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## Sweetgrass Method: A Culturally Responsive Approach among American Indian and Alaska Native K-12

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## Sweetgrass Method: A Culturally Responsive Approach among American Indian and Alaska Native K-12

### Cover Page Footnote

Biographies M. Standing Eagle Baez, PhD, LSP, LCDC, MS/MA (Mohawk, Pawnee, Coahuiltecan and Mexican descent) is an assistant professor of Clinical and Counseling Psychology in the Psychology Department at Bemidji State University, a Licensed School Psychologist, and Licensed Substance Abuse Counselor, author, and trainer across Indian country. C. Allison Baez, Ph.D., (Coahuiltecan and Mexican descent) is the program manager with the National American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health TTC at the University of Iowa/ College of Public Health. Dr. C.A. Baez continues to work with Tribes across Indian country. Brittany Lavallie (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa) is a senior at Bemidji State University and planning to graduate with her BA in Psychology in May 2022. Brittany is currently applying to Grad school to major in clinical psychology. Whitney Spears (Red Lake Band of Chippewa, Oglala Lakota and Cheyenne River Lakota) is a Bemidji State University student that is majoring in psychology and indigenous sustainability. She is planning to graduate in May 2022 and she also plans to continue her academic journey in a graduate program that focuses on clinical psychology.

## **Sweetgrass Method: A Culturally Responsive Approach Among American Indian/Alaska Native K-12**

There are 600 diverse American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities that show strong and resilient nations throughout Indian Country. Though, a history of genocidal practices, cultural microaggressions, and continuing subjugation contribute to high rates of mental health and substance use disorders (O’Keefe et al., 2021). AI/ANs face some of the greatest challenges to their health, mental health, and well-being of any ethnic or racial group in the United States. Mental health related mortality is a priority (O’Keefe et al., 2021). *The Sweetgrass Method* is a prevention approach for practitioners, and educators in analysis of their process approach to identify areas of need in their abilities to develop a culturally responsive learning opportunity. What this means is, as educators/practitioners, they may apply/braid the introspective (cultural approaches) with collaborative and continual culturally responsive examination delivery systems.

The Sweetgrass Method’s introspective strand allows both the educator/practitioner and student/client to present their understanding to one another that is culturally sensitive and inviting. The Sweetgrass Method is the opposite of egoism because it recognizes that all life is sacred and connected with the three braids:

1. the introspective strand-(1<sup>st</sup> strand) one owns their stories (youth/client and or educator/practitioner level of cultural competencies).
2. The collaborative strand (2<sup>nd</sup> strand)– collaborate with others (consult or communicate with other professionals/youth) to heal.
3. The continuity strand (3<sup>rd</sup> strand) on the road of receiving and or providing ongoing support opportunities.

The Sweetgrass Method (SGM) may be accomplished by building awareness,

sensitivities, and knowledge of racial and cultural issues; empowering educators/practitioners to comprehend and identify their own biases, as well as the larger cultural forces involved; and creating a supportive culturally appropriate environment that views culturally responsive services as a continuum of growth in successful outcomes. The SGM is a comparable approach that uses Indigenous cultural knowledges and experiences to increase engagement with learning and partnership.

## **Background**

Although AI/AN students attend a variety of schools across Indian Country, and these may be either public or private establishment systems where their teachers may be Native and non-Native educators, there is limited literature regarding (a) how educators and practitioners (counselors/therapists) can effectively meet the unique mental health and educational needs of these students and (b) what strategies educators can use while working with their families.

Although America's educational system exists to provide the best advantages for students to use their potential to reach their learning, social-emotional, and specialized goals, it has also relegated and oppressed the rights and opportunities of culturally diverse groups (Desmuke, 2019). Because culture strongly impacts the attitudes, values, and behaviors that students and teachers bring to the instructional process, better educator/practitioner preparation is a major factor in solving the problems of mental health outcomes and underachievement. In the 1980s, Pewewardy & Hammer (2003) said several terms (cultural congruence, cultural appropriateness, cultural compatibility, culturally sensitive, culturally aware, mitigating cultural discontinuity, culturally relevant, cultural synchronization, and cultural responsiveness) in literature that designate pedagogical approaches are used by teachers to make the schooling experiences of American Indian students more well-matched with their everyday lives. The term *culturally*

*responsive* weaves the concepts embodied in all these descriptors but also brings a more dynamic relationship between tribal (home or community) culture and school culture (Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003). In addition, when culturally responsive methods, such as sustaining pedagogy (CSP), are applied when teaching, its framework for instruction creates an environment where trust is established and student worldviews are honored, enabling teachers and students to examine the role of race and social inequity in the learning process (Desmuke, 2019). The SGM uses the same approach of applying all concepts when working with the youths' academics and social emotional needs. The SGM incorporates culturally responsive methods and encourages culturally sensitive therapies as significant approaches for American Indian/Alaska Native youth K-12.

### **Culturally Responsive approach in mental health**

Considerate approaches and services for diverse populations start with culturally responsive methods. Reasonable beginning steps to provide culturally responsive services include identifying the diverse populations you are serving, learning more about their cultural practices, and adapting your approach to care to meet your patients' needs. When considering culturally appropriate mental health care in the school setting, it is important to recognize cultural views, traditions, and practices related to healing and wellness, which far preexist contact with Europeans (Goodkind et al., 2010; Hodge et al., 2009), directly from and for tribal community members (Gone, 2004; Gone & Trimble, 2012). The beliefs and practices among AI/AN vary by tribe and may include prayer, ceremony, storytelling as a method of passing on traditions, interactions with a traditional healer, and daily practices to sustain balance and wellness (Goodkind et al., 2015).

Regarding AI/AN students attending non-Native schools, studies suggested that within-

school discrimination negatively influences Indigenous youth's academic performance and mental health (Bowker, 1992; Ledlow, 1992; Sanders, 1987), while, more generally, perceived discrimination has been shown to influence physical reactivity (Jones et al., 1996) and psychological distress (Kessler et al., 1999). Evidence suggests that Indigenous students attending predominately white high schools after previously attending reservation schools encounter more racial prejudice, isolation, and lower expectations than those who continuously attend reservation schools (Wilson, 1992; 18 of the 23 students in the study left school). Thus, discrimination is likely to directly affect school change while, indirectly, attending schools in communities where discrimination or microaggressions are high, and this may affect an increased reactivity to stressful educational situations (e.g., testing, bullying) and higher levels of psychological distress in school settings in general. Research suggested that mental health problems can also affect many areas of students' lives, reducing their quality of life, academic success, physical health, and satisfaction with the school or college experience, and negatively impacting relationships with friends and family members. These issues can also have long-term consequences for students affecting their future employment, earning potential, and overall health (Eisenburg et al., 2007).

### **Culturally Responsive approach in the classroom**

America's educational system has historically provided the best advantages for learners to use their potential to reach their learning, social-emotional, and specialized goals. In contrast, it has also marginalized and oppressed the rights and opportunities of culturally diverse groups (i.e., AI/AN, African Americans and Latinos) through the distortion of, or the complete omission of, various ethnic groups and cultures in traditional instruction (Desmuke, 2019). There have been several approaches on

classroom instruction for AI/ANs education in school settings. For example, linear classrooms are commonplace among educational institutions. Linear learning and instruction are derived from the notion that students learn uniformly and dissimilarly. *“We remain in a culture that promotes one curriculum for all, one age group and one grade at a time, and one set of tests to determine learning* (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017, p. 1). Interventions are targeted at the cause or symptom, and the relationship between the intervention and the symptoms is measured. For example, a teacher may be speaking to the class, whereas (linear style) communication would be conducted in a straight line, moving in a linear way toward the main point the teacher would be making. "Getting to the point" is very important to a linear communicator, whether listening or stating a point explicitly. Not getting to the point quickly is seen as a time waster. It is believed that linear methods develop competence and non-linear methods create capability. Competence by itself is not enough; capability is necessary for individuals to learn and develop. Storytelling is one non-linear method used in education as a teaching strategy. Individuals generally believe linear thinking as an honest, mature, and intelligent process; however, it lacks ingenuity, innovation, and originality. Like circular thinking, linear thinking is characterized by repetition and is, in the long term, detrimental to intellectual advancement. An example of the teacher who uses the circular approach to communicate would be a discussion that is conducted in a circular manner, telling stories, and developing a context around the main point, and this is often unstated because the listener will get the point after they are given all of the information.

There is a high reliance on context; once students have the relevant information, there is a strong possibility they will understand what the teacher is saying. For AI/AN students, learning from educators who are not delivering culturally responsive teaching methods may continue to see AI/AN students struggle in their academic success. These educational and well-being

disparities are manifested as early as Kindergarten and often lead to exhibiting problem drinking behaviors, committing suicide, becoming teen parents, and experiencing negative labor market outcomes such as unemployment” (Riser et al., 2019).

Historically however, AI/AN people have not used linear cause-and-effect thinking. Rather, the approach could be called a relational or cyclic view (Cross & Friesen, 2013). Pewewardy (2002) concluded that the educator can deliver instruction and learning opportunities that are well-matched with American Indian/Alaska Native students. Pewewardy approached learning styles through seven classifications that directly connect to Native culture and way of life that encourages and motivates the student to succeed. These are:

**Field-Dependence/Field Independence** - Field dependence learners are global and holistic learners. This learner is concerned with life and relationships (p.115).

**Perceptual Strengths** - Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic- Visual learners learn best when they can see the material they are expected to master. When skills are taught by parents or elders, they generally teach through demonstration. Children are expected to watch, listen, and do (p.115).

**Reflectivity versus Impulsivity** - Research indicated that AI/AN students tend to reflect. A reflective student does not need immediate closure. Instead, they are more open-minded, delaying decision-making until all evidence is collected before concluding or acting in response to a situation (p.115).

**Classroom Management/ Behavior** - Research indicated that AI/AN worldviews and social behaviors are at odds with White values and behaviors. Often AI/AN children respond more effectively if the teacher gives the student warnings of bad behavior couched in community terms (p.115).



**Tribal Role of the Family/Elders** - Research suggested that the family, the elders, and the tribe play an important role in the teaching/learning process as related to the AI/AN. Social acceptance and approval are sought from older members of the family. Grandparents especially, have symbolic leadership positions in family communities (p.115).

**Teacher/Pupil Relationships** - Findings suggest that the teacher of the AI/AN 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 (p.115).

**Cooperation versus Competition** - Research indicated that AI/AN students tend to favor cooperation over competition. They prefer harmony, unity, and a basic oneness. (p.115)

The seven classifications of approaches to AI/ANs learning styles are culturally appropriate and provide an understanding how to deliver the SGM to youth and adults. Pewewardy (2003) suggested that culturally responsive teaching cannot be approached as a recipe or series of steps that teachers can follow to be effective with AI/AN students. Instead, it relies on the development of certain dispositions toward learners and a holistic approach to curriculum and instruction.

A culturally responsive approach to teaching would suggest incorporating a culture-based wraparound method. This style would incorporate the application of a higher standard of cultural competence which integrates culturally responsive wraparound services into the youth and AI/AN family’s culture. As the linear style approach of teaching and learning is more common and has been more familiar within Western culture, there is a more recent, less familiar style

introduced as “cyclical” (Briers, 2010). With the Western way of thinking and learning, one may often think of circles as a shape, within Native American ways of thinking we have many ways to think of a circle, such as our Medicine Wheel, the four directions, the four seasons, and the four elements (Briers, 2010). The Wraparound service methods help improve delivery strategies to help the youth cross barriers and provide comprehensive, cultural, and more holistic ways of support, especially for children facing any mental health or behavioral challenges (VanDenBerg, 2008). Students spend most of their days inside school classrooms or other educational institutions; for this reason, it is important to provide mental health services within the systems. Like the wraparound service approach, weaving a culturally responsive method, addressing behavioral and mental health concerns, the SGM service delivery model may be appropriate. The SGM is a culturally responsive client/student-centered approach to counseling, training, and educating. The SGM embraces and uses what each client/student brings culturally to the counseling or educational setting. This cultural approach is currently being used, but conclusions and results are inconclusive at the writing of this paper.

### **Sweetgrass Method**

The Sweetgrass Method for AI/AN Youth looks at braiding strands of introspective (looking within self- 1<sup>st</sup> strand), collaboration with student/families (reaching out to others) and continuity (providing continued support 2<sup>nd</sup> strand). What we bring from this is an understanding that we as practitioners 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).

The Sweetgrass Method developed out of a previous article written by the first author (MSEB) as a means of fostering collaboration between AI/AN individual’s, families, and the

community. Working together for the better good to deliver answers to problems that arise is good practice. The use of Sweetgrass in Tribal ceremonies helps one to grow in harmony and balance. Like the roles as a practitioner and/or educator, the value in helping others with sensitivity, cultural responsiveness, cultural knowledge provides a welcoming atmosphere with cultural understanding. The Sweetgrass Method (as shown in Figure 1) was developed by the first author in 2009 and encompasses what is escribed, shows how it serves to for the practitioner and for the practitioner to communicate, and continues the support services towards successful outcomes (Baez, 2011; Baez & Isaac, 2013; Baez et al., 2016).



Figure 1.

Sweetgrass Method Model

**Introspective (self) Strand 1.** Weaving goodness into our spirits and our minds gives us the strength to deal with many obstacles that are before us. Many Indigenous tribes in North America use sweetgrass in prayer, smudging, or purifying ceremonies and consider it a sacred plant. Sweetgrass is usually braided, dried, and burned. Just as the sweet scent of this natural

grass is pleasing to people, so is it attractive to good spirits. Many Indigenous people incorporate the burning of sweetgrass as 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).

The first strand in the braid is Introspection- the work on self (looking within self on areas of professional competencies, cultural competencies, self-care/spiritual wellness, emotional wellness, physical wellness and mental wellness). For Native and non-Native practitioners/educators, it is significant to prepare and educate yourself about culturally responsive approaches with your client/student. The Introspective strand brings understanding, clarity, and preparedness on the client/student's prevention strategies and support. Professionals providing services with Indigenous populations and communities would greatly benefit the overall successful outcomes of their clients if professionals would be respectful and non-judgmental nor make any assumptions and not bring one's own expectations (Baez & Isaac, 2013). Practitioners/educators working with the Indigenous population need to understand the healthcare issues specific to this group and subgroups (tribe specific) to provide effective culturally competent support services. All these points 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.

The Introspective braid (self) is necessary and important for practitioners/teachers to be examples of healthy leaders for the AI/AN individuals to whom they provide services. As professionals working with this population, it is 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, and alcohol) brings a holistic approach to each child with whom we must work. Duran et al. (2008) stated the term *psychology* itself means the study of the soul. Culturally competent counselors who are knowledgeable of AI/AN 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.

**Collaboration Strand 2.** The second strand of the braid is collaborative- the work with others (Baez, 2011). Partnerships with families and communities are critical when providing mental health prevention/intervention support strategies for school students. Partnerships from the clients, students, families. and community are essential to produce reduction of suicide in your community. Practitioners/educators must work smarter not harder to improve healthy relationships with parents and community members. When appropriate, follow through with graduations, naming celebrations, coming of age ceremony, and sweat lodge invitations. It is important that you are invited and not offend anyone by showing up without a verbal or written invitation. The first step in collaboration with AI/AN is to honor the invitation. From there, trust and well-being from that family will begin (Baez, 2011). Trust and respect mean a great deal among AI/AN people. For practitioners and educators, valuing traditions and ceremonies is just as important. The collaborating strand is a powerful component in that, when appropriate, consulting with story tellers, AI/AN historians, and collaborating with elders and/or traditional practitioners' elders is a necessity. The three reasons why collaborating with the community is essential are (a) building trust and respect of the culture and ceremony, (b) validating the traditional teachings of morals and values, and (c) acknowledging learning

opportunities for both practitioner and community. The outcome in addressing any areas of mental health on any reservation/reserve is a healthy approach when involving the help and support of elders and or strategies of medicine men/women, community, and educators/practitioners, in addition to incorporating culturally sensitive therapies.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> strand in the braid is an evolving process that calls for active participation from contributing professionals and clients/students who engage in shared problem-solving and decision-making to achieve a common goal (Baez & Isaac, 2013; Baez et al., 2016).

Collaboration/communication/consultation is especially significant in the healthcare environment to meet the increasingly complex demands of the client's/student's mental health needs. The 2<sup>nd</sup> strand becomes action to assist, to support, and to nurture the client/student. This strand focuses on the client/student relationship and building trust with the client/student. Client relationship - Cultural-Emotional Learning (CEL) equals building trust. CEL is a methodology that is in its earliest stages of research for professionals working AI/AN clients to assist them and their needs. The initial cultural dialogue is to develop cultural understandings and cultural knowledge to identify and regulate emotions for positive change. CEL refers to the professional providing culturally responsive treatment approaches which incorporate culturally sensitive therapies and/or culturally responsive supports to assist their client's growth in treatment.

**Continuous Strand 3.** The third and final strand in the braid is continuity or continuous- the work continues to move forward with and for the youth and others. When one looks at braiding the relationships (services with their students or clients) from a school perspective towards the parents and students, it is a viewpoint of understanding and developing quality efforts for academic achievement for the students one serves (Baez, 2011). This can be achieved by continuing services towards the youth, parents/guardians, and community, in addition to

continuing professional staff development that is culturally responsive. Improving social-emotional learning that is more culturally responsive for the Indigenous youth that are being served, providing educational skills training for parents/guardians and students that are more culturally tailored for the family and youth. This strand also focuses on continued high level of academic and social support services (Western approaches & Indigenous methodologies) that provide successful outcomes for the AI/AN youth. Also, continued student strengthening that provides cultural learning opportunities in the classroom setting which may support to nurture the family structure. Educational approaches that are culturally responsive for the clients you serve may suggest a positive outcome. Continuing culturally appropriate learning opportunities as a professional is best practice. Communicating, collaborating, and consulting with other professions as best practice. Sweetgrass is flexible and bends in all directions when stepped on. In other words, institution/agencies may have non-Native approaches to dealing with mental health; however, institutions and or communities would benefit with the understanding of AI/AN clients/students, families by incorporating the culturally responsive approaches into the daily norms. By continuing a healthy dialogue and relationship with the AI/AN client/student and honoring their stories, their feelings and or understanding of what they are currently experiencing is H.O.P.E. (honoring our people's experiences). We are providing a safe place to honor our people's experiences (Baez et al, 2016), without judgment.

## **Conclusion**

As we are practitioners, educators, counselors, and administrators, there is a need for continuity of communication with families and community, not just when there is a discipline issue but when something positive occurs. Open and honest communication and collaboration with families can lead to greater trust and develops a nurturing relationship

which allows educators to ask questions and learn more about their students and their backgrounds. Ongoing collaborative care is a means of improving outcomes particularly for people with complex needs (Henderson et al., 2019). This also includes partnerships with the community and what works well for families and youth working through adversities. For many AI/AN peoples, participation in traditional healing serves a dual purpose. It promotes cultural salience in the face of urbanization and acculturation and at the same time addresses the health concerns of AI/ANs which are often overlooked by the health practices of the dominant culture (Baez, 2021). Culturally responsive approaches are key to improving academic and social emotional outcomes for AI/AN youth. The Sweetgrass Method weaves the client-student, practitioner, family, educator, and community as the main contributors in the success of reducing mental health issues among AI/AN youth.

The SGM includes an Indigenous 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 mental health services. Understanding the issues of mental health among AI/AN youth is an important way to begin the dialogue of self-care and promotion of healthy choices and healthy living. This also provides for educators/counselors the opportunity in developing healthy approaches to mental health that are culturally responsive for AI/AN youth. It is imperative as we are practitioners, educators, counselors, and administrators to determine ways to involve the teaching and learning development within a cultural framework. By applying the SGM approach, one not only provides culturally responsive academic and social emotional services, but also observes our own sensitivities and prejudices. Educators/Counselors facilitate the learning for AI/AN youth on academics, behaviors, and emotional knowledge by weaving



culturally relevant pedagogy and cultural sustaining pedagogy may provide a best approach to understand the cultural dynamics and experiences (Baez, 2022).

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