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Introduction

American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students experience high rates of difficulty and systemic oppression, such as poverty, racism, insufficient access to resources and services, and the long-term consequences of historical trauma and displacements (Krogstad, 2014). In addition, AI/AN students in the U.S. are implicitly asked to acculturate to a "mainstream" education system. Current studies suggest that AI/AN students performed two to three grade levels below their white peers in reading and math and were two times more likely to drop out of school than their white peers (NCES, 2020). Many AI/AN students have a dropout rate twice the national average, the highest dropout rate of any United States ethnic or racial group. About three out of every ten AI/AN students drop out before graduating from high school, both on reservations and in cities (Lomawaima, 1995; Rhodes, 1988). Mainstream academic environments may not reflect AI/AN cultures, and an emphasis on assimilation may undermine the value of AI/AN cultures (Fryberg et al., 2013; Gone, 2013). Research suggests that students may encounter difficulties in school due to the district's inattention to a given group's learning style or culture (Pewewardy, 2008; Rhodes, 1988; Swisher, 1991). High poverty rates, significant inequalities among AI/AN students and their non-Native peers on standardized achievement tests, and experiences of discrimination suggest an urgent picture of injustice and deprivation (Dearien, 2016). For example, AI/AN youth are 2.5 times more likely to experience trauma than non-Indigenous peers (APA, 2017). Deprivation, high substance use, and abuse rates are disproportionately relevant in Indian countries (SAMSHA, 2004). These current traumas are not inadvertent and cannot be isolated from colonizing strategies of cultural and linguistic
genocide, forced family separation, boarding schools, and the physical incarceration and violent relocation of Indigenous peoples from their homelands (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020).

Baez et al. (2022) propose that AI/AN children are more predisposed to adverse childhood experiences that directly impact their thoughts, behaviors, self-esteem, choices in life and emotions. Most teachers appear to care about their student's social and emotional needs; however, educators need to identify the strengths and knowledge Indigenous youth bring to school. Finally, Mahfouz and Anthony-Stevens (2020) ask some compelling questions: How do teachers understand the unique know-how of Indigenous communities developed through centuries-long relationships with the earth? Can teachers recognize the causes of well-being and knowledge practiced in specific cultural and linguistic knowledge customs? How often is present-day tribal knowledge incorporated into curricula and school policies?

**Education Disparities**

Although the aspirations of AI/AN adolescents to attend college have increased over the years, college-going goals still need to be reflected in their performance. AI/AN adolescents have a much lower graduation rate from high school (44.1%) than the graduation rate (69%) of all students in the United States (Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2010). This incongruity between intent and performance can be attributed to inadequate funding for school programs, biased standardized testing, lack of understanding of community ceremonies, obligations of caring for our relatives, barriers to culturally sustaining pedagogy, and low expectations from teachers and counselors (Brayboy & Makka, 2015; Wilcox, 2015). In 2008, the Education Committee of the National Caucus of Native American State Legislators (NCNASL) said the state of instruction in our nation's K-12 schools for AI/AN students is distressing (Sia Davis, n.d.). In 2020, this disturbing trend in education for AI/AN students changed since the 2007 NCNASL study. A
study by Mahfouz and Anthony-Stevens (2020) suggests that a lack of social and emotional stability in households is described as an obstacle that students must overcome to achieve "normal" school performance. Many researchers theorize that discontinuities between teachers and students deter student performance in school (Lomawaima, 1995). These gaps could involve learning and communication styles and the cultural applicability of the curriculum. Swisher (1991) reviews research showing that traditional classroom environments often restrict how AI/AN children learn. How often is current tribal knowledge incorporated into curricula and school policies? Healthy social and emotional growth is crucial to family, school, and community success.

Social and emotional strategies can be adapted to address cultural differences. Social and emotional skills are developed in complex contexts, interactions, and relationships (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Managing the culture and social-emotional strategies suggests that background and culture matter. Therefore, social and emotional approaches should be modified to address cultural differences. In other words, for AI/AN students, their cultures include principles, traditional stories, and stories that can be utilized in teaching social and emotional skills. A promising theoretical approach is the theory of relative functionalism, as applied to academic achievement, which suggests that minority students will thrive academically because their academic skills align with their cultural values and perceived prospects for social flexibility (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Palmer & Wood, 2016; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). In addition, to have an effective model among AI/AN students, their academics, and skills, those facilitating the learning must understand the cultural dynamics and experiences (Cultural-Emotional Learning) that AI/AN students are 'arriving with when they enter the school buildings' (Mills, 2019).

**Education and Culture**
Generally, we understand that the school setting is essential for children and adolescents to experience connectedness with others, particularly peers and teachers. Research with AI/ANs has identified connectedness as a culturally based protective factor. Connectedness refers to the interrelated welfare of the individual, family, community, and the natural environment. American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner created the Ecological Systems Theory to explain how social environments affect children’s development. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory argues that the environment you grow up in affects every facet of your life (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Social factors determine your way of thinking, the emotions you feel, and your likes and dislikes. If you alter your environment, you will change; if you move to another country with a different culture, your identity will undoubtedly change (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Gray and colleagues (2019) suggest that the connection with nature and spirituality is indicated in cultural aspects of feeling connected to the whole when in nature and, even if not participating in cultural ceremonies of spirituality, feeling spiritual when observing and interacting in nature. Therefore, refining school ‘connectedness or belongingness’ can be beneficial to address the current overall academic performance of AI/AN students. However, education historian Joel Spring (2021) contends that early AI/AN education presented by colonizers used educational practices as a tool for cultural genocide to abolish the culture and language of the people. Cultural extermination aims to substitute a people's culture with a new one. Spring (2021) defines this as deculturalization. He further suggests, "Due to globalization and imperialism, indigenous peoples have been forced to undergo extreme cultural change, resulting in many becoming socially and psychologically dysfunctional" (p. 21). The residual effects of historical events among AI/AN communities were inarguably traumatic and may carry
over for generations. Risks include suffering from mental, emotional, and physical stressors by hearing stories that previous generations experienced traumatic happenings (Baez et al., 2016).

Considering the long and traumatic educational history of AI/ANs, a key question comes to mind: What is a culturally appropriate practice for educating AI/AN youth? Cornel Pewewardy (2008) reviewed the literature on AI/AN learning styles and concluded that educators could provide instruction and learning opportunities compatible with AI/AN students. Peristeris (2017) proposed that as teachers listen to students sharing their cultural perspectives, their actions provide honor and value to their cultural perspectives and engagement.

**Social-Emotional Learning**

Social-emotional learning programs are critical in students' development; however, the sociocultural experiences of the students need to be served (Garner et al., 2014). Social-emotional learning (SEL) was designed to help students develop skills to recognize and manage their emotions; it may also address positive youth development, resilience, violence prevention, wellness, and character education. SEL can be conveyed as the framework for aligning these elements of well-being in hopes of meeting all students' academic and social education needs (Greenberg, 2003; Merrell & Gueldner, 2010).

The SEL framework is essential because approximately half of the nation's public school students are students of color, yet only 18% of the teaching force are teachers of color (Simmons, 2017). For example, when educators teach students that there is one right way to do something, and the emotional education students receive at school varies from what they receive at home, it can send the message that what has been done at home is wrong (Simmons, 2017). In addition, a group of leading SEL researchers observed that current approaches to SEL need to address cultural differences across unique environments, beliefs, and behavioral norms (Taylor et al., 2017).
The sociocultural elements and the social demands will significantly impact the implementation process for any SEL program because it is imperative to create a contextual frame for students to identify with (Griner & Smith, 2006). In addition, students require various social and emotional skills because they come from varying sociocultural experiences (Padron et al., 2002). For example, 20% to 25% of AI/AN students experience significant SEL challenges, which correlates to the long history of cultural, psychological, and physical genocide (Cummings et al., 1999). The authors suggest that this is because of the lack of acknowledging and lack for respecting a value system different from that of the dominant culture (Cummins et al., 1999). In addition, AI/AN students can experience significant SEL challenges due to their cultural and linguistic upbringing (Garner et al., 2014). Culturally and linguistically diverse students may need help staying engaged in a learning culture in which they are unfamiliar and do not see themselves represented. As a result, students may need more time to fully engage in the delivered lessons (Castro-Olivo et al., 2018). Culturally responsive and sustaining SEL refers to practices that actively draw upon a responsive approach and support students' diverse backgrounds, identities, strengths, and tasks to expand learning.

Baez et al. (2022) suggest that America’s educational system has historically provided the best advantages for students to use their potential to reach their knowledge, social-emotional skills, and specialized goals. In contrast, it has also relegated and oppressed the rights and opportunities of culturally diverse groups (i.e., AI/AN, African Americans, and Latinos) by distorting or altogether omitting ethnic groups and cultures in traditional instruction (Desmuke, 2019). Castro-Olivo et al. (2018) state that a deep cultural analysis can illuminate why standard approaches to SEL need to be sufficiently differentiated to address students' diverse needs, especially those minoritized based on race and socioeconomic status. SEL programs must create
spaces for teachers and school leaders to engage in discussions of deep cultural analysis (Pollock, 2008) that include the development of sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Ladson-Billings (2014) changed the perspective on the culture of poverty by examining the strengths minority youth bring to school to support learning and by studying contexts where teachers experienced pedagogical success with marginalized youth (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020). Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) shifts educational orientations from pathologizing minority students as short versions of dominant youth to recognizing and building upon the assets and strengths of working-class, multilingual individuals and people of color. Teachers who practice CRP: (a) support students' intellectual growth through relevant classroom instruction and learning experiences; (b) help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while gaining knowledge of at least one other culture; and (c) practice sociopolitical consciousness by using school knowledge and skills to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems (Ladson-Billings, 2014). When educational pedagogies and programs fail to consider culture deeply, the situation is often overgeneralized and misapplied to explain problem behaviors and school failures (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Morse and colleagues (2016) state that practitioners working with AI/ANs must understand this population's unique strengths and belief systems that support their lifeways and help them face life challenges.

**Cultural-Emotional Learning**

In response to the need to integrate culture into learning, we are introducing a new process - Cultural-Emotional Learning (CEL) - which assists AI/AN individuals to grow in healthy identities, continue supportive relationships with family and friends, and make healthy choices. CEL incorporates realistic goal setting and culture, providing both children and adults
with tools to express themselves authentically and appropriately. CEL provides school children
with the initial cultural dialog to develop cultural understandings and knowledge to identify and
regulate emotions for positive health outcomes. To explore CEL, we first need to look at what
methods are woven into CEL. One of the main ingredients is culturally sustaining pedagogy
(CSP), which seeks to foster cultural diversity as part of schooling for positive social change and
renewal. CSP positions dynamic cultural resourcefulness as a necessary good and sees the
outcome of learning as an additive rather than subtractive. CSP exists wherever education
continues the lifeways of communities damaged and erased through schooling (Paris & Alim,
2017). CSP explicitly calls for schooling to be a site for maintaining rather than removing the
cultural ways of being of communities of color. Another essential ingredient to CEL is CRP, an
academic approach that concentrates on multiple characteristics of student achievement and
strengthens students to uphold their cultural identities (Ladson-Billings, 2006; 2014). CEL weaves
culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-
Billings, 2006; 2014) with the social-emotional paradigm. This braid of methods (CEL, CSP &
CRP) provides a strong, culturally responsive foundation when developing adequate SEL
opportunities for AI/AN students.

As the introduction mentions, a practical model among AI/AN students on their
academics, behaviors, and emotional learning is vital. Those facilitating the learning among
AI/AN students should have a teaching approach incorporating cultural relevancy and cultural
sustainability. CEL is a method for faculty/educators working with AI/AN students to assist in
the initial cultural dialog when developing cultural understandings and knowledge when
identifying healthy social and emotional needs. This braid (CEL, CSP & CRP) of methods &
SEL may provide a flexible foundation for individual school districts. CEL guides educators to
think critically about cultural adaptation to SEL programs. Rivas-Drake et al. (2020) suggest that it is essential to incorporate a culturally pertinent model into SEL programs and to ground SEL with a focus on equity. A study conducted by Dobia and Roffery (2017) showed that an Aboriginal Girls Circle initiative yielded tangible positive outcomes by increasing social connection, participation, and self-confidence among Aboriginal girls attending secondary schools. Unfortunately, a systematic review showed that only 12.5% of all SEL interventions had been culturally adapted (DeLuca et al., 2018).

Adaptation may not be enough to interpret the factors contributing to healthy and problem behaviors in non-dominant communities or to encourage and sustain healthy social, cultural, and linguistic interactions (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020). CEL weaves the culturally sustaining pedagogy, which allows and encourages students to use their cultural practices from home in school and maintain them. The CRP focuses on multiple aspects of student achievement and supports students in upholding their cultural identities. The CRP goals are that students demonstrate cultural competence (maintaining their heritage and community practices while gaining access to dominant practices) and understand and critique the existing social order (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

**Conclusion**

As Indigenous education scholars point out, “All curricula and pedagogy are culturally based. The real question is, whose cultural knowledge and practices are they based on?” (Lipka, Sharp, Brenner, Yanez, & Sharp, 2005, p. 369). This article has provided a new way (CEL) of implementing SEL among AI/AN students. The CEL applies a cultural lens for educators, which allows them to identify that the social-emotional needs of AI/AN youth are entwined with social-historical background and require community partnership. McCarty and Lee (2014) suggest that
CSP constitutes a specific approach to supporting Indigenous youth’s unique social and political needs (McCarty & Lee, 2014). In addition, the CEL approach looks at the teaching framework for Indigenous students in a way that reflects their culture, and teachers must understand that AI/AN students are often taught differently at home than mainstream students.

Nevertheless, AI/AN children can also differ significantly from each other. Indigenous students may have difficulty with the traditional teaching styles of U.S. schools because teachers often teach according to mainstream values that do not correspond with the values of minority students. Although overgeneralizing is dangerous, research has shown that AI/AN students are likely to behave and react to teachers and teaching strategies in specific ways that often differ from mainstream students. To avoid stereotyping and overgeneralizing, teachers should observe students before assuming they will respond in specific ways that reflect anticipated cultural learning styles (Pewewardy, 2008). As noted by Pewewardy, for AI/AN students to reach their potential in school, it is recommended that teachers understand their preferred ways of learning (2008).

Once this understanding of CEL is expanded, educators can apply this approach to their students when teaching them academic and behavioral skill areas. This approach will support AI/AN students in successfully using what is familiar to them to develop a new skill. Also, remembering the importance of building partnerships with AI/AN families and communities is essential. These partnerships can be great opportunities for schools to connect with students and parents/guardians, create advocacy for education, and work towards achieving a common goal. As a starting place, school officials can reflect deeply on their own personal values, beliefs, and biases as an essential step toward providing identity-affirming and CEL support to every student. School professionals can also ask themselves: What is the immediate reaction of AI/AN families and community members when they come to your school campus? Are components of Indigenous
culture reflected in the hallways, artwork, and classrooms? Training all school staff members on AI/AN culture is beneficial. Tribal communities embrace CEL, where relevant cultural knowledge is taught, sustaining cultural teaching is provided in the classrooms, and ongoing schoolwide training on history, culture, and contemporary issues occurs. This approach includes partnering with tribal experts who can provide significant healing, health, and nourishment expertise. Schools must show the tribal communities that they are continuously trying to improve at being more attuned to and inclusive of students' cultures.

Applying culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy into the SEL framework are the guiding principles behind CEL. Implementing this methodology, educators working with AI/AN students can assist students in early cultural discussions in developing cultural understandings and knowledge to recognize and adjust emotions for health outcomes authentically and affirmatively. However, in the end, SEL can only occur among AI/AN with a culturally relevant start. Therefore, Baez et al. (2022) suggest that educators/counselors facilitate the learning for AI/AN youth on academics, behaviors, and emotional knowledge by weaving culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy which may provide the best approach to understanding cultural dynamics and experiences.
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