

## Effective Service Delivery for Indigenous Children, Youth, Families, and Communities

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) affirms the rights of all Indigenous children and youth to access and participate in culturally responsive education and mental health services. The term *Indigenous* means “first people of the land.” It describes common roots and cultural and spiritual bonds among people across the globe. For the purposes of this paper, the term is used in reference to Native Americans (NA), Alaskan Natives (AN), and Native Hawaiians (Dauphinais et al., 2009). An estimated 5.2 million NA/AN people and 560,000 Native Hawaiian people are citizens and residents of the United States (Goo, 2015; Norris et al., 2010). Legally and politically, 573 tribes are federally recognized as sovereign nations, and an additional 61 tribes are recognized by individual states (Bureau of Indian Affairs, n.d.). Each tribe has a unique history, set of values, creation story, and world view which guide their lives. An estimated 169 distinct Indigenous North American languages are spoken in the United States today (Ryan, 2013).

Culturally responsive practice with Indigenous children and youth must begin with affirming their culture and identity as well as recognizing their communities and families as critical partners. To provide culturally responsive practice, school psychologists should first be aware of their own cultural perspectives, so they do not inadvertently impose their world views or biases when working with Indigenous communities. Moreover, it is vitally important that school psychologists understand the diversity among Indigenous populations of North America and Hawaii, the legacy of trauma, and the promise of resiliency. As in work with all cultures, school psychologists must consider that Indigenous people across these many communities live both on and off reservations, live in rural and urban settings, hold varying levels of acculturation, and may or may not identify with traditional practices. They also should understand the educational and mental health outcomes, including disproportionality of Indigenous students in multiple aspects of education (e.g., special education, suspensions, gifted and talented education, graduation rates).

### **CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICE AND GENDER IDENTITY**

For all of recorded history, on nearly every continent, “cultures have recognized, revered, and integrated more than two genders” (Public Broadcasting Service, 2015). Many Indigenous languages naturally reflect culturally specific nonbinary gender identities, which includes the fluid nature of gender and sexual identity. These nonbinary gender identities came with social and cultural responsibilities within their respective tribal communities (Hunt, 2016), and they were vital to their communities’ collective well-being. These roles and responsibilities include healers, warriors, mediators, herbalists, and orators of their tribal communities. As there are over 500 surviving NA/AN cultures, attitudes about sex and gender are diverse, and not all are supportive of gender diversity and same-sex attraction presently, though historical documents acknowledge acceptance of diversity. For example:

- *Two-Spirit (2-S)* is used today as a pan-Indian term to acknowledge the sacredness of LGBTQ2-S youth (or accurate terms distinct to specific Indigenous cultures).
- *Mahu* is a Native Hawaiian term for one who is revered and respected for embodying both the male and female spirit.
- *Napêw iskenêwisêbo* describes a man who dresses as a woman, and *iskenêw ka napêwayat* describes a woman who dresses as a man in Cree.
- *Muxe (Moo-she)* are Indigenous transgender women who mix gay male and feminine identities (de Jesus Cortes & Alire Garcia, 2019).

School psychologists should acknowledge the differences between sex and gender with the understanding that there are differences across cultures. Historically, Indigenous populations have revered gender diversity, though presently some persons living outside the gender binary now face discrimination. School psychologists will treat these youth as viable members of their communities entrusted with special talents and gifts.

## EDUCATION AND MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES

A number of factors support positive outcomes in education and mental health for Indigenous children and youth. Validating culture and identity serves as a protective factor and leads to resiliency (Garrett et al., 2014; Kirmayer et al., 2011). For example, youth participation in language revitalization strengthens positive cultural identity and is supported by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; American Institute for Research, 2016; McCarty & Nicholas, 2014). In addition, many Indigenous youth are active participants and advocates in their communities in protecting their sacred lands and waterways. This is vital to their spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being (Center for Native American Youth, 2018).

Nonetheless, significant barriers impede schools from adequately supporting Indigenous children to seek and complete their education. Indigenous children and youth remain overrepresented or misidentified in special education or are underserved in general education across the nation. During the 2015–2016 academic year, 17% of Indigenous children and youth were served with an Individualized Education Program (IEP), more than any other racial or ethnic group (McFarland et al., 2018). In a national survey, school psychologists reported significant disparities in their levels of training and in the tools they need to serve Indigenous children, youth, families, and communities with competence, with high percentages reporting being underprepared or unprepared (Robinson-Zañartu et al., 2011).

Indigenous children and youth leave school early at rates far higher than any other group (Stillwell, 2010), complete higher education at far lower rates (Sheehy, 2013), and attend class with teachers who understand far less about them in general compared to other students (National Congress of American Indians, 2019; Starnes, 2006; Sue et al., 2007). Many leave school or are pushed out long before dropout rates are calculated, frequently at Grade 7, which results in significant underrepresentation of Indigenous youth in nationally reported dropout figures (Losen & Orfield, 2002). National figures report that only 72% of Indigenous youth complete high school (National Congress of American Indians, 2017), while the true numbers may actually be lower.

In addition to these academic outcomes, Indigenous populations have disproportionately higher rates of mental health needs than other ethnic minority populations in the United States. Specifically, Indigenous children and adolescents have higher rates of depression than any other racial or ethnic

group (American Psychiatric Association, 2017). Suicide rates among American Indians and Alaskan Natives are significantly higher than the national average (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2017). Nationally, one third of Indigenous people who completed suicide were youth ages 10–24 years (Leavitt et al., 2018). For Native Hawaiians, rates of suicide attempts are significantly higher than other adolescents in Hawaii (Hawaii State Department of Health, 2015; Yuen et al., 2000). Some tribes have linked community action and awareness to decrease suicide rates. For example, in 2006 the White Mountain Apache, in partnership with Johns Hopkins University, developed a multitiered youth suicide prevention program that centered on culturally appropriate referral and follow-up in order to destigmatize mental health in their tribal community. Data from their community-based surveillance system indicated a reduction in suicide rates by 38.3% over a 6-year period. A key component was linked to a mandate to report at-risk suicidal behaviors, with culturally appropriate follow-up and referral by team members to destigmatize mental health in their tribal community (Cwik et al., 2016).

There is tremendous diversity across Indigenous nations. Thus, it is incumbent upon school psychologists to learn about and understand the implications of the unique histories, belief systems, and ways of knowing in the communities they serve. Without doing so, there is a tendency to treat all Indigenous groups as one unit (Martin et al., 2017), which is disrespectful to the communities being served and creates critical gaps in understanding. To access the information, school psychologists can start by building trust and forming reciprocal relationships. For example, they might be a consistent presence and actively participate in social or community gatherings to form meaningful relationships that will facilitate access. They might talk to their students about local community activities in which they and their families will be involved. School psychologists can learn appropriate greetings (e.g., nonaggressive handshakes) and culturally appropriate openings, as well as seek parent input and involvement to support these efforts (cf., Dauphinais et al., 2009). By being active participants in their students' community, school psychologists build inclusive and authentic relationships that enhance trust with Indigenous children, youth, and community members. These reciprocal relationships are strong foundations for advocacy, more meaningful engagement, and greater validity in school psychology practice.

## **THE LEGACY OF TRAUMA AND THE PROMISE OF RESILIENCY**

A long history of the dismantling of Indigenous communities, languages, and cultures has affected the lives of Indigenous children and youth. This legacy creates historical or intergenerational trauma, which is a cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, the effects of which continue to be experienced individually and by entire communities over lifespans and across generations (Brave Heart, 2003; Cajete, 2015). European colonization of Indigenous lands led to the loss of language and spiritual and cultural practices, as well as to genocide of millions of Indigenous peoples. The loss of cultural roots has resulted in lasting negative effects on many Indigenous youth (Evans-Campbell, 2008) as manifested by high rates of learning difficulties, school dropout, mental health challenges, and deaths by suicide. Increased incidences of high-risk behaviors related to drinking, drug use, and lateral violence are prevalent (Beauvais et al., 2008; Indian Law and Order Commission, 2015). School psychologists must take an active stance to understand this tragic history and to help overcome the effects unique to Indigenous children, youth, and families.

Government boarding schools played a key role in historical trauma. Established in the late 1800s and operating well into the 20th century, boarding schools initiated the harsh process of forced assimilation. Children were taken from their families and homelands to be indoctrinated into Western thought and

were stripped of traditional cultural practices, language, and parent and community contact (Kawai'ae'a et al., 2007; Reyhner & Eder, 1990). Indigenous identity was suppressed through corporal punishment, which has been cited as a source of internalized oppression resulting in underachievement as well as multiple distresses and dysfunctions (Dauphinais et al., 2009).

Despite this legacy of trauma and efforts at extinction, Indigenous peoples are still here, and they are resilient. Indigenous communities have begun the process of healing by using traditional methods (e.g., community-based learning, gatherings, ceremonies, storytelling, language revitalization, advocacy, and grassroots activism) to validate, understand, and heal from the full impact of the historical traumas within and across communities. Many have begun to rejuvenate cultural and linguistic traditions that strengthen Indigenous identities. Strengthening identity, or enculturation, is strongly associated with enhanced resilience (Kahn et al., 2016; LaFromboise et al., 2006). Furthermore, most tribal nations continue to practice and fight for sovereignty and the right to manage their land and natural resources. By engaging in cultural healing processes, Indigenous peoples empower themselves to live as survivors, rather than as victims. NASP recognizes that school psychologists can play a key role in fostering this resiliency through their work in schools and communities. In doing so, it is critical that school psychologists be aware of Indigenous nations' responses to the past, become familiar with their world views and cultural perspectives, and consider remnants of past practices or experiences that continue to influence the institution of education today.

## CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICE WITH INDIGENOUS YOUTH

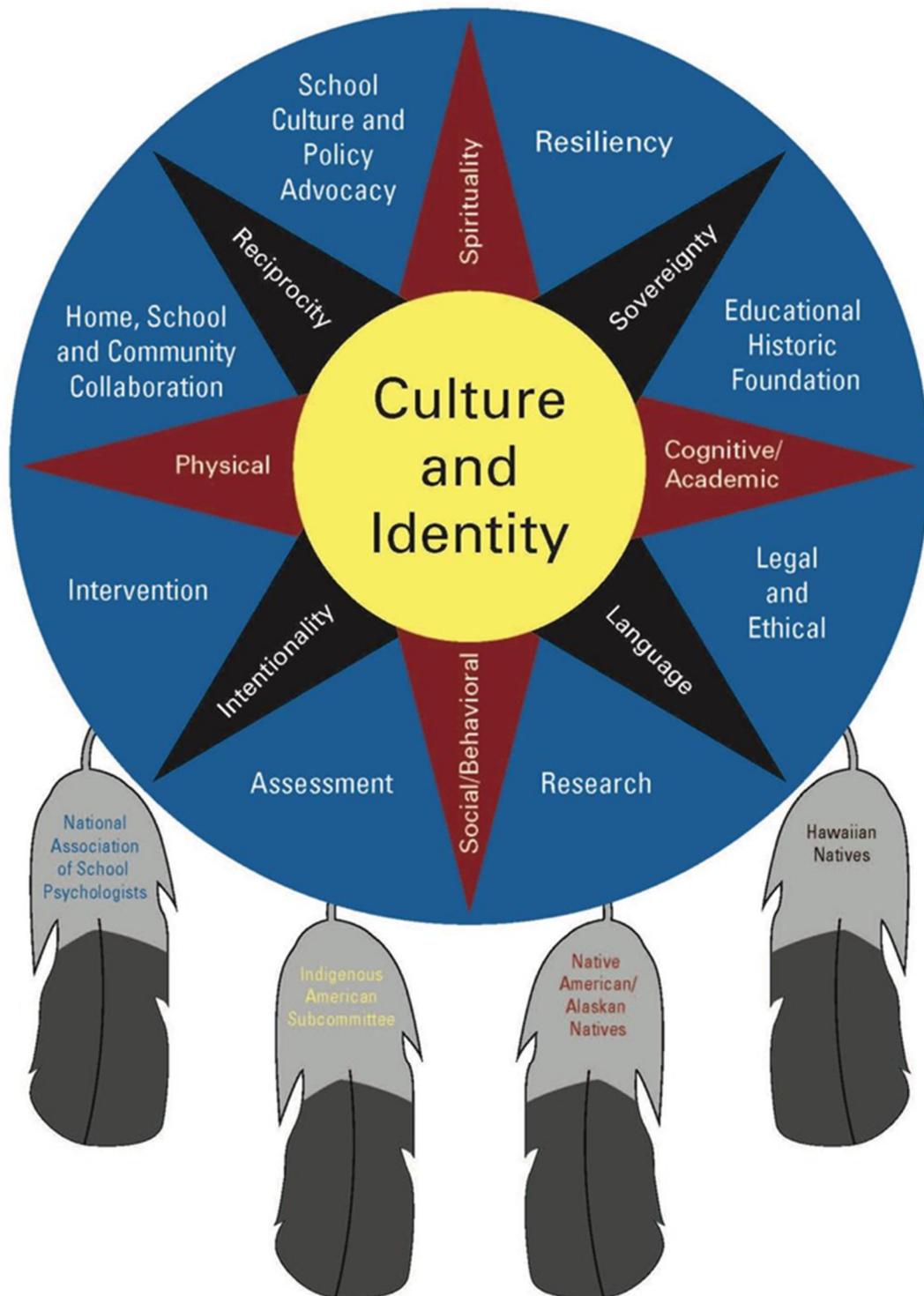
School psychologists must ensure that Indigenous children and youth receive culturally responsive education and mental health services. The Indigenous Conceptual Framework Guiding School Psychology Practice With Indigenous Children, Youth, Families, and Communities (Figure 1) is consistent with the NASP Practice Model in considering diversity and development in learning as foundational (NASP, 2010). Furthermore, NASP promotes that school psychologists enact social justice through culturally responsive professional practice and advocacy to create schools, communities, and systems that ensure equity and fairness for all children and youth (NASP, 2017).

The NASP Indigenous American Subcommittee developed a nonlinear graphic image which draws on the Indigenous world view of the interconnectedness of nature and which integrates the sun (yellow), four point stars (black/red), and water (blue). NASP recognizes the *Indigenous Conceptual Framework* as a foundation for providing culturally responsive services. The *Indigenous Conceptual Framework* recognizes culture and identity as its core. This core serves as a symbol of the source of energy that feeds the spiritual, cognitive–academic, social–emotional–behavioral, and physical development of Indigenous children, as well as that of the practitioner. The two four-point center stars encompass key ideas and practices needed to support Indigenous children, youth, families, and communities.

The four points of the black star—sovereignty, language, intentionality, and reciprocity—address elements essential to understand when building relationships.

- **Sovereignty.** Sovereignty is seen as inherent to Indigenous communities. The Constitution, treaties, and laws of the United States entitled federal trust obligation to Indigenous education (National Indian Education Association, 2016). Indigenous communities have the right to revitalize their cultures and languages through self-sufficiency and self-governance. School psychologists will recognize that land and water, and the rights to those, are tied to sovereignty and will honor those

**Figure 1. An Indigenous Conceptual Framework: Guiding School Psychology Practice With Indigenous Children, Youth, Families, and Communities**



rights. School psychologists can honor sovereignty through validating Indigenous students' identities, cultures, and languages. This can occur within the school environment through the use of authentic visual cultural representations, incorporation of Indigenous knowledge in curricula, acknowledgment of tribal efforts at language revitalization, and acknowledgment of their ancestral lands and waterways. In honoring sovereignty, they will accept and foster cultural practices such as respecting long hair, wearing eagle feathers during graduation, and attending community ceremonies as critical to identity, and thus resilience. However, sovereignty not only pertains to land and legal issues, it endows each tribe “the sustaining and enhanc[ing] of political, economic, and cultural integrity” (Wilkins, 2002, p. 339). Sovereignty upholds each tribe as a governmental entity and each tribal member as a recipient of those sovereign privileges that cannot be separated and fractionalized. Because an issue is politicized does not make it less of a social justice issue. The intersection of sovereignty as identity for NA/AN peoples and their socioeconomic status creates marginalization because of the many distinct self-governing tribes and concurrent lack of wealth and power. NA/AN identity includes federal, state, and tribal citizenship. A lack of understanding of this unique relationship with each of the governmental entities can interact with existing school policies and child welfare policies in negative ways. By honoring sovereignty, school psychologists understand and acknowledge the privileges they hold themselves, and they can leverage those privileges to advocate for the diverse students and families they serve (Proctor et al., 2019). NASP recognizes the concept of intersectionality and social justice; this recognition can create more equitable outcomes when each school psychologist better understands the importance of these intersecting identities as they contrast with power and privilege in schools and agencies that include NA/AN children, youth, and families. NA/AN students and communities are keenly aware of injustices, oppression, domination, and discrimination. School psychologists can validate these perceptions (Wilkins, 2002).

- **Language.** Language is a culture carrier and, therefore, it is seen by many as critical to identity. Some tribes face extinction of their languages, which endangers key parts of those identities; however, communities who have lost language must still be considered fully Indigenous. Children and youth regaining their Indigenous languages may know songs, phrases, prayers, or stories in their original languages, while others may be fully bilingual. The Ka Papahana Kaiapuni, the globally recognized Hawaiian language immersion program, has provided a rich model for other Indigenous communities to revitalize their own languages (Kawai'ae'a et al., 2007). It is critical that school psychologists appreciate the complexity of second language development and dual languages. Consider the language model in the home and go beyond the language survey. School psychologists should advocate to support their communities' work on revitalizing and promoting local Indigenous languages.
- **Intentionality.** The school psychologist comes to the relationship with Indigenous children and youth, their families, and their communities with the intention of giving them full respect. Effective school psychologists intend to support the development and the resilience which grows out of identity and culture (Charley et al., 2015). Given that intent, school psychologists must practice in a way that is congruent with the academic, behavioral, and social success of their Indigenous students.
- **Reciprocity.** An effective school psychologist working with Indigenous children and youth, families, and communities builds genuine reciprocity. This includes partnering with the community and parents, as well as understanding and learning the culture by building reciprocal relationships that facilitate trust and the development of respect (Baez, 2011). For example, in most Indigenous cultures, adults are expected to model rather than demand respect. Thus, in schools, culturally responsive school psychologists will model respect that fosters two-way relationships and will consult with educators to do the same.

The four points of the red star—spiritual, cognitive–academic, social–emotional–behavioral, and physical—address key elements of being human.

- **Spiritual.** Indigenous spirituality is concerned with philosophies of interrelatedness and respect for all living things, from Mother Earth to Father Sky. It is important that school psychologists understand the nature of Indigenous spirituality. Students and families may hold varying levels of belief in these philosophies depending on their levels of acculturation. Culturally responsive school psychologists will promote a sense of belonging within their Indigenous students by creating a sacred space in the schools where they feel safe to learn, share thoughts, and disclose concerns. Creating sacred spaces relevant to Indigenous teachings in schools means validating tribal teaching and values through the creation of a place where each child/youth feels there is cultural acceptance and that fosters calmness for reflection, meditation, and movement. It is in this safe place—which can be within the confine of school walls or within nature on school grounds—where patience, compassion, love, generosity, and forgiveness is facilitated. Many tribes have spiritual and cultural practices that require extended absences from school, sometimes longer than expected for students in the majority. School psychologists will advocate on behalf of Indigenous students’ ways of knowing and understanding the world.
- **Cognitive–academic.** School psychologists should consider cultural assets and culturally embedded knowledge, thinking, and problem-solving skills in assessment and intervention planning (Tso, 2010). When conducting assessments with Indigenous students, school psychologists should develop knowledge about culturally appropriate, dynamic, and authentic measures of ability (Muller, 2005; Robinson-Zañartu & Aganza, 2019; Robinson-Zañartu et al., 2017), as standardized measures are unlikely to be valid for many or most Indigenous students. Issues of validity include the use of tests not standardized on the population, lack of proficiency in English or in their native languages, and lack of exposure to the concepts being assessed (American Psychological Association, 2017; NASP, 2010). Assessment models that consider response-to-intervention data and culturally informed professional judgement should be encouraged (Dauphinais et al., 2018).
- **Social–emotional–behavioral.** School psychologists should affirm resilience among Indigenous children, youth, and communities, and they should validate traditional models of healing (e.g., medicine wheel, smudging, ceremony). They should acknowledge the influence of historical trauma on student behaviors and social–emotional status, and they should promote resilience through asset-based and trauma-informed models, pedagogies, and interventions as integral to their multitiered systems of support (MTSS). School psychologists should understand that many Indigenous communities are in the process of healing from intergenerational trauma and must consider related ecosystemic factors to avoid pitfalls of misdiagnosis. They should consider cultural adaptations to evidence-based interventions and should collaborate with community members trained to use traditional healing practices in intervention.
- **Physical.** The physical health and well-being of Indigenous youth are related to and influenced by all areas of the framework. They are seen as interrelated. Traditionally, those relationships are subject to the concept of balance and harmony. Thus, when culture and identity have been disrupted, physical health has been affected. School psychologists will consider how land is interconnected with physical and spiritual well-being, and for Native Hawaiians the connection of land and water. For instance, when land is desecrated through pollution of water, Indigenous children’s health deteriorates. School psychologists will collaborate with community agencies (i.e., Indian Health Services or contract health services) to promote physical health using methods such as reincorporating ancestral foods and Indigenous games (i.e., lacrosse, canoeing, kayaking, archery,

seal hop, scissor broad jump, snow snakes, traditional dancing, and running) into school health and wellness routines. They will also address health issues such as suicide, alcohol use, obesity, and diabetes through culturally appropriate prevention and intervention efforts.

## THE BLUE BACKGROUND AND FOUR FEATHERS

The blue background of the model represents the elements that flow throughout the other components. Just as in Indigenous cultures, where rituals and beliefs form a spiritual connection with nature, the water flows as one of the sustaining and most critical life forces. Water is a source of life, supporting and nourishing the lives of the people. In this model, the blue background represents elements of practice within the NASP Practice Model which provide sustenance for the Indigenous Conceptual Framework (NASP, 2010).

The four feathers represent the alliance between NASP, the Indigenous American Subcommittee, and the nations for whom school psychologists advocate.

## SUMMARY

Native American, Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian children, youth, families, and communities each have unique heritages, histories, world views, cultural and spiritual beliefs, and practices which impact their experiences of learning and of education. Current education and mental health outcomes, along with the legacies of trauma, make culturally responsive work with these communities imperative and necessitate unique approaches. The Indigenous Conceptual Framework outlines key interrelated areas of understanding that will support this practice, including recognizing Indigenous resilience and promoting access to their own cultures as central. School psychologists work from authentic and intentional support of Indigenous identities and build positive, trusting, reciprocal relationships with children, youth, families, and communities. Whether serving Indigenous students on or off the reservation, in rural or urban settings, school psychologists approach communities with respect and openness to learning.

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