

Applying the Sweetgrass Method to Address Bullying for Indigenous Youth

BY MARK STANDING EAGLE BAEZ

The sweetgrass method (SGM) provides a culturally responsive framework for addressing mental and behavioral health concerns for American Indian/Alaska Native youth. School psychologists can apply the three interwoven strands of SGM to address bullying with introspection, communication, and continuity.

BE IT PHYSICAL, verbal, relational, or electronic, involvement in bullying is associated with many adverse outcomes, including increased risk of substance abuse, delinquency, suicide, truancy, mental health problems, and physical injury, as well as decreased academic performance; even those witnessing bullying in school are at an increased risk of experiencing negative mental health effects (Rivers et al., 2009) and an increased sense of vulnerability (Glover et al., 2000).

Although bullying can compound existing vulnerabilities for students from marginalized populations, research on culturally responsive bullying prevention programs is limited, particularly for American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities. This article explains how a culturally responsive approach to mental and behavioral health, the Sweetgrass Method (SGM; Baez, 2011; Baez et al., 2022), can be applied to address bullying for AI/AN youth.

The Unique Needs of AI/AN Youth

Not only are AI/AN students overrepresented in special education programs, they have the highest dropout rate and the lowest levels of academic achievement and attendance (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). They are also at greater risk for mental health problems, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, and involvement in the juvenile justice system (Gion et al., 2018). These outcomes are attributed to a variety of causes, such as lack of support from parents and family members, poor academic skills, poor student-teacher relationships, lack of a sense of belonging in schools, linguistic and cultural barriers, low expectations, and student transfer and mobility (Reyhner, 2010; Sarche & Spicer, 2008). To effectively address this range of critical needs, we must provide services that are grounded in cultural awareness.

Although there is literature on the effectiveness of antibullying programs (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011), little research is available to inform our understanding of bullying within the AI/AN context, its consequences among AI/AN students, and what prevention approaches are culturally aligned for AI/AN people. However, for professionals working with AI/AN students, any framework to prevent and address bullying must consider cultural context as a critical component.

Bullying and AI/AN Youth

Although many things influence bullying behavior, in Indian Country, historical trauma is an additional factor. However, literature specific to this and other unique aspects of the AI/AN experience is nearly nonexistent. Based on what is available, AI/AN youth who are bullied generally show higher levels of insecurity, anxiety, depression, loneliness, unhappiness, and other physical, emotional, and mental health symptoms (Morris, 2016). It is alarming to note that LGBTQ-2S youth are more than four times more likely to attempt suicide (Johns et al., 2019; Johns et al., 2020), as there are in-

creasing reports of bullying towards these students on reservations, though various Tribes hold stories and accept the roles of two-spirited people (Baez, 2011).

AI/AN youth living on a reservation might be targeted by their non-AI/AN peers based on stereotypes and misconceptions. However, when we look at AI/AN students and how they treat one another across the reservations, most are no different from their peers in the dominant culture: AI/AN students bully one another too (Baez & Baez, 2023). These similarities and differences highlight how bullying occurs in a broad social and environmental context, including individual, family, community, and school factors (Swearer et al., 2012). The SGM incorporates this range of considerations and facilitates active involvement from families and the community.

The Sweetgrass Method

American Indians/First Nations people have held sweetgrass (Óhonte Wensérákon) sacred for a long time. Sweetgrass is used to purify oneself—mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually—in hopes of grounding the person in healing. Grounded in this tradition, the SGM is a culturally responsive framework for working with Indigenous clients (Baez et al., 2022). It is a community-based participatory practice approach incorporating practice-based evidence (PBE), which looks at what works for the community setting. PBE includes a range of behavior approaches and supports derived from and supportive of the positive culture of the local society and traditions (Bartgis & Bigfoot, 2010) and is an effective practice for AI/AN school communities.

The SGM weaves together Western and Traditional approaches. It incorporates three strands: (a) *introspection*, a life-long commitment to self-reflection and cultural humility; (b) *communication*, a commitment to building relationships and partnerships with people and groups to address mental health concerns; and (c) *continuity*, ongoing supports for students and their communities that foster long-term success.

First Strand: Introspection

Recognizing one's culture and how it influences behavior is necessary but insufficient for working effectively in a multicultural society (Baez et al., 2022). Such awareness is particularly critical for professionals providing services to Indigenous populations, as they must be respectful and nonjudgmental, and avoid assumptions and expectations to serve their students best (Baez & Isaac, 2013). This cannot happen if one is not grounded introspectively. Introspection includes reflecting on professional competencies and practicing self-care to promote spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental wellness. The introspection strand of the SGM braid also allows educators to be examples of healthy leaders for the AI/AN and Indigenous individuals to whom they provide services.

Introspection incorporates cultural humility. Cultural humility starts with a commitment to exploring

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one's cultural beliefs and values, because responding effectively to others is very hard without understanding oneself. When practitioners apply cultural humility, they ask sincere and curious questions about, for example, the client's ethnicity, identity, language, and social needs. Counselors knowledgeable of AI/AN perspectives of mental health also understand that the primary goal of psychological helping is to explore issues related to a student's reason for acting out and helping them find healing (Baez et al., 2022). Through and with introspection, we can assist our students in finding healing and provide support for their academic and social-emotional growth.

Second Strand: Communication

The second strand of the braid, communication, refers to how the work becomes action with others. Partnerships with families and communities are critical when providing support to AI/AN students. In particular, the community is essential to reducing bullying in schools and the local society. Communication is an evolving process that calls for active participation from professionals, families, community, and students, all of whom engage in shared problem solving and decision making to achieve a common goal (Baez & Isaac, 2013; Baez et al., 2022). All these groups must communicate well to work together effectively. However, this can be challenging when the partnerships include AI/AN and non-AI/AN members.

As a community, we provide a safe place to H.O.P.E. or *honor our people's experiences* without judgment (Baez et al., 2016). Non-AI/AN providers can communicate respect for their AI/AN clients' stories, feelings, and understanding of what they are experiencing through H.O.P.E. For example, most AI/ANs understand the purpose and use of sweetgrass, which is used to cleanse the mind, spirit, and body. According to C. A. Baez, "the culturally responsive technique of the SGM discusses how professional clinicians would approach with openness to honoring our people's experiences" (personal communication; April, 2015). This means embracing the experiences that AI/AN students and parents may factor into their choices.

When addressing bullying with students from any cultural group, there may be a need to communicate information that parents find difficult to hear. The National Indian Education Study (NCES, 2019) found that more than 30% of AI/AN children are regularly involved in bullying, including as bullies themselves, or as both bully and victim. It is essential to communicate the supports available to caregivers in a culturally responsive manner that fosters trust, especially when the child is engaging in bullying behaviors. For AI/AN parents, trust is essential in any conversation when working with non-AI/AN providers. Based on historical trauma, AI/AN caregivers have a multitude of reasons not to trust school personnel and may not feel comfortable or be receptive to discussions about their child's behavior when they do not know, let alone trust, the person sharing such information.

Third Strand: Continuity

The third strand in the SGM braid involves maintaining a continuum of culturally responsive services that are delivered with consistency. This includes supports for youth, caregivers, and the community, as well as staff development. Providing ongoing culturally responsive approaches is vital to improving social-emotional and academic outcomes for AI/AN and Indigenous youth (Baez et al., 2022). This strand also focuses on continued research on new prevention strategies and ongoing social support services that weave together Western approaches and AI/AN Traditional methodologies.

Although the idea of consistently continuing services may sound intuitive as best practice, it does not always happen. Maintaining continuity can be challenging, especially in areas experiencing shortages of mental and behavioral health providers. There may be situations in which a provider cannot follow through, even though they are committed and want to, because they have too large a caseload or too many mandated special education evaluations to complete. But when systems break down, Indigenous families may end up feeling abandoned by providers who fail to "show up" for them. Therefore, practitioners should be honest and transparent about their availability and the services to be provided. Communicating with parents about what is happening is essential, and asking families for their suggestions and support is particularly useful.

As a braid, the strands of SGM are interwoven and overlapping. Thus, communication and continuity are often closely connected. For example, as practitioners, educators, counselors, and administrators, there is a need for continuity of communication with families and the community. Providers can achieve this by communicating not just when there is a discipline issue, but also when something positive occurs. A phone call or note home to share a success—large or small—can go a long way towards continuing to build trust and maintain relationships. Generally, continuity of support services requires continuing a healthy dialogue to maintain relationships with AI/AN clients.

Continuity of support services should extend outside of school, be it for bullying prevention and intervention or any other mental or behavioral health challenge. Ongoing collaborative care improves outcomes, particularly for people with complex needs (Henderson et al., 2017). This often requires partnerships with other professionals and community resources, particularly those who are familiar with local knowledge and traditions. Practitioners and community partners must be flexible in deciding the appropriate and relevant methods for their particular Tribe or community.

Case Example: An SGM Approach to Bullying

Chris is an AI/AN eighth grader sent to meet with Jamie, the school psychologist, because of allegations of Chris bullying other students. Applying the SGM (see Table 1), Jamie would begin with introspection. This would include thinking through what she knows and needs to learn about Chris's culture and reflecting on where there may be similarities and differences between

Chris's traditions and her own. It would also mean assessing self-care and how calm and equipped she felt to handle Chris's case at that time.

Communication with Chris would begin from a place of cultural humility and curiosity to build trust. Jamie might thank Chris for coming to the meeting and explain that because she cares about him and where he comes from, they need to discuss what has been happening. Gazing around the room without staring directly at Chris, Jamie could start by expressing a sincere desire to learn about Chris and asking him about any preferred terms or his Tribal name. Like most discussions with students about difficult issues, the conversation would carefully and patiently explore Chris's perspective about the alleged bullying incidents, with Jamie checking for understanding.

For a school psychologist applying SGM, it would be important to communicate to Chris that addressing bullying requires an ongoing collaborative process with his

caregivers and his community. Thus, Jamie would want to be clear with Chris about all plans to speak with his parent(s) or guardian(s) before connecting with his family.

Applying the fundamentals of the SGM communication braid, Jamie would invite Chris's caregivers for a meeting to discuss the bullying issue and ensure they know they have a voice and a valued perspective. Jamie would aim to establish an equal partnership with Chris's family and avoid any implication that, as a school staff member, she was more of an expert or held more power. Rather, Chris's family members are the experts on Chris, and by hearing their stories and honoring their experiences, Jamie will be better equipped to support him. While following the school's code of conduct, Jamie would want Chris and his parents to know, "We want Chris here with us at school, and we want him to learn and feel welcome here, but this is behavior we must adjust and correct; how can we work together to support him?" rather than simply stating, "We have to

TABLE 1. APPLYING THE SGM STRANDS

INTROSPECTION

- Understand the limits you may have with AI/AN culture.
- Reflect on how you approach AI/AN students. What do you know? What assumptions might you hold?
- Be open to improving your skills. Ultimately, you want to improve your learning to promote better outcomes among AI/AN students.
- Consult with other practitioners with experience working with AI/AN students or particular Tribes. This may include networking with Tribal communities and elders.
- Assess self-care. Are you able to respond to the situation with calmness and professionalism? Or are you overstressed and lacking patience?

COMMUNICATION

- It is often best to deal with bullying without the class watching, but address egregious problems immediately.
- Approach the student calmly and with a soft but assertive tone.
- Practice cultural humility to build trust. Ask questions and approach the student with sincere curiosity. Be upfront with the AI/AN student if you do not know about their culture and ways, but stress that you are open to learning to provide the support that honors their growth and the relationship between the two of you.
- Ask, "Do you prefer AI/AN or Indigenous?" and inquire about the Tribal name.
- Recognize that different cultures have different attitudes regarding personal space and eye contact. Be cautious about hugging or touching students without asking permission. Do not require the student to "look at me when I talk to you."
- Address the concern without a fixed stare (i.e., pan around the room).
- Clearly state that you care about who they are, their culture, and where they come from, which is why you want to address the bullying.
- Listen to the student and check your cultural understanding of them and their situation.
- Collaborate with the student's family; listen to their story, learn who they are and where they come from, and understand their family customs.

CONTINUITY

- Show up and follow through. It is essential that the student and their family believe that you will do what you say you will do.
- Recognize the value of AI/AN students' talents, abilities, skills, and experiences that honor who they are as AI/AN people.
- Maintain healthy partnerships with the AI/AN student, their family, and the community (e.g., Tribal healers).
- Provide ongoing support and bullying prevention/intervention strategies that are culturally responsive for both students and caregivers.
- Incorporate practice-based evidence (i.e., what works for that Tribal community).



suspend Chris because of these incidents.”

The process of addressing Chris’s bullying behavior would be ongoing and collaborative. Jamie would need to “show up” consistently and work patiently to establish and maintain the trust needed to work with Chris to change his behavior. Consistent communication with Chris’s family would also be key. For example, Jamie might call home periodically to check in for updates, or to share successes when Chris made progress towards his behavioral goals. The three strands of the SGM braid would remain woven throughout the process, and through reflection Jamie would continue to learn and strengthen her skills for working with AI/AN communities.

Conclusion

The SGM applies community-based participatory practices in a partnership approach that involves Indigenous community members, Indigenous and other organizational representatives, and academic professionals in all aspects of the process. As practitioners, we can make positive school changes by building relationships and partnerships with our AI/AN parents and communities. Understanding AI/AN youth is an important way to begin a healthy dialogue between the student and the practitioner. This also allows the school psychologist to develop approaches to mental health that are culturally responsive for AI/AN youth. With an understanding of the SGM, the school psychologist can form cross-cultural connections in a mutual relationship with the student, the family, and the community. ●

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MARK STANDING EAGLE BAEZ, PhD, LSP, LCDC, CCBT, MS/MA is a licensed school psychologist and an assistant professor of Clinical and Counseling Psychology at Bemidji State University. He is Mohawk/Pawnee descent and a member of the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation (Mission Indian).