



## *Indigenous Social Justice Pedagogy: Teaching into the Risks and Cultivating the Heart*

---

Valerie J. Shirley, University of Arizona

### **Abstract**

*As Indigenous communities envision their future, it is without question that the Indigenous youth play a significant role in sustaining their Indigenous lifeways and communities. They will no doubt be faced with the responsibility to navigate socio-cultural, environmental, political and economic issues while simultaneously preserving their Indigenous knowledge systems. Educators have the capacity to prepare youth for the responsibility of understanding colonialism and to begin the process of helping youth understand such tactics to protect Indigenous land, people, languages, and culture. When Indigenous youth are provided with the necessary knowledge, skills and analytical tools to navigate this future undertaking, they will be prepared to be protectors and change agents for their Indigenous communities; which, in turn, reflects nation-building. In this article, I will provide an overview of Indigenous social justice pedagogy and explain its role in Indigenous nation-building efforts. In addition, I will draw on experiences of engaging Diné youth (ages 12-14) in a decolonizing process and discuss what it means to teach from an Indigenous social justice framework that invokes critical inquiry with individual and collective action.*

**Keywords:** social justice pedagogy, decolonization, indigenous education, nation-building

*Oak Flat is my home, it is where I come from as a young girl...Going there and praying to see the land, you see the life that it gives. But to corporations, they see it as nothing...I am proud to be Indigenous and I will continue to fight for Oak Flat. Oak Flat is a place of sacredness. It is a place of life. It's a place of who I am and our identity as Apache people. Who are we without Oak Flat? Who are we without these sacred places? (Naelyn Pike, San Carlos and Chiracahua Apache).<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction**

The opening quote is from Naelyn Pike, a 16-year old San Carlos and Chiracahua Apache youth, speaking at the Natural Resource Committee in Washington, DC with a group of supporters (Apache Stronghold) advocating for the preservation and protection of Oak Flat, a sacred site to the Apache people, located in southeastern Arizona. Oak Flat is currently under threat of being

---

1. See <https://www.facebook.com/802193869856079/videos/924403060968492/?theater> for video footage.

destroyed. In early 2015, lawmakers John McCain and Jeff Flake of Arizona insidiously slipped language into a “must pass” National Defense Authorization Act to give land (Oak Flat area) to a foreign mining company called Resolution Copper, “at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour...bypassing public scrutiny” (Revkin, 2015). Naelyn and her group, Apache Stronghold, have been protesting and raising awareness about this unjust land exchange and have gained massive support from government leaders, legislators, environmentalists, activists, and other Indigenous people across the globe. Although legislative bills have been introduced to protect Oak Flat, such unjust and inequitable situations continue to occur in Indigenous communities as Indigenous peoples’ lands and resources remain under threat of destruction, theft and/or exploitation in various communities.

As Indigenous communities envision their future, it is without question that our<sup>2</sup> Indigenous youth play a significant role in sustaining our Indigenous lifeways and communities. Indigenous youth will be at the forefront in sustaining our Indigenous communities and they will no doubt be faced with the responsibility of navigating socio-cultural, environmental, political and economic issues while simultaneously preserving their Indigenous knowledge systems. Educators have the capacity to prepare youth for the responsibility of understanding colonialism and to begin the process of helping youth understand such tactics in order to safeguard Indigenous land, people, languages, and culture. When Indigenous youth are provided with the necessary knowledge, skills and analytical tools to navigate this future undertaking, they will be prepared to be protectors and change agents for their Indigenous communities; which, in turn, contributes to nation-building.

Understanding the historical context behind present-day social and community issues through truth-telling processes is important. Unfortunately for Indigenous people, this history is filled with trauma and injustices; consequently, when truth-telling practices activate stories of struggle and resistance, educators need to be conscious of the risks involved in telling such stories. Teaching into the risks involves the process of raising awareness in students by unveiling history from the perspective of those affected by injustice and requires educators to carefully ponder how to cultivate students’ emotional responses and reactions. Consequently, teaching into the risks requires *cultivating the heart* and carefully navigating youth through their emotions in the process of critically engaging in sociocultural analyses of society. It is certainly not an easy task; however, truth-telling is necessary for any type of social change to occur. Educators serving as change agents have the capacity to transform educational experiences for young people by providing learning experiences that *engage the heart and mind* to address various issues and concerns so as to promote social change. In doing so, this type of teaching in Indigenous contexts asks educators to involve Indigenous youth in an emotional journey of uncovering the past in addition to engaging youth in the process of healing and empowerment by affirming Indigenous values and epistemology. Nonetheless, uncovering history from Indigenous perspectives is an important first step in becoming critically conscious and aware (Fanon, 1963/2004; Said, 1978/2003; Smith, 1999); therefore, in order for healing and social change to occur, cultivating the minds and hearts through Indigenous epistemologies is extremely important.

In this article, I will provide an overview of Indigenous social justice pedagogy (ISJP) and explain its role in Indigenous nation-building. The following question will be addressed: What does it mean to teach critically, and for social justice, from an Indigenous framework? I will draw on experiences of engaging Diné youth in a process that prompted a critical consciousness and discuss teaching from an Indigenous social justice framework that invokes critical inquiry with

---

2. The author is a member of the Diné Nation, an Indigenous Native American group in the United States. Diné is also commonly known as Navajo. As a member of an Indigenous community, I include myself within this paper; using the pronouns *we*, *our*, and *us*.

individual and collective action for change. My goal is to extend the field of social justice education with specific attention to developing an Indigenous social justice pedagogical framework. ISJP involves decolonization, Indigenous epistemologies, and nation-building.

### **The Roots of Social Justice Pedagogy**

*Social justice education is...about the goal of transformation.*  
(Chapman & Hobbel, 2009, p. 4).

Social justice pedagogy is rooted in the educational frameworks of multicultural education and critical pedagogy (Cammarota, 2011; Chapman & Hobbel, 2009). Multicultural education includes multiple dimensions that aim to support the practical component of providing equitable learning opportunities for all students through the curriculum and affirming diverse student identities and experiences (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). Critical pedagogy critiques the dominant knowledge within curriculum, critically examines inequities in society, and focuses on the analytical tools to advance the development of a critical consciousness, agency, and empowerment through a problem-posing approach to teaching and learning (Freire, 1970/2002). Problem-posing education is a pedagogical approach that critically examines issues and concerns in a learning context. Within the educational context that cultivates a critical consciousness, students question and critique oppressive power structures in society and envision the potential for change. The analytical tools and methods of critical pedagogy include reflection, praxis, and dialogues. By drawing on critical pedagogical methods and tools, students begin to attain a critical consciousness to enact social change and transformation in their communities and schools. Therefore, social justice educators implement curriculum that aims to combat discrimination, prejudice, and oppression based on race, class, gender, sexuality, language, ability, etc. In this process, educators enact a problem-posing approach to engage young people in a critical examination of such injustices and inequities while facilitating pedagogical experiences and opportunities that promote “the goal of transformation” (Chapman & Hobbel, 2009, p. 4). In the next section, I contextualize social justice pedagogy within Indigenous settings.

### **Indigenous Social Justice Pedagogy**

Indigenous social justice pedagogy is a framework for *rethinking* the process of schooling for Indigenous students. Its primary focus is on reframing curriculum and pedagogy that aims to preserve and privilege Indigenous epistemologies while promoting nation-building in Indigenous communities. When educators privilege these two aspects in the classroom (or in a specific learning context), they are intentional in building curriculum around Indigenous issues and concerns in hopes to bring about positive social change in Indigenous communities. Indigenous communities have been faced with various social, environmental, and political issues (which have strong ties to colonialism) that have affected the livelihood and well-being of Indigenous peoples today. If educators can integrate such issues into the curriculum for youth to investigate, they will be preparing students to not only envision alternative possibilities to sustain their communities, but also empowering them to protect their land, cultures, and people. Pedagogically, educators can draw on the framework of ISJP to facilitate the process of: 1) deconstructing and disrupting the cycle of colonization in Indigenous communities; 2) promoting, revitalizing, and protecting Indigenous

languages and knowledge systems; and 3) envisioning ways to inspire youth to employ transformative possibilities that contribute to nation-building. Thus, central to ISJP are decolonizing processes that foster empowerment and activism in youth. In what follows, I describe the central components of ISJP: decolonization, Indigenous epistemology, and nation-building.

### **Decolonization: Teaching into the Risks**

Over the years, colonization has become endemic to Indigenous communities (Brayboy, 2005). The cycle of colonization, with its historical legacy and present-day infiltration, is entrenched in our Indigenous communities (mentally and structurally), and many of the social issues and concerns within Indigenous communities are linked to colonialism, which McCaslin and Breton characterize as “the root harm” (2008, p. 512). It becomes essential that educators begin to understand, deconstruct, and disrupt this cycle of colonization in the educational setting in order for social change to occur. As Mary Hermes (2015) posited, “Structures seem to influence what we do on a daily basis and...we need to build and act within structures that have their roots in Indigenous life” (p. 273). Schools, as a structure, has historically implemented colonial policies and practices that aimed to assimilate Indigenous peoples; and as a result such policies and practices have pushed our Indigenous knowledges, languages, cultures and identities to the margins in our own communities. In order to build schooling structures rooted in Indigenous life, schools would need to be restructured to center and promote Indigenous knowledge and values.

Decolonization becomes an essential component in the process of restructuring because it is the avenue by which we can challenge colonialism and begin to envision and create structures rooted in Indigenous life. The process of decolonization is worth noting at length:

A large part of decolonization entails developing a critical consciousness about the cause(s) of our oppression, the distortion of history, our own collaboration, and the degrees to which we have internalized colonialist ideas and practices. Decolonization requires auto-criticism, self-reflection, and a rejection of victimage. Decolonization is about empowerment—a belief that situations can be transformed, a belief and trust in our own peoples’ values and abilities, and a willingness to make change. It is about transforming negative reactionary energy into the more positive rebuilding energy needed in our communities. (Wheeler as cited in Wilson, 2004, p. 71)

An essential first step in decolonization requires the rediscovery of our histories (Laenui, 2000) in order to examine and uncover the project of colonization and reveal its effect on Indigenous peoples’ histories, cultures, languages, identities, land and resources. Consequently, much of Indigenous histories is silenced and excluded in curriculum documents; therefore, educators would need to seek alternative resources that include the voices and perspectives of Indigenous peoples’ around various historical events. Such truth-telling practices reveals stories of injustices and trauma within Indigenous histories and thus exposes how power and knowledge have worked to oppress Indigenous peoples. Truth-telling within decolonization initiates the development of a critical consciousness as it works to reveal the hidden histories and social realities of colonialism in our Indigenous communities. The practice of truth-telling, however, comes with the risks of students feeling angry, offended, and hurt by the stories of trauma and injustice experienced by their ancestors. When educators *teach into these risks* that move students into an emotional space where the stories of oppression stir up such emotions, it is crucial for educators to consider the

ways in which they can navigate youth through this emotional space. I propose that educators draw on Indigenous epistemologies to direct youth toward the process of healing. Within decolonization, there should also be emphasis on rejecting the notion of victimage and to move into a space of transformation and empowerment to change the oppressive circumstances in our communities; thus we must rely on our own Indigenous values, knowledge and abilities to initiate healing, (re)affirm our identities, and instill a commitment to improving our communities.

### **Cultivating the Heart: Promoting, Revitalizing, and Protecting Indigenous Epistemology**

In ISJP, Indigenous epistemologies are purposefully infused in the daily structure of the learning environment—from curriculum and pedagogy to the classroom community—drawing on Indigenous knowledge systems to create an environment where young people begin to privilege, promote, revitalize and center their Indigenous ways of thinking and being. To build and create structures rooted in Indigenous life, the learning environment is essentially infused with Indigenous philosophies, values, language, songs, stories, histories, and respectful relationships. Considering that the deconstruction of colonialism engenders feelings of anger and frustration when truth-telling uncovers stories of injustice and trauma, I propose educators draw on aspects of Indigenous epistemology to *cultivate the heart* toward healing and empowerment. Cultivating the heart toward empowerment is an essential step that sets the stage for students to consider the ways in which they can contribute to the betterment of both their classroom community and their Indigenous community in general. For example, in the particular study that I describe below, I draw on the Diné epistemological concept of *hozhó*. *Hozhó* is a philosophical concept in Diné teachings that is essentially about maintaining balance and harmony in life. Diné scholar Herbert Benally defined *hozhó* as “the state of much good, leading to a peaceful, beautiful and harmonious life” (1994, p. 23). This philosophical aspect is contextualized within the highly complex Diné epistemology of *Sa’ah Naaghái Bik’eh Hozhóón* and has many (*hozhóoji*) stories associated with it.<sup>3</sup> Many stories within our epistemology teach us about life and it is through these stories we gain the power of true Diné identity (Begay, 2002). Cultivating the heart through Indigenous epistemological aspects is necessary when educators teach into the risks by exposing the oppressive present-day conditions linked to colonialism (such as the exploitation of sacred sites like Oak Flat).

In ISJP, it is important to ensure the students’ epistemologies are reflected in the curriculum as well as in the overall classroom community and interactions between the students. Fostering relationships built on Indigenous aspects of respect, reciprocity and responsibility offers a unique way to incorporate Indigenous epistemologies in learning environments. To illustrate this, I draw on the work I conducted with Diné youth. My interactions with the student participants in my study began with an initial introduction of ourselves through our clans. The purpose of starting with introducing ourselves with our clans was to establish *k’é* (kinship). Our clans are the core aspects of our Diné identity as our clan affiliations place us in context to the family from which we come (the first clan is the mother’s clan, the second is the father’s clan, the third is the maternal grandfather’s clan, and the fourth clan is the paternal grandfather’s clan) and places us in relationship to other Diné people. Once kinship was established, I began a discussion of the deep meaning of *k’é* by explaining the process of developing and maintaining respectful relationships with others and

---

3. *Sa’ah Naaghái Bik’eh Hozhóón* is the journey toward living a balanced and harmonious life. According to Miranda Haskie (2002) it is “a system from which the Navajo people gain teachings and learn how to achieve a healthy well-being throughout life” (p. 32).

nature.<sup>4</sup> The ways in which we practice *k'é* is reflected in how we treat and interact with one another grounded in respect, care, and compassion for self and others. Developing explicit connections to *k'é* meant that in order to move forward in sharing our internal thoughts, ideas, and feelings, we needed to establish trust with one another to be able to express our deep and vulnerable thoughts and emotions. Establishing this foundation was a crucial step in our dialogues. By drawing upon the fundamental Diné value of *k'é*, I was able to create an environment where trust was established, respect was enacted, and taking care of one another became a priority. The relationships and values embedded within the practice of *k'é* were important in moving into deep conversations about identity, as “the deep caring and healing process rooted in kinship, family, compassion, respect and cooperation” (Lee, 2016, p. 102) was essential. Evident in Diné youths’ interactions, they remind us that having healthy relations with others based on Indigenous notions of respect, compassion, empathy, and care is essential when engaging in dialogue and interacting with others.

Cultivating the heart with Indigenous epistemologies is a core component within a space of learning where social issues and concerns are discussed and is fundamental within the practice of nurturing and guiding students through the process of critically examining issues and effects of colonialism, exploitation, oppression, inequity, and injustice on students’ lives and communities. In other words, colonialism has contributed to disrupting the lives, livelihood, and well-being of Indigenous peoples; it is Indigenous epistemologies that will contribute to the healing of our community members. By cultivating the heart through enacting decolonization in educational contexts, it provides youth with opportunities to examine core aspects of their Indigenous identity in addition to acquiring knowledge and skills required for protecting, promoting, and preserving Indigenous people, language, culture, and land. These processes contribute to rigorous academic work that are intellectually engaging and empowering as they provide young people with real opportunities to “reject victimage” and to begin working for social change and nation-building in their communities.

### **Nation-building**

In ISJP, educators are fundamentally preparing young people to contribute to nation-building. Nation-building in Indigenous communities is about sustaining our sovereignty in ways that are beneficial to our own community needs and aspirations. This process requires “generations of Indigenous peoples to grow up intimately and strongly connected to our homelands, immersed in our languages and spiritualities and embodying our traditions of agency, leadership, decision making and diplomacy” (Simpson, 2014, p. 1). By drawing on sovereignty and self-determination rights, schools can engage in this process. As Brayboy, Fann, Castagno & Solyom state, however, “Indigenous nations cannot successfully engage in nation-building projects that are driven by sovereignty and self-determination unless they develop independence of the mind by taking action to restore pride in their traditions, languages, and knowledge” (2012, p. 15). Developing independence of the mind is linked to what Tiffany Lee (2006) refers to as critical Indigenous consciousness, which is the process of liberating the mind from dominant hegemony and cultivating the mind toward indigenization where individuals are guided by Indigenous epistemologies to transform Indigenous communities.

---

4. See Kulago (2016) for an expanded explanation of *k'é*.

Understanding the impacts of colonialism, schools can be the site by which nation-building is rooted. When schools and educators restructure their curriculum and pedagogy to address nation-building, it raises unique and critical levels of responsibility and accountability. It requires educators to engage in a self-reflective process that recognizes teaching Indigenous students is not just about high stakes testing and standards; but embodies expectations of sustaining and privileging Indigenous knowledge as the source of decision making, leadership, advocacy, and agency. Educators are pressed to answer the question of how they will have prepared Indigenous youth, such as Naelyn, to be of service to their communities. Importantly, what dialogues and projects can educators facilitate that create opportunities for youth to begin contributing to notions of nation-building?

In ISJP, cultural regeneration through the curriculum and pedagogy must involve the incorporation of Indigenous values, stories, and language as the source for understanding nation-building. The next section is a case example of how aspects of ISJP (decolonization, Indigenous epistemology, and nation-building) come together in a tribal community school located on the Diné Nation.

### **Methodology**

The context for this case example is based on a critical Indigenous qualitative research study that explored the Indigenous subjectivities of ten Diné youth. Utilizing the theoretical framework of Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), this study investigated how the youth interpreted and made meaning of their Diné identities as they engaged in critical analyses of colonial tactics of assimilation and in learning aspects of Diné epistemology. At the time of this study, the youth were enrolled in a tribal community school (K-8) located on the Diné Nation where the study took place. I worked with 10 Diné students, ages 12-14, over a course of 5 months. Within this time period, I conducted classroom observations, 2 semi-structured pre-/post-interviews and 4 focus group discussions. The topics of each focus group session were: 1) the Diné Long Walk Period; 2) the history of boarding schools; 3) the media construction of stereotypes and Native identities; and 4) the Diné stories and philosophy of life. In this section, I will share stories of the students' engagement with curriculum and pedagogy that gives meaning to the framework of Indigenous social justice pedagogy.

### **Indigenizing Curriculum Through Truth-Telling**

In ISJP, the curriculum is built around Indigenous concerns and issues. Within this particular study, the concern was that the youth were losing their culture and language. The decline and shift in Diné culture and language among our youth has been a concern since early encounters with colonialism. Exposing students to these early encounters with colonialism was essential in the curriculum of this study as "Virtually every ill that Indigenous peoples suffer can be traced to colonization" (McCaslin & Breslin, 2008, p. 525). The purpose was to unpack the present-day issue of identity in relation to historical colonialism. As a result, the curriculum for this study started with an examination of colonialism by uncovering the history of the Diné Long Walk period and early boarding school experiences and ended with Diné stories and philosophy. Each of these aspects of the curriculum are examples and scenarios of truth-telling practices. What follows is a description of how students interacted and responded to specific aspects of the curriculum as truth-telling.

***Truth-telling: The Diné Long Walk Period***

In week five of the classroom observations of this research study, the classroom teacher (also Diné) wanted to discuss ideas for teaching her next unit. In the previous 4 weeks of classroom observations, she taught aspects of Diné seasons. Upon completing her unit, the teacher explained she wanted the next unit to focus on the Diné Long Walk experiences. The Diné Long Walk period (1860-1868) is the forced removal of the Diné off our ancestral homelands by being forced to walk approximately 450 miles (at gunpoint) to Fort Sumner in New Mexico. The Diné (men, women, children, and elders) were imprisoned for 4 years in harsh conditions within the camp at Fort Sumner, which is known to the Diné as *Hweéldi* (“a place of great suffering”). As the classroom teacher and I discussed the plans for developing the unit, we problematized the issue of textbooks reproducing dominant narratives about the Diné Long Walk period that excluded Diné perspectives; therefore, we agreed to focus on stories that were from Diné perspectives. We drew on the book *Diné Stories of the Long Walk Period* by Ruth Roessel (1973), which is a compilation of stories that were orally conveyed to the authors/storytellers in the book by their relatives who experienced the harsh conditions before, during, and after the Long Walk. Over the course of 2 months, the teacher implemented this unit by assigning short stories to each student to read and share with the class while I observed each lesson and the students’ reactions and responses. One can imagine the emotions that might emerge within any individual when examining the harsh conditions and experiences during the Diné Long Walk period. One student shared her reaction to the story she read of a Diné woman on the Long Walk during our first focus group discussion. In this particular story, the Diné woman was pregnant and struggled to walk the 450-mile trek to Fort Sumner. She was exhausted, and her family pleaded with the US Army soldiers to let her rest. The student shared:

It was really sad to see that she got shot just because she couldn’t keep up. And she tried to say we could wait until I had it [the baby] and maybe I could keep up, but they [the soldiers] didn’t want to do that. I was sad because a lot of us died during the Long Walk. I was mad at the same time too. Pissed off, angry. I still feel mad about it. I mean in our culture we just have to protect our people.

Another student expressed his discomfort with the dehumanizing experiences within the camp: “It was shocking because the [soldiers] kept our Navajo people inside a fence and they treated them like animals. Some of the feelings I had were mad, angry, shocked, scared, crazy, sad and hurtful.” It is important for educators to be prepared for the emotional response from the students when engaging in truth-telling processes. One student shared her emotional state as she was reflecting on these stories during an ordinary day at school:

When I’m walking all of a sudden I have these thoughts and I would begin to feel sorry for all the people that suffered [on the Long Walk] and I would just wish that never happened to the people and sometimes I would just start crying and I would say, “Don’t cry, it happened a long time ago. So I shouldn’t be crying.”

In recognizing the risks in engaging youth in critical processes that expose the historical trauma of our ancestral experiences, the emotional response and reaction can become intense, especially within young people who need assistance in reasoning through such fragile states when



moving between classroom and community contexts. In making sense of such emotional responses within one's learning process, I drew on the notion of embodied learning, which posits that the mind and body are intricately connected in learning experiences. Manu Aluli Meyer explained that within Hawaiian epistemology there is no separation of mind and body (2008)—and this is also true within Diné epistemology. Meyer described this process as, “Our thinking body is not separated from our feeling mind. *Our mind is our body. Our body is our mind.* And both connect to the spiritual act of knowledge acquisition” (Meyer, 2008, p. 229). Likewise, Jo-ann Archibald (2008) describes the notion of embodied learning as “heart knowledge,” which describes the emotional reaction to stories that transmit energy to the listener.

Knowledge acquisition was certainly prompted by such strong emotional responses within the students; however, the key was to *cultivate the heart* in order to move toward healing and empowerment. Thus, I connected to the Diné philosophical aspect of *hozhó* to move students toward healing. *Hozhó* is an ultimate state of being characterized by harmony, beauty, balance, well-being and goodness. *Hozhó* is a central aspect in Diné epistemology and is inherent in everyday life, prayers, ceremony, philosophy, and songs. Each focus group session with the students incorporated *hozhó*—for the purpose of reconciling intense emotions and understanding Diné philosophy of learning, which I describe later on. In the sessions that examined injustices, I intentionally strived to move students to a state of *hozhó* through dialogue that focused on the positives within our lives and the strength of our ancestors and people. I next turn to another key moment in the study that gives meaning to notions of truth-telling and teaching into the risks.

### ***Truth-telling: Boarding School Experiences***

The opening activity provided students the opportunity to not only realize and deconstruct the hegemonic forces that shape-shift their identities, but to also envision various possibilities for change. I find the experience of deconstructing history from Diné perspectives to be one of the most essential steps to engaging these students in decolonization. By critically reflecting on their identities in relation to the past, I also facilitated a self-reflective activity that encouraged the students to critically analyze the different aspects of Diné and Western cultures that influenced their identities. Upon reflecting on the discussion on the unfair educational policies and practices within the boarding schools, we can observe one student's emotional response to the ideological underpinnings of assimilation:

I think it was hurtful because they treated our Navajos a different way...and by saying, “Kill the Indian and save the man,” I think that was hurtful because that's like letting go of heritage and traditions and learning something else and forgetting about us and our ways.

As students continued to self-reflect on visuals that mapped out their time devoted to Diné cultural contexts in relation to Western cultural contexts, the students were astonished when they discovered they were more influenced by Western ways. One student commented about how he was more Westernized in his identity and thought process because he was more immersed in aspects of Western culture on a daily basis (i.e., speaking English, going to church) and did not participate in aspects of Diné culture (i.e., speaking Diné language, participating in ceremonies, understanding the language). He expressed:

I knew a little bit about the Navajo but when I wrote it down, I didn't really know I was more into the Western than the Navajo because usually we're supposed to be more of the Navajo and not that much Western. But I...was more influenced by the Western way. It made me feel no good. (Garcia & Shirley, 2012, p. 85)

In order to move the youth toward the state of *hozhó* within this discussion, I asked them to think about the ways in which they could take action in restoring the Diné epistemology and to reflect on the different opportunities they could potentially engage. Some of the youth, for example, took the initial steps of asking parents and relatives to teach them the language and stories so they had a stronger foundation and affiliation with a Diné identity. I now turn to the last scenario which speaks to the significance of cultivating the heart through Indigenous knowledge.

### ***Truth-telling: Diné Stories and Philosophy of Life***

With the intent of restoring balance in the students' thoughts and emotions, the topic of the last focus group session was traditional Diné stories and the philosophy of learning. According to Archibald (2008), stories have the power to educate the heart, mind, body and spirit. She expands, "Stories have the ability to soothe...and to heal the emotions and spirit" (p. 98-99). In addition to helping the youth recover aspects of Diné epistemology that had been marginalized in their lives, engaging the youth in a healing process to soothe the emotions and spirit was the intent of this last focus group session. When explaining the Diné philosophy of life, I used the shape of our traditional home, *hooghan*, to share stories about the journey through life, the different stages of life (childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and elderly) and the role of *hozhó* (to maintain holistic well-being and balance) within our journey. The students were instructed to draw a picture of aspects of the stories that resonated with them. One student drew a picture of Changing Woman (a deity) by her side during her *kinaaldá*, which is a ceremony for adolescent girls. Another explained that she felt protected within the 4 sacred mountains.<sup>5</sup> The students then began to reflect on *hozhó* in relation to their past behaviors and actions. A student expressed, "It made me think about not making any bad choices." Another elaborated:

It made me think about my life and how it is because if you get sad, you kind of go off the path and you're not in the right state of mind. So I was thinking about it and I was thinking about how many times I went off and I was like, it would've been a whole bunch if I actually counted it. Just a couple days ago, I was starting to misbehave and my mom got mad and I started thinking about the philosophy and the stories and how people used to act and I thought back about it and I started behaving more.

Overall, the philosophy and stories became prominent in their thought processes. As the students reflected on their identities throughout the entire research journey, majority reported that learning the philosophy of life was the most beneficial part of reconstructing their thoughts and actions toward being more conscious and taking pride in their Diné culture and identity, as the Diné philosophy played a huge role in their own healing process. It was at this point in the decolonization process that launched a sense of empowerment within them to facilitate the process of individual action in their personal lives.

---

5. The traditional homeland of the Diné is within the 4 sacred mountains of the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona, Mount Taylor in New Mexico, Blanca Peak in Colorado and Hesperus Mountain in Colorado.

### T'áá hwó ají t'éego: Transformative Possibilities Toward Nation-building

It is important within Indigenous social justice pedagogy to transform the emotional reactions of anger and sadness and move toward transformative and constructive ways of thinking and acting. By connecting on such an emotional level within each phase of the research process, the students developed a sense of empowerment that motivated them to take proactive steps toward positive changes in their personal lives. Upon analyzing colonial tactics of assimilation that uncovered the process of changing and shifting Diné identities away from our values and ways of being, the youth concluded that reclaiming the Diné language and stories was the essential first step in addressing the issue of culture and language loss; therefore, this reclamation became a priority for this group. Students explained the different ways they took individual and immediate action within their personal lives. Nearly all of the students (9 of the 10)<sup>6</sup> shared that they asked parents and grandparents to teach them the language and stories as they recognized that fluency in the language gave them access to the traditional stories and knowledge within the Diné epistemology. Each personal story was unique; one student asked her mother to speak *Diné bizaad* (language) to her as she conducted daily chores at home, another shared how she asked her father to teach her the language and chuckled at his way of doing so through total immersion and the entertaining experiences that emerged through their interactions, and another asked her mother to devote time to helping her pronounce various words and phrases. In addition, several of the students shared their interactions with specific individuals about the Diné stories and concepts. One student saw her former Kindergarten teacher at a local grocery store and asked if she could borrow her film collection of some of the Diné stories. Another was helping her grandfather clean the *hooghan* when she started reflecting on the stories, which prompted a conversation with him about *hozhó* and the different phases of life. All in all, the students found solutions in their own ways.

Youth have the intellectual capacity to deeply engage in decolonizing and indigenizing processes. By examining history and present-day issues, engaging students in the process of critical self-reflection, drawing on Indigenous philosophy (such as Diné concepts of *k'é* and *hozhó*), and engaging students in dialogue, educators can move students toward facilitating individual and collective action. For example, the sense of urgency in disrupting the cycle of cultural and linguistic decline of our Diné people had one student envisioning possibilities for enacting transformative possibilities. In the final interview with this student, he shared his idea for seeking action beyond individual and personal changes that would transcend improvement within Diné communities. He stated that he considered the notion of proposing “storytelling nights” at the local chapter house in the community.<sup>7</sup> Educators facilitating the process of navigating youth in taking action based on ideas such as these are important in helping students understand positive ways of addressing social concerns. This student’s idea for change motivated him to address the cultural and linguistic decline in Diné people—in the Diné epistemology, this sense of empowerment is known as *t'áá hwó ají t'éego*, which essentially translates to “it is up to you to do it” and describes the internal drive and motivation to take action.

The findings from this study suggest that the youth uncovered multiple layers of colonization that led to the decline in the Diné language, culture, and identity within themselves and the Diné communities. Although the youth engaged in an emotional journey about the knowledge they

---

6. One student claimed he was fluent in the language.

7. A chapter house is a community center. Every community on the Diné Nation has a chapter house where politics and local concerns are discussed and addressed. These chapter houses are also social spaces where community gathers for various activities and events.

deconstructed and gained through the rediscovery of their history and contemporary forms of colonialism, by the end of the process they were brainstorming various action steps they could possibly take to transform their situations and conditions among themselves and their people. Deconstructing identity through decolonizing and indigenizing processes developed a critical Indigenous consciousness within the youth which in turn prepares them to contribute to nation-building.

### Concluding Thoughts and Implications

Teaching into the risks while cultivating the heart asks educators working with Indigenous youth to draw on Indigenous social justice pedagogy to carefully and intentionally engage youth in examining issues and concerns in Indigenous communities. Unfortunately, such present-day issues contain a history filled with trauma and injustices. In working with Indigenous youth, it is important to consider the vulnerabilities and emotional reaction that might emerge within them to facilitate a process through which they transcend those fragile emotions and move toward more positive and constructive ways of activating agency to make change.

The emotional journey of the youth in this study is one from which we can draw implications for teaching into the risks. Risks can be revealed through the emotional outcomes that might emerge when uncovering histories from Indigenous perspectives that expose historical injustices; therefore, educators need to be prepared to help youth navigate the intense emotions that accompany such histories. Cultivating the heart by integrating aspects of Indigenous epistemology is an important strategy. No educator should intentionally leave youth in a state of anger and sadness; therefore, educators must skillfully teach into the risks and cultivate the heart by relying on Indigenous values and knowledge to move toward the “positive rebuilding energy needed in our communities” (Wheeler cited in Wilson, 2004, p. 71). For example, by engaging youth in the process of analysis that examines why and how the current conditions, issues, or circumstances exist, youth can begin to understand how to envision themselves as *protectors* of Indigenous people, land, languages and cultures. In essence, knowing the historical context may inform their future actions that develop capacity for nation-building. In doing so, educators serving Indigenous youth would be expected to liberate their minds from the traditional settler colonialist methods of school and begin rethinking curriculum, pedagogy and classroom interactions that center Indigenous epistemologies. This reconceptualization of schooling is essential if we wish to reinforce sovereignty for nation-building.

Furthermore, it is vital to create an environment that features a deep level of trust and respect in order for youth to share their innermost thoughts and feelings. I am reminded of the notion of the “dialogical spiral” (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014), a process that occurs during an exchange of communication where deep levels of trust and respect emerge within the in-between space of listening and speaking. In such an exchange of communication, it is important to draw on Indigenous knowledge and values to reinforce trust and respect. Every Indigenous group has its own conceptualization for relating to one another based on the fundamental notion of respect. For example, Kulago described *k'é* as relationships based on the values of respect, “compassion, cooperation, love kinship, clanship, friendliness, kindness, unselfishness, peacefulness and thoughtfulness” (as cited in Lee, 2016, p. 99). Imagine a classroom environment based on such values!

Creating spaces of learning through Indigenous social justice pedagogy enables students to critically examine and deconstruct history, colonialism and socializing forces, which leads to the development of a critical Indigenous consciousness (Lee, 2006). Within these determined efforts by educators, Indigenous youth will begin to critically reflect on how socializing forces contribute

to the internalization, oppression, and construction of their identities. Thus the space of learning contextualized within ISJP can become an avenue where analytical skills, knowledge and emotional dispositions can be developed and cultivated. In addition, if educators were to create curriculum around other issues of oppression, such as racism, classism, sexism, or discrimination inherent in our Indigenous communities, how might one begin this process? What are the risks inherent within the process? What Indigenous values and epistemologies can be drawn on? And how can educators facilitate change with the youth so we can maintain strong, healthy, and vibrant communities? Indeed, engaging young people in such critical examinations and dialogues will raise their consciousness around such issues and inspire a sense of empowerment that will facilitate individual and communal change.

Consider the issue of Oak Flat, for example. How could educators draw on Indigenous social justice pedagogy to integrate this social issue of the mining company destroying land that is sacred to Apache people into the classroom curriculum? How might aspects of colonialism, Indigenous knowledge, and social change contribute to the development of the curriculum? Upon learning about Naelyn's efforts to save and protect Oak Flat, I repeatedly pondered what experiences led to the development of a political, critical, and spiritual consciousness within her. How was she prepared for such advocacy? Both examples of Naelyn and the Diné youth in this study lead us to develop pressing questions regarding pedagogical implications and curriculum development for Indigenous communities. Likewise, Naelyn and the Diné youth also remind us that youth have the strength and capability to be leaders within an Indigenous structure of nation-building. When educators evoke critical methodologies like ISJP in education, they are preparing students to contribute to and promote the social, political, and cultural goals of nation-building in Indigenous communities.

### References

- Alfred, T. & Corntassel, J. (2005). Being Indigenous: Resurgences against contemporary colonialism. *Government and Opposition*, 40(4), 597-614.
- Archibald, J. (2008). *Indigenous storywork: Educating the mind, heart, body and spirit*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- Begay, L. (2002). Awakened belonging: Utilizing traditional stories to enhance self-perception of Diné children. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Fielding Graduate Institute, Santa Barbara, CA.
- Benally, H. (1994). Navajo philosophy of learning and pedagogy. *Journal of Navajo Education*, 12(1), 23-31.
- Brayboy, B. (2005). Toward a tribal critical race theory in education. *The Urban Review*, 37(5), 425-446.
- Brayboy, B., Fann, A., Castagno, A. & Solyom, J. (2012). *Postsecondary education for American Indian and Alaska Natives: Higher education for nation building and self-determination*. In Ward, K. & Wolf-Wendel, L. (Eds.), ASHE Higher Education Report. 37(5).
- Brayboy, B. & McCarty, T. (2010). Indigenous knowledges and social justice pedagogy. *Social justice pedagogy across the curriculum: The practice of freedom* pp. 184-200). New York: Routledge.
- Cammarota, J. (2011). The value of a multicultural and critical pedagogy: Learning democracy through diversity and dissent. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 13(2), 62-69.

- Chapman, T. & Hobbel, N. (2009). *Social justice pedagogy across the curriculum: The practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Chilisa, B. (2012). *Indigenous research methodologies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dei, G. (2011). Introduction. In G. Dei (Ed.), *Indigenous philosophies and critical education: A reader* (pp. 1-13). New York: Peter Lang.
- Fanon, F. (1963/2004). *The wretched of the earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Freire, P. (1970/2002). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Garcia, J. & Shirley, V. (2012). Performing decolonization: Lessons learned from Indigenous youth, teachers and leaders' engagement with critical Indigenous pedagogy. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 28(2), 76-91.
- Haskie, M. (2002). Preserving a culture: Practicing the Navajo principles of hohó d00 k'é. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Fielding Graduate Institute, Santa Barbara, CA.
- Hermes, M. (2015). Mii-gaa-izhiwinag: And then I brought her along. In S. Grande (Ed.), *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought Tenth Anniversary Edition* (pp. 273-276). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kinloch, V. & San Pedro, T. (2014). The space between listening and storying: Foundations for projects in humanization. In D. Paris & M. Winn (Eds.), *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities* (pp. 21-42). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kulago, H. A. (2016). Activating Indigenous Knowledge to Create Supportive Educational Environments by Rethinking Family, Community, and School Partnerships. *The journal of Family Diversity in Education*, 2(1), 1-20.
- Lee, T. S. (2006). "I came here to learn how to be a leader": An intersection of critical pedagogy and Indigenous education. *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, 2(1), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/92m798m0>
- Lee, T. S. (2016). The home-school-community interface in language revitalization in the USA and Canada. In S. M. Coronel-Molina & T. McCarty (Eds.), *Indigenous language revitalization in the Americas* (pp. 99-115). New York: Routledge.
- Lomawaima, T. & McCarty, T. (2006). *"To remain an Indian": Lessons in democracy from a century of Native American education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- McCaslin, W. & Breton, D. (2008). Justice as healing: Going outside the colonizers' cage. In N. Denzin, Y. Lincoln & L. T. Smith (Eds.), *Handbook of critical and Indigenous methodologies* (pp. 511-531). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Meyer, M. (2008). Indigenous and authentic: Hawaiian epistemology and the triangulation of meaning. In N. Denzin, Y. Lincoln & L. T. Smith (Eds.), *Handbook of critical and Indigenous methodologies* (pp. 217-232). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Revkin, A. (2015, July 17). From Times Square to the Capitol, Apache protestors fight U.S. land swap with mining company. *New York Times*. [http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/07/17/from-times-square-to-the-capitol-apache-protestors-fight-u-s-land-swap-with-mining-company/?\\_r=0](http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/07/17/from-times-square-to-the-capitol-apache-protestors-fight-u-s-land-swap-with-mining-company/?_r=0).
- Roessel, R. (1973). *Diné Stories of the Long Walk Period*. Tsaille, AZ: Navajo Community College Press.
- Said, E. (1978/2003). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Simpson, L. (2014). Land as pedagogy: Nishaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3(3), 1-25.

- Voyageur, C. (2015). Restorying the leadership role: Indigenous women in politics and business in Canada. In C. Voyageur, Brearly, L, & B. Calliou (Eds.), *Restorying Indigenous leadership: Wise practices in community development* (pp. 129-154). Alberta, Canada: Banff Centre Press.
- Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Fernwood Publishing.
- Wilson, W. A. (2004). Reclaiming our humanity: Decolonization and the recovery of Indigenous knowledge. In D. A. Mihesua & A. C. Wilson (Eds.), *Indigenizing the academy* (pp. 69-87). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

**Valerie Shirley** is an assistant professor of Indigenous Education and director of the Indigenous Teacher Education Project at the University of Arizona. She is a member of the Diné Nation which continues to shape her research and pedagogical interests. Her research interests are within the areas of critical Indigenous pedagogy, social justice pedagogy, critical Indigenous research methodologies, curriculum development, teacher education and Indigenous education.