

# TOOLS FOR *IINA* (LIFE): THE JOURNEY OF THE *IINA* CURRICULUM TO THE GLITTERING WORLD

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*Abstract: This article presents the participatory curriculum development process and foundational Diné (Navajo) concepts that inform the Tools for Iina (Life) curriculum, designed for grades 4-6 by a group of Diné educators to strengthen resiliency by addressing children's health, relationships, identity, and sense of the future, utilizing core concepts from Diné oral tradition. Rather than develop a curriculum relying only on experts, and rather than utilize existing American Indian curricula addressing specific risk behaviors or diseases, we facilitated a dialogue with a range of community members to identify core concepts from Diné oral tradition that could provide young people with a perspective on life and its conflicts and challenges, tools for building respectful and supportive relationships, and stories to inform their sense of themselves, the Diné People, and their shared future. The Ways of Life: Iina Project will make the curriculum available in 2012. We offer reflections for other tribes interested in adopting a similar curriculum development process.*

## INTRODUCTION

This article presents the community-based development process and foundational concepts of the Ways of Life: *Iina* curriculum, designed for grades 4-6 by a group of Diné (Navajo) educators to address children's health, relationships, identity, and sense of the future, utilizing core concepts from Diné oral tradition. The curriculum is currently in final development, to be made available in 2012. Here we describe our unique, multiple strategies for developing a Diné-based curriculum and a facilitative policy environment that, together, could transform the education of Diné young people. We are already receiving extensive interest about the curriculum, as well as requests for

advance guidance on how to modify the Diné-specific curriculum for other tribes. In this article, we reflect on this curriculum development process, and discuss how other American Indian (AI) communities could adopt a similar process.

The education literature acknowledges that curriculum development is best informed through a participatory process that elicits the community's available knowledge and makes that knowledge relevant to the future of the community (Taylor, 2004; Wiles, 2008). Briefly in the late 1970s, and again in the 1990s, there was widespread interest in community-based AI curriculum development (Coburn, 1976; Yazzie, 1999). As an archive of materials became available during these periods of ample federal funding, educators more commonly sought to modify rather than develop new curricula.

More recently, federal public health funding has stimulated curriculum development for disease prevention and health promotion. Health curricula which focus on the prevention of one specific disease or risk behavior can leave classroom teachers with tough choices. Educators with little, if any, freedom to augment the standardized and mandated content of instruction are faced with selecting from a number of relevant prevention curricula related to diabetes, HIV, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide in AI communities where all or most of these public health concerns are acute (LeMaster & Connell, 1994). AI youth health issues can rarely be addressed community by community, language by language, tradition by tradition, and instead are addressed through generalized "AI" curricula that, while intending to speak to all AI youth, speak directly to very few of them (Arviso et al., 2010).

Tribal government plays a crucial role in preventing risk behaviors and promoting young people's health. Tribal policy can be understood as each nation's curriculum for self-determination, enacted in sometimes tense relation to state and federal policies. In this political arena, the health and welfare of AI youth are literally at stake. For example, a decade of research with First Nations tribes in Canada suggests that those tribal governments which invest in youth education, youth employment, language learning, and identity development evidence dramatically lower rates of youth suicide compared to Nations which do not make these investments (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003). In addition, those First Nations governments which promoted a positive vision of the tribe's future, rather than emphasizing the tragedies and atrocities of the past, evidence lower youth suicide rates (Chandler et al., 2003). These findings suggest that curriculum alone, no matter how well designed, cannot achieve the goal of improved health, unless combined with policy measures and commitments by tribal government to effect a community environment that supports positive health behaviors.

## THE CURRENT STATE OF DINÉ CURRICULUM AND RESOURCES

Passage of the 1972 Indian Education Act and the 1975 Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act institutionalized self-determination in Indian education (Reyhner & Eder, 2004). Passage of the Native American Languages Act in 1990, and the 1991 release of the U.S. Secretary of Education's report from the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, spurred a second wave of interest in Indian education and language learning (Reyhner, 2006), but with subsequent funding cuts, the implementation of self-determination in Indian education remains a challenge.

Although the Navajo Nation has an education code and Diné standards for language and culture, there is no one existing curriculum that is mandated for schools. Over the past four decades, federal and tribal funding has supported significant curriculum endeavors with varying levels of implementation. As a result, a massive amount of lower elementary-level bilingual and cultural materials have been produced, ranging from picture books, topical readers, and subject materials to posters, videos, and DVD supplemental materials.

Diné language and culture teachers are known to modify and create materials based on their own differing personal perspectives about Diné tradition. In many classrooms, handouts that diagram basic Diné concepts such as The Four Directions, the Basket, or the Cornstalk have become the primary materials for language and culture lessons. Understandably, teachers have found it difficult to relate this system of symbols, locations, objects, colors, and domains of life into practical strategies for young people's everyday lives. As a result, instruction often "preserves" knowledge of a symbolic system, while reducing its significance and application as a living, dynamic knowledge base. This preservation effort, unfortunately, has lent itself to public criticism of Diné-centered curriculum.

## FORMING THE VISION FOR THE *IINA* CURRICULUM

Curriculum can be understood as a "plan for learning consisting of two major dimensions: vision and structure" (Wiles & Bondi, 1984). Vision for a curriculum needs to be grounded in an understanding of the social conditions in which learning takes place and which education can and should aim to transform. A curriculum working group can serve to structure a balanced dialogue between education practitioners and community members who bring their various concerns to the process. Wiles (2008) describes the essential function of a working group:

The leader is helping the community contemplate what education is supposed to do. A purely maintenance role, refining what we have always done, or just meeting state standards, falls far short of understanding the nature of real curriculum work. Through sorting, prioritizing, analyzing, and deciding, a common reality begins to emerge. (p. 31)

With this idea in mind, the first step in *Iina* curriculum development involved forming a working group of seasoned Diné educators with extensive, successful experience working with Diné youth within the Navajo Nation. The *Iina* working group consisted of the following members, all Diné women whose careers have spanned a number of roles in and beyond that of educator.

- Vivian Arviso, MA, Director of Ways of Life: *Iina*; educational consultant, with 50 years experience in Indian education. Former Executive Director of Navajo Nation Division of Education. Honorary Doctorate, Sinte Gleska University. Member of Tohatchi Chapter.
- Shirley Waterhouse, HIV Health Educator, Navajo Nation HIV Prevention Program, Tuba City, Arizona. Established funding for HIV services on the Navajo Nation and helped found the Navajo Nation HIV Prevention Program. Member of Tuba City Chapter.
- Susie A. John, MD, MPH, Medical Officer, Teen Life Center, Shiprock, New Mexico. Has over 20 years in Indian Health Service, including position as CEO for Tuba City Indian Medical Center and Crownpoint Director of Community and Preventive Health Services. Member of Beclahbito Chapter.
- Gloria Hale-Showalter, MA, Ed. Education Program Administrator, Chinle Agency, Bureau of Indian Education. Has 33 years of experience in education as a public school superintendent, federal programs director, Indian education director, school principal, and classroom teacher on the Navajo Nation in Arizona and New Mexico. 2008 New Mexico Indian Educator of the Year. Member of Oak Springs Chapter.
- GloJean B. Todacheene, MA. Navajo Nation Councilwoman (2007-2011), Shiprock Chapter, Shiprock, NM. Re-elected member of San Juan County Commissioners. A former principal for 11 years, with 14 years as a high school educator teaching life skills to Diné students. 1994 recipient of the Milken Family Foundation Award for Excellence in Education. Member of Shiprock Chapter.
- Janet Slowman-Chee, PhD. Former Director of Special Education, Central Consolidated School District, Shiprock, New Mexico. Has 29 years of experience as former school superintendent, school psychologist, college faculty member, and program administrator on the Navajo Nation in Arizona and New Mexico. Member of Teecnospos Chapter.

Working group members represent a diversity of educational journeys, life experiences, perspectives on Diné education, and were variously raised in traditional and/or Christian families. Members brought to the project a collective concern about Diné youth engaging in risk behaviors and being subject to negative forces in the community and in their families. Throughout their professional careers, working group members have been aware of challenges facing Diné society, and of the external influences of modern America on youth. They brought a deep concern about cultural loss of oral traditions—especially in terms of Diné language, guiding concepts, respect,

and relationships—and of families’ and schools’ ability to teach these to the next generation. These were not just abstract concerns, but real concerns about an appalling way of life that is widespread in Diné society.

With this shared experience, the working group discussed the many reports in the *Navajo Times* and other news sources which detailed dramatic increases in family violence. Comparing their various observations across multiple generations of Diné youth and multiple decades of Diné education strategies, the working group members also noted that previous generations of Diné youth were strongly impacted by alcohol abuse, and that recent generations were additionally impacted by illicit drugs like methamphetamine, crack, and heroin.

The next stage was to consider the behavioral data on youth in New Mexico. According to the national Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2009), high school youth in New Mexico were twice as likely as the national average to have ever used marijuana, any form of cocaine, ecstasy, and heroin, and were twice as likely to have injected an illegal drug. New Mexico youth evidenced higher than the national rates in risk behaviors related to violence, suicide, and alcohol use, as the findings in Table 1 show:

**Table 1**  
**Rate of Risk Behaviors among New Mexico Youth vs. National Rates\***

Risk Behavior	New Mexico Rate	National Rate
Carry a weapon on school property	8.1%	5.6%
Not go to school because of feeling unsafe	7.2%	5.0%
Be in a physical fight on school property	15.0%	11.1%
Feel sad or hopeless	29.7%	26.1%
Seriously consider attempting suicide	13.1%	10.0%
Attempted suicide in past 12 months	9.7%	6.3%
Carried a weapon in past 30 days	27.4%	17.5%
Carried a gun in past 30 days	10.8%	5.9%
Had at least one drink of alcohol on school property in past 30 days	8.0%	4.5%

\* CDC, 2009

To understand risk behaviors of Diné youth, the group examined the New Mexico Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey (YRRS) report (New Mexico Department of Health, 2007) and compared rates of risk behaviors in those counties with predominantly Diné youth (San Juan, McKinley, and Cibola Counties) to rates statewide. The 2007 YRRS demonstrated health disparities for Diné youth, who evidenced higher rates of risk behaviors and vulnerability than youth statewide in the following areas:

**Table 2**  
**Rate of Risk Behaviors among Youth in Predominantly Navajo-Populated Counties in New Mexico\***

Risk Behavior	San Juan County Rate	McKinley County Rate	Cibola County Rate	New Mexico Rate
Attempted suicide (last 12 months)	16.9%	16.3%	18.6%	14.3%
Skipped school because felt unsafe (last 12 months)	12.0%	15.1%	8.1%	9.0%
Physical fight at school (last 12 months)	41.4%	32.6%	35.6%	37.1%
Sexual intercourse before age 13	8.6%	6.2%	14.9%	7.7%
Ever forced to have sexual intercourse	11.3%	8.5%	5.1%	9.2%
Persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness (last 12 months)	38.7%	30.4%	31.5%	30.8%
Has been offered, sold, or given drugs on school property (last 12 months)	33.4%	32.7%	32.3%	31.3%
Ever had sexual intercourse	49.4%	40.0%	62.6%	45.7%

\* New Mexico Department of Health, 2007

These data only confirmed that Diné youth needed a curriculum to build the foundations for resiliency at home and in school.

### CONSULTING WITH THE *HATALTHI*<sup>1</sup>

The *Iina* working group consulted throughout the development process with the officers of the Diné *Hatalthi* Association, the longtime reservation-wide organization of Diné ceremonial practitioners. At the community level, the *Hatalthi* regularly witness the erosion of Navajo language and traditional knowledge. They described a resulting loss of confidence among youth and adults in

understanding the world from a traditional Diné perspective. The *Hatalthi* expressed concern at the difficulties that contemporary parents and grandparents have in transmitting traditional knowledge to their children.

Community members and families depend on the *Hatalthi* as the intellectual repositories for the oral tradition of the Diné people. Individuals and families seek out *Hatalthi* for intervention and guidance in a number of aspects of everyday life: health, wellness, family relationships, and material concerns (e.g., unemployment, livelihood). The *Hatalthi* expressed frustration that family members often lack knowledge of how to assist in tasks related to ceremonies. To their expert perspectives, such knowledge is obvious, but it is not always easily available to untrained individuals. They were frank and open about their dismay that young people “have no ears” (i.e., are unable to listen and learn) and lack parental guidance. Thus, the *Hatalthi* struggle to stave the erosion of traditional knowledge and to find effective ways to bolster the Diné public with a basic foundation for understanding, let alone applying, Diné guiding concepts.

Frequently invited to be guest speakers in Diné language and culture classrooms, the *Hatalthi* described their own challenges to develop student interest in and knowledge of the Diné oral tradition. They characterized their own teaching experiences in schools as sometimes frustrating, other times successful. Although they experienced warm welcomes at the classroom level, they sometimes were met with lukewarm acceptance by school administrators who were ambivalent about the teaching of Diné language and culture. Many expected the *Hatalthi* to utilize a more “traditional” teaching approach rather than their own innovative methods of engaging students. During meetings with the *Hatalthi*, working group members learned to differentiate between what the *Hatalthi* called “esoteric knowledge” (i.e., knowledge related to ceremonial practices) and traditional knowledge relevant for living a long and happy life. A profound standard for life, known as *Saah Naaghai Bikeh Hozho*, emerged as an effective framework for the curriculum. A Diné College instructor explained:

The whole idea is that there is an order to nature, an order in how things interact. The sky—the sun is warm, there is rain, wind and air, life comes from that. These are things that Navajo youth can use in their own lives (Madar, 2011).

The *Hatalthi* challenged the *Iina* working group to utilize Diné concepts and relate them to everyday life. Heated debates followed on how to interpret and apply Diné concepts. We discussed whether the four sacred mountains coincide with the standard North/South/East/West grid, we split into different camps on the question of whether all Diné are “circular” versus “linear” thinkers, and we argued about how to apply the Diné system of valuing. In these collegial debates, a traditional framework was applied to assign value to contemporary goods, including the consumer goods that

many young Diné value. Some cited the merits of characterizing a coffee maker or an iPod as “hard goods” (goods with enduring value), while others viewed these as “soft goods” (goods that would lose value over time).

While we marveled at the range of knowledge shared through the *Hatalthis*’ PowerPoint slides and hands-on lessons for the classroom, we were most inspired by their storytelling. Effortlessly, the *Hatalthi* moved from telling stories about The Four Worlds to talking about teen pregnancy, bullying, and family conflict. In their storytelling, the distinction between “traditional” and “modern” knowledge and everyday experiences started to blur, and we began to identify themes that could inform an accessible, relevant curriculum. It became clear that storytelling could be the essential vehicle for conveying core concepts and relevant knowledge.

Once the *Iina* working group received the *Hatalthis*’ support, we were charged with the responsibility to develop an essential product. We proceeded to invite state and tribal service providers, educators, community organizations, and federal agency officials to the first curriculum conference to identify issues facing Diné youth and their families. Participants stated that never before in their careers had a diverse group like this been assembled to talk, share observations, and identify the needs of young people. Several *Hatalthi* attended, with an interest in bridging traditional and social service-oriented approaches to supporting Diné youth. Everyone in attendance desired to find a viable way to address the crisis in Diné children’s social development and well-being. Acknowledging the many obstacles faced by Diné children, participants emphasized the need to utilize oral tradition to guide Diné youth towards a positive future.

## HOSTING CURRICULUM CONFERENCES

In 2009, a grant from the Ford Foundation supported two related efforts: 1) the development of a Diné curriculum using a process of community involvement to inform curriculum content, and 2) raising awareness of Diné youth health and rights, including young people’s right to access education and services and to learn about core Diné principles to guide everyday life. This curriculum project was not designed as a formal research project. Rather, we organized the process through the lens of Diné oral tradition: facilitating dialogue through a process of listening and reflecting, highlighting the perspectives of elders, and building a shared set of knowledge over time.

Community participation in curriculum development has numerous advantages that can translate into effective learning in the classroom, as identified by Taylor (2004):

- Stakeholders in education who might normally be marginalized gain the right to take part in decision-making about teaching and learning;



- Through dialogue, individuals are able to build their own knowledge and share their knowledge and experience with others;
- Different stakeholders hold different values, attitudes and beliefs; these may be better understood and taken into consideration through an ongoing, open dialogue;
- At the same time, those with different forms and sources of expertise may still make a contribution where knowledge and skill gaps exist, and strategies may be developed to address such gaps.

These principles for participation reflected the shared values and vision of the *Iina* working group.

Over a two-year period, the *Iina* working group organized a series of curriculum conferences (Bude, 2000) to bring together small and large groups of diverse community, public health, service provider, education, and government stakeholders to consult on their perspectives about Diné youth risk behaviors. AI legal experts were consulted to understand how tribal traditional code informs standards for individual conduct and, specifically, the conduct of adults in relation to children and young people. Through these conferences and consultations, shared perspectives emerged on core Diné concepts that could structure a curriculum.

Significantly, these various stakeholders and experts emphasized that holistic philosophy and principles inform Diné oral tradition and traditional code. Based on this feedback, the working group decided not to design a curriculum to prevent one particular disease or particular risk behavior, but instead to focus on strengthening Diné young people's understanding of *Iina*, or Life, with the goal of teaching core Diné concepts that could guide them in those ways of life that have long supported the survival and development of the Diné people.

One of the most important aspects of the curriculum conferences was the way that community members, educators, and parents shifted from “defending” their particular viewpoints on oral tradition to engaging in a dialogue about the meaning of traditional knowledge and possible ways to apply and utilize it as a compass for Diné children, young people, families, and even tribal government to guide Diné survival and development. For instance, stakeholders held different views on the clan system, oral tradition, the meaning of core concepts, and even traditional Diné behavior or identity. The curriculum conferences promoted an ethic of equality and tolerance of plural perspectives and interpretations, all in the context of a shared concern for the well-being and future of Diné children and young people.

In this way, community members began to treat Diné oral traditional knowledge not just as something to be “preserved” for the sake of the past, but as something living and relevant to their lives now. The *Iina* working group, along with the curriculum community, began to see Diné oral tradition and core concepts as the essential intervention in restoring balance and strengthening the

health and well-being of Diné youth. (For a detailed description of this process at a curriculum conference with Diné educators, see Arviso et. al. [2010]). A clear need emerged for a curriculum approach to strengthening youth resiliency that would incorporate Diné language learning and identity development, as well as a narrative about the positive possibilities for a collective Diné future.

Conference participants also considered the timing of puberty and initiation of youth risk behaviors. There was broad consensus that high school is too late to establish social foundations of Diné identity and behavior. Shared observations suggested that puberty onset among Diné girls is occurring at younger ages—typically at 10 years of age, and sometimes at 9. Targeting the curriculum to junior high students posed a similar problem, because grades 7 and 8 are when many common risk behaviors are initiated, and a growing level of unintended or coerced pregnancy among young girls is observed. Thus, it was decided that the Tools for *Iina* (Life) curriculum would target grades 4-6 in order to strengthen better decision-making skills for life, creating the potential to impact prevention of problem behaviors.

The curriculum conferences inspired several additional efforts launched in partnership with Diné community-based organizations. The Miss Navajo Council, Inc. integrated into its White Shell Woman workshops traditional teachings for Diné girls about relationships, health, and leadership development. Interestingly, as fathers and other male relatives saw what was available for girls, community interest grew in addressing boys' educational and social development needs. "The Hero Twins" event for Diné boys was organized to teach about the key male figures in early Diné life, the role of men in Diné society, and identity development for young Diné men. As one young participant commented, "I had no idea there was such a cool thing as Diné math!" These were key additional accomplishments of the curriculum development process. Community members and leaders rallied around the need to support both boys and girls in strengthening their Diné identity, health, and sense of the future. It is anticipated that the Miss Navajo Council and the *Iina* working group will provide these workshops on an annual basis.

### DINÉ IDENTITY EDUCATION IN A DIVERSE COMMUNITY

Throughout 150 years of missionary efforts, boarding schools, mass media, urban American influences, and the resulting Diné culture loss, Christianity has exerted a profound influence on the Diné community and its families, schools, and values. While some Christian Diné have found ways to integrate both Christian and Diné traditional beliefs and values, others outright reject AI symbols and traditional knowledge, forbidding their children to learn the Diné language or read materials related to Diné oral tradition.

Aware of the potential for clashes between Christian and traditionalist perspectives, the *Iina* working group sought a common foundation on the continuum between those who consider the oral tradition as the source of Diné identity and those who reject the oral tradition and yet identify themselves as Diné. Curriculum conference and working group discussions came back again and again to themes of “identity,” “mutual respect,” and “relationships” as the missing components and common ground in the social development of Diné children.

### USING DINÉ ORAL TRADITION TO INFORM CURRICULUM

The Diné oral traditions detail the struggles of early Diné to survive in the different worlds of their collective journey. The early Diné had to learn how to co-exist with diverse others, including Insect People, and overcome crises brought on by the impulsive behavior of Coyote and a host of other challengers. As the early Diné journeyed from one world to the next, they also faced new and unfamiliar environments where they had to develop survival skills, deepen their ability to cooperate with each other, and move on when the environment became too hostile. By the time the Diné finally emerged into the current world, the Glittering World, they were free to develop ways of living that celebrated beauty, sustained balance, and instilled a sense of harmony with all beings in their environment.

The curriculum utilizes the Diné story of “The First Worlds” as an analogy for real-life transitions into different environments and the challenges and hardships presented in each. The extended story of the Four Worlds helps Diné students understand that their own maturing is and will be structured through conflicts which can be met with thoughtful behavior and resolved in relationship with others. The concept of early Diné people journeying from one world to the next helps Diné students understand the challenges of moving between the different worlds of home and school, their peer groups and their families. The stories of conflicts between First Man and First Woman and others in their environment provide opportunities to reflect on how children can better relate to each other, their families, their teachers, and their immediate environments. The concept of “emerging” into this current world also encourages a respect for Diné children’s own inner world of thoughts and emotions, and teaches skills for children to communicate from their personal perspectives in ways that help them relate to adults and peers.

The theme of life as a journey is further reinforced through stories about the early Diné journey from the West to their current homeland in Diné Bikeyah. Stories of Changing Woman detail how the Diné people were revitalized after a period of terrible crisis. The oral tradition further affirms Diné life as a journey through stages of human development that are clearly delineated, as marked by celebrations or traditional practices. Corresponding to the four directions, each person

moves from infancy to adolescence to adulthood to old age. Oral stories of the four original clans detail how each Diné child belongs to a greater whole, and is related to many others. Taken together, these resources from the Diné oral tradition provide a foundation for understanding and strengthening Diné identity and relationships, and inspiring reflection on and practice of conflict resolution.

### **ANCHORING YOUTH SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH DINÉ CONCEPTS OF DUALITY AND RESPECT**

One of the key philosophical issues that arose in early discussions with the *Hatalthi* was the meaning of “duality” in Diné oral history. The *Hatalthi* conveyed over and over again that tolerance is rooted in the concept of duality: that each person’s body is a combination of male (left side) and female (right side) characteristics and capabilities. Given this duality, Diné society demands tolerance in all relationships, including respect for diverse gender expression.

The curriculum teaches young people to understand and appreciate duality in themselves, their environment, and everyday life. The *Hatalthi* also emphasized that First Man and First Woman and the Diné people once depended for their survival upon Third and Fourth gender persons during the separation of the sexes. (Third and Fourth gender persons include two-spirit, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people.) Without the presence of Third and Fourth gender people, the Diné could not have survived as a people and become a nation, and the oral traditions convey a very strong appreciation for people of all genders. In modern families, Third and Fourth gender people are often caregivers; they also serve in tribal government, the military, the workforce and many other capacities. To highlight the contemporary relevance of Third and Fourth gender people, the *Hatalthi*, service providers, and educators all expressed concern about bullying in school, especially bullying targeted against children with different gender expression. Bullying is addressed throughout the curriculum via the core concepts of equality and belonging, respect and tolerance, in a context of duality.

In addition to concerns about the loss of oral tradition, the Diné public has developed a growing awareness of prevalent risk behaviors, with sexual risk being the most sensationalized. Given the strong traditional and Christian prohibitions against talking about sex, and reluctance by many Diné adults to discuss sexual behavior, how could the *Iina* working group address sexual risk behaviors? We started by examining Diné coming of age as a key moment in a young person’s traditional education. Diné tradition includes a *Kinaaldaa* celebration honoring a young woman’s entry into adulthood, and emphasizes a woman’s role as a maternal guardian and leader in a matriarchal and matrilineal society. Diné boys’ coming of age centers around the sweat lodge, which was an entry point into traditional warrior training and responsibilities in the family and clan. In the curriculum, health lessons integrate explanations of gender roles and societal expectations for adulthood.

### THE TOOLS FOR *IINA* (LIFE) CURRICULUM

Traditional Diné education took place through ceremony and storytelling conducted in family settings rather than the institutional setting of schools. When authority over Diné education was wrested from the family by the Church and boarding schools, Diné children lost their supportive and memorable settings for learning and development. The Tools for *Iina* (Life) curriculum acknowledges that loss through a narrative designed around the real-life situations of two Diné children who themselves have been urban dwellers far from Diné Bikeyah. Their mother and father have separated and their father was raising them in California. He brings them back to Diné Bikeyah where his mother, Nali, takes them in each day after school. This story framework reflects the fact that many children residing on Diné Bikeyah share with their urban Diné peers a confusion over identity and gaps in cultural knowledge. Diné youth with a traditional upbringing who experience these lessons will be able to identify with Nali's perspective and her pride in Diné heritage. The curriculum aims to strengthen the sense of belonging of all Diné children to a diverse Diné community.

The curriculum has four sections: self-identity, relationships, health, and the future. Each section is comprised of sequential lessons with objectives that match Arizona, New Mexico, and Navajo Nation curriculum standards in social sciences, health, culture, and language. Continuity across lessons is achieved through Nali's after-school stories which reflect oral traditions for socializing children into Diné adulthood. The stories teach tolerance and respect for one another through personal, family, school, and community relationships. For example, each lesson opens with instructions for the 4th-6th graders to sit in a respectful fashion, in order to help young people become responsible for their bodies and to convey dignity and modesty. The lessons employ instructional strategies to reinforce the core concepts, and include activities ranging from art and theater projects to homework activities that emphasize language learning and teach everyone the personalization of clan relationships. In addition, instructional materials for parents follow each lesson, framing a learning conversation between the parent/caregiver and the child.

The objective of this curriculum is not to try to recreate centuries-old or pre-contact socialization settings. Rather, the lessons aim to convey the core concepts of Diné personhood in a contemporary context. The Nali narrative features a Diné boy, Tyler, and a Diné girl, Brooke, with equally strong personalities, voices, and perspectives. The lessons focusing on the two children and their Nali have two goals: to convey a memorable setting which allows students to experience a connection with their relatives, the land, nature, animals, and the rich journey towards adulthood; and to model supportive relationships which enable students to identify with the characters and aspire to relate to their own peers and their elders. By strengthening young people's sense of belonging, the curriculum aims to build the resiliency of young people who, like Brooke and Tyler, might initially feel disconnected in their own home and school settings.

The Nali narrative uses traditional concepts to guide young people in living a good life. However, unlike stories that are only told in ceremonies held at specific times of the year, the curriculum draws on stories available year round and, most importantly, outside of ceremonial context. These stories are embedded in Nali's after-school conversations with her two grandchildren. In this way, the Nali stories are compelling and entertaining just as oral tradition was to previous generations.

Nali lets the concepts emerge as she listens to her grandchildren describing their day-to-day experiences at school and in the community, and as they tell Nali about their worries as well as their future aspirations. Fourth-grader Brooke wants to be a psychologist, while her brother Tyler wants to be an environmentalist. Both feel a responsibility to save Diné land, people, and animals for future generations. Nali listens, she feeds them after-school snacks, and she desires the best for them. She reflects out loud about their concerns, and offers Diné concepts to shed light on their conflicts and questions, providing guidance and insight into self-development, relationships, and the Diné people. She expects both her grandson and her granddaughter to utilize Diné ways to become strong individuals and overcome life's challenges. She takes pride in their dreams to protect the land and to support health in the community. She (and other adults in the narrative) corrects them when their own interactions fall short of mutual respect. Adults encourage each of the children to pursue their educations and their dreams for the benefit of the community. The Nali narrative acts to reinforce a sense of belonging and a desire to contribute to the future of the Navajo Nation.

## CONCLUSION

The experience of this undertaking reflects only one distinct tribal context from among over 500 federally recognized tribes. Those who share our goals and wish to travel the same path with their community can and should do so. Curriculum leaders should understand that participatory curriculum development is not a matter of replacing words from one language with words from another language, or concepts from one tradition with concepts from another tradition. Curriculum conferences can and will demand a long-term commitment to true curriculum reform. Even when a curriculum succeeds, has a long life in school systems, and educates large numbers of children, by itself it cannot transform the conditions that deprive young people of healthy social development. Tribal policy is the "curriculum" for the development of one's society, and has the potential to strengthen conditions for children's learning and success (see Warner, 1999). In that regard, we also initiated a proclamation to support children's rights to a healthy future, which is currently being considered by the President of the Navajo Nation.

Curriculum leaders need to anticipate and welcome unexpected community needs that might arise during the curriculum development process. For example, dialogue about the *Iina* curriculum has drawn outspoken male and female supporters and enabled parents, service providers, politicians, and community leaders to call for a Diné sexuality education initiative to address risk behaviors in older adolescents. As one highly respected leader in the child abuse prevention field reminded community members and educators, “It’s true that as Diné we were taught that what happens in the home is sacred and should not be discussed. However, much of what is happening in today’s homes is not sacred, and we must not only talk about it, we must change it.” In this way, the curriculum development process enabled community members to test and voice their own views, and to define part of the solution as “talking more openly” with children and youth about everyday realities, including sexual behavior and sexual abuse of children.

In order for the Tools for *Iina* (Life) curriculum to make the greatest impact in Diné society, the *Iina* working group is consulting with Navajo Nation representatives to ensure the progress of the curriculum and identify ways to support its implementation. Innovative leaders in the Diné Department of Education, the Speaker of the Navajo Nation Council, and the President of the Navajo Nation have affirmed the need to improve the lives of young people through the use of Diné core concepts. Once the curriculum is in use in Diné schools, we hope to focus on strengthening broader public awareness of Diné concepts in relation to risk behaviors, with PSAs featuring Nali herself, and with youth voices featured in the *Navajo Times* and radio outlets. Having made our own journey through the “worlds” of Diné young people and having identified Diné core concepts to address the challenges they face, we look forward to supporting Diné young people as well as curriculum leaders from other tribes making their journey in this Glittering World.

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#### FOOTNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Spelling conforms to that used by the Diné *Hatalthi* Association.