Policy Recommendations for Healing from Inter-Generational Trauma

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This policy paper is meant to educate lawmakers, American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) advocates, and tribal leaders with up-to-date research and cultural considerations on the dire need for improving systems so that all Native peoples may heal from inter-generational trauma.

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VIII. References
Abstract
Since emergence, the Navajo people have traveled through four different worlds. The first Nihodoohil, the Black World, known to have the mist beings and insects. Nihodoottlizh, is the Second World that belonged to the sea beings and birds. Nihodootsoh, the Yellow world taken by the mammals and hairy creatures and the last is Nihodooghai, the White World where we as human beings are present today. From all the worlds, Navajos caused destruction or abuse that led them to live elsewhere in history. In the White World, they were mistreated and abused by European powers or American interest. Although, from each tragic event in Navajo oral history and American history, they are one of the most resilient Native people, today.

Traditional oral teachings/stories are documented Navajo history for thousands of years. There are no such things as books, recorders, or documentaries in Navajo history, only oral history. Today, many Navajo people are faced with poverty, unemployment, family loss, and other illness. These factors leave them in heartbreaking trauma from federal policies. However, this is not the first time Navajo people endured such pain. What must now take place is the healing phrase that has been lost, but can be found in traditional ceremonial practices.

Native American languages and cultures are the root to living a long and happy life. That was the goal for every Navajo person, that is represented by the yucca leaves, there are one hundred and two stems and each stem represent each year of life. What is discussed is the stories and oral teaching that was passed down from generation to generation. These types of discussions are not talked about and needs to be taught in order for future generations to learn from.

Introduction
On the Navajo Nation, there are health issues that have devastating impacts that have not yet been cured or healed. Alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, suicide, even human trafficking is present on the Navajo Nation. These issues have been talked about for years and are still affecting the people. One issue in particular that does not get enough attention and action, is the inter-generational trauma passed down from Navajo elders to their grandchildren, who have shown to be the most affected. Many Navajo youth have not shown an interest in learning or speaking their language. Navajo Nation has for many years provided Navajo language classes geared to teach the language in the classroom but only for one hour each day. When compared to the overall day spent speaking English, the ratio is too large for learners to grasp Navajo language fluently.

Although, the Navajo Nation has made steps to find solutions, it is ultimately the decision of the learners to motivate themselves to learn the language. Navajo elders think and feel they have barriers that prevent them from teaching their grandchildren, not in a school setting but in the home, where everything was taught in Navajo traditional ways. The impacts from these barriers include the boarding school system, influence from religious practice, and being forced to move out of their home and live in non-traditional homes.

This inter-generational gap between the youth and elders has been getting larger and wider everyday it is not talked about. There has been no dialogue between the youth and elders, which creates isolation and doubt in each age group on how to approach the issue and begin thinking of solutions to fix it. It used to be that years ago, Navajo was the primary spoken language between these two age groups. Today, there has been a drastic shift in speaking Navajo between the youth
and the elders. Furthermore, this also led to a loss of traditional teachings, songs, prayers, and stories that are all said in Navajo but today’s generation is not able to comprehend or carry those sacred tools of living a good life.

It will take resources and the whole Navajo Nation to address this issue, but through the teachings and prayer passed down from generation to generation, the healing process for elders and their grandchildren will begin.

**Navajo Language**
The origins of Navajo language can be found within the prayers and songs chanted through a traditional ceremony. Listening carefully to the lyrics tells a story about the sacred language. Yahalii yeyani, is a star that is also called sitsóí, meaning grandchild, it has no gender or separation, inside it carried the natural elements of water, (tò) fire, (k’o) air, (niłchį’) and Earth. (náhásdáán) According to Wilson Aronilth, a Navajo philosopher, “Every creation was created and developed by thought and sounds. Every living creation makes a sound with their voice. We were given the sound of voice. Through the spirit of our voice is where our language came into existence. All creation is identified by the sound of their voice and language.” (Aronilth, 1991) With that understanding, Navajo language was once sound, which became voice, and in result became language.

There is the spirit of four languages which are: white shell language, turquoise language, abalone shell language, and black jet language. Each have roles and responsivities when spoken. For example, the white shell language we used to feel, think, and discipline ourselves to be physically clean, throughout our mind and thoughts. The turquoise language is used to gain and learn education, in order to learn knowledge and wisdom, in return, it helps brighten the mind to be strong and teaches us to have courage. The abalone shell language is used to develop our minds and bodies from childbirth to old age, including our social and behavioral development. Lastly, the black jet language is used to keep harm and evil things away from us. It is spoken to protect the mind, spirit, body, and whole being, as well as, is the power of words that defend and protect one’s self.

Along came the teaching of Sa’ah Naaghai Bik’eh Hozhoon, which was made by the Holy People to have maintain the language and proper way to say certain words, through kindness, thoughtfulness, emotional feeling, and happiness in life. Although, since its creation and being came to be the language over the years has evolved and changed, but the songs, prayers, stories in Navajo remain the same since the beginning.

The contributions and benefits to speaking Navajo is the strong connection between yourself and the Holy People (Diyin Diné’ë) When a child first speaks, it was said Shimá or my mother was the first word. A traditional practitioner is invited to perform chants and give the child corn pollen inside his or her mouth to have good choice of words and is the natural process for the child to begin speaking. Language is also a way to identify yourself to others and it tells itself about the creation and how all that is here came into existence.
Boarding Schools & Residential Programs
Navajo people’s primary spoken language was Navajo, but with early contact with Spanish, Mexican, and American settlers or soldiers it was interrupted. The United States put forth General Richard Pratt who had the idea of “Killing the Indian, Save the Man” which was the theme of taking the whole Indian out of children and making them more “civilized” for the better of man. Traditional customs and teachings were stripped from Navajo children, if they were caught speaking Navajo to other children, effective punishment would be brutal to those children. Putting soap in their mouth, cleaning the floors with a toothbrush, or getting a whip was known to be punishment upon speaking Navajo. Today, many Navajo elders are traumatized or would always remember what occurred within the boarding schools.

Role of Grandparents
According to Aronilth, “the belief was to respect your mother and father, grandparents, and blood relatives by address them in the right way by clan.” (Aronilth, 1991) K’é, is kinship, every Navajo child, elder, and adult have four clans, each represent their mother, father, maternal grandfather, and paternal grandfather. Using these clans will an individual be able to establish his or her own clans with others and create kinship. If someone’s first clan match other’s first clan, they can identify as brothers, sisters, a mother, an aunt, an uncle, or close friends. There are seven steps to understand Navajo way of life. One, is to learn to be happy. Second, learning to know yourself, third, learn to cope with your fears. Forth, learn to exercise your mind and spiritually. Fifth, stimulate your senses. Sixth, to tune your motivation. Lastly, learn to reward yourself with goof things and push away the bad things in life. These were basic teachings our ancestors taught other generations to learn to live a “long and happy life” to the age of one hundred and two years old. This knowledge was passed down from Mr. Aronilth from his grandmother, making this teaching valued and precious to our youth.

Intimidation of Both Perspectives
Many Navajo elders use these teachings discussed and have been carried by them by their grandparents before them. Today, elders have a tough time communicating their message in Navajo to the youth. The Navajo Nation took a step to host a Navajo Youth & Elder Summit on the Navajo Nation at two of their tribally controlled higher education institutions. According to the website and mission of the summit, “The first annual Youth and Elder Summit was held in July 2016 at Diné College in Tsaile, Arizona focused on bridging the intergenerational gap between youth and elders. The main focus of the Youth and Elder Summit was to bring together the two populations to ignite and build relationships, connection, and reunification. The Youth and Elder Summit promoted positive protective factors, strengthening resiliency, cultural empowerment, and communication.” (Y&ES, 2017) In particular session that was discussed was using Navajo language to communicate between youth and elders. One youth participate shared his experience while learning Navajo and said he would be laughed at or after his speech would be criticized for saying a certain word in Navajo wrong. Which in result would not want him to speak in any further.

Elders that listened gave their view on why it is not criticism but preparations. One elder pointed out that their criticism is not to be little them but to encourage them to speak it. Both youth and elders were able to get the views out and at the end of the session there was a common goal of not laughing at you but correct them. As well as the youth to listen and pay more attention to their elders and carry their teachings on to other siblings or family members.
Low Confidence & Discourage
Just like any other skill or talent, there comes practice and self-learning through trials or challenges. Speaking Navajo is not a one-time teaching or learning experience, it happens throughout life. Learning another language, it not easy but it can be done with the right resources and teachers that support an individual. Low confidence can be not wanted to participate or be involve with other or a group. Always questioning one’s authority and even question one’s self over the actions and speaking abilities. Navajo youth are discourage to speak, for example, the Navajo consonants of “ts; ts’; tl; and tl’” are expressed through the movement of the tongue and air through the mouth. The consonant tl’ in a Navajo word is tl’izí’ meaning goat. In English, tl’ has the same sound as cl in the word clothes. If it is repeated over time the pronunciation differs from the Navajo consonant tl, so there is an exacerbation of the glottal enclitic. English sounding of words differ from Navajo sounding, where there is more attention on the pronunciation and sound. Two words might be written the same but have totally different meanings. These basic teachings are what many youth find difficult to say and sound out. Making it harder on them to learn while at the same time being laughed upon.

One study conducted by Les B. Whitbeck and her colleagues found that “these findings suggest that the “holocaust” is not over for many American Indian people, it continues to affect their perceptions on a daily basis and impinges on their psychological and physical health” (Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt & Chen, 2004). It was surprising that what native people suffered by American contact could closely be resembled to the Jewish Holocaust. As well as, there are no “safe place” to go to according to this study. This type of loss will take time and healing in order to start fresh again as a people.

Bridging the Inter-Generational Gap
With these issues of sounding, speaking, and learning, it further drives an individual to not anything to do with Navajo language. However, the Youth & Elder Summit was a step towards connected youth and elders. It was the smallest factors like sitting together both youth and elders at one table during lunch that changed the atmosphere. Youth were able to ask question after a presentation what was in Navajo. Elders could help translate what was said to the youth. On the holistic approach, it created a strong bond not only with the youth and elders but with the spiritual people looking down upon their children.

Importance of Navajo Healing
Through ceremonial setting is where majority of Navajo culture teachings are taught and have set rules and policies for the patient that needs healing and the traditional practitioner. Hozhoji, is the blessing way ceremony that restores one’s beauty and blessing to the patient. During the spring it when this ceremony is conducted along with the plants, herbs, and other species waking up and rejuvenating during the spring. For example, Dziłeezh, is the mountain bundle, every four years it is re-bundled and has certain songs that bless it and bring back to life again through the Holy People. The mountain bundle is the most sacred and most valued among a Navajo family, it is the core or heart that protect the family from harm and give blessings to them. Naayeeji, is the protection way ceremony that ensured defense and protection from evil things. It is sort of a force field that keeps the family and their belonging safe. Both ceremonies help restore balance within themselves and surrounding belongings like, livestock, land, water, and other items.
On the other hand, modern methods of healing range widely in western methods of healing. Although, most of these methods used originate them indigenous people. Bessel van der Kolk, author of “The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma,” indicates that, “to learn to live with the memories of the past without being overwhelmed by them in the present” (Kolk, 2015). Meaning, accepting past memories or stories into the future will help resolve trauma. Various types of methods are mediation, prescribed medication, therapy, or counseling are ways to relieve oneself from historical trauma.

**Herbal Medicine**
Certain herbal medicines help cure the imbalance in one’s self. The process of getting herbal medicines involve giving an offering to the plant. Once the prayers and offering it complete, using the same plant, it is said it find another the same and using that for healing. Many youth feel isolated, depressed, and alone in some situations. Herbal medicines help keep those away. Burning sheep wool, keeps the dangerous spirits away, as it is seen as a sign of not wanting hunger around. Naabįih, is a root used to help keep snakes who could be spies or messengers for the bad spirits away.

**Holistic Approach**
Ádá ahwołyá, taking care of yourself is a teaching. When the Twin warriors killed the monsters from the Earth. Several others are still among the Navajo today. Laziness, poverty, lice, and anger are “modern monsters,” as Vice President Johnathan Nez explains during the Youth & Elder Summit. Taking care of yourself starts by fighting these monsters of today. Utilizing the tools or in Navajo, the weapons to fight these “modern monsters” through education.

**Initiatives to Increase Navajo Language Use**
Immersions programs throughout the Navajo Nation are used to help youth speak Navajo. Diné College offers a program of Diné Studies to learn Navajo language, culture, and history. James McKenzie, the Navajo Language Immersion Institute Director, helped Navajo Nation Council Delegate, Nathaniel Brown host a Navajo Language & Culture Revitalization Summit. According to the website, “The purpose for the Navajo Language and Culture Revitalization Summit is to build awareness, dialogue, understanding, unity and action around the common cause of Navajo language and culture revitalization and maintenance efforts, and to broaden and increase the reach and impact of such efforts, Navajo Nation system-wide.” (NLCRS, 2017) Asking not only youth and elders but the whole Navajo Nation to begin a dialogue of Navajo language should be the official language of the Navajo Nation, new methods of teaching Navajo language and culture in the classroom, youth and elder perspectives, and inviting Navajo lawmakers to begin drafting legislation to improve Navajo language speaking.

**Social Development and Healing for Elders**
From past encounters, Navajo elders have faced boarding schools and major impacts like the Long Walk that changed their feeling about speaking Navajo. Today, majority of Navajo elders are bilingual and speak both Navajo and English. Summits like the Youth & Elder Summit and the Navajo Language & Culture Revitalization Summit built their confidence in speaking Navajo to the younger generations. One elder spoke and said, “I feel bad about it. Tears came down. That is how I feel. I feel weak. I feel weak about how we are losing our grandchildren” (Whitbeck, 2004).
Navajo elders are shame for not teaching their grandchildren. It only hinders their traditional knowledge or wisdom that was once passed down generation to generation.

Conclusion
Since emergence, Hajineeh as the Navajo call it, they have been challenged by several influences and even destroyed by others. If there is one major component learned from intergenerational trauma is a story. The power and influence story or oral tradition can have on a people. A Navajo medicine man, who out of respect is unnamed, told this story.

Long ago, there was a being named the Gambler. It was weak, old, and fragile to most being but it could talk with small beings like plants, animals, and others. The Gambler thought, in order for me to get strong I have to deal with other beings. Plants started to challenge the Gambler but would lose to it. Over a period of time, the Gambler started to deal with bigger beings like mammals or trees. Those too would be beaten by the Gambler, soon enough, the Gambler controlled all the plants, animals, trees and even the people. They were all owned by the Gambler. Turkeyboy, lost his parents to the Gambler and wanted them back. He confronted the Gambler and said, “I want my parents back, I can’t live on without their guidance in life.” The Gambler looked down on the boy and laughed at him. The Gambler said, “Be gone boy, there are no need for you around here.” Turkeyboy left feeling helpless and lonesome.

As he was walking, he could hear the wind talk to him. The wind said, “Listen to me boy, and we will get your parents back and all the other beings, too.” Turkeyboy agreed and the next day challenged the Gambler to deals. The Gambler accepted, they both went through various types of gambling games and each time, Turkeyboy would win. After each game, Turkeyboy won back everything being, including his parents. Just like before, the Gambler was weak, old, and fragile. So, the people gathered and decided to send the Gambler east away from Navajo land. As they were tying up the Gambler, it spoke and said, “I will return and avenge you all. I will take your land, people, language, culture, and ways of life.” The people sent the Gambler east and was never spoken of again, until.

Today, Navajo people reflect on this story and see the Gambler is returning. It was sent to the east but what came from years later? European discovery, diseases, warfare, Manifest Destiny, and white settlement all came from the east to Navajo land. The Gambler is said to have return and has taken our land, people, language, culture, and way of life. Navajo language is in critical condition, suicide is high on the reservation, and land is being poisoned by oil, coal and uranium. These are symptoms or signs of the Gambler’s return. Very few people know about this particular story because it is earned and shared with those who are fighting the Gambler today.

This story captures why Navajo people are having difficulties learning the language or practicing traditional ceremonies. For too long, they have suffered identity loss and now it is time to start the healing process for many of the 300,000 Navajos living on the Navajo Nation. What steps do Navajo people need to take to fight the Gambler, Nahwiilbihi?

Policy Recommendations
In order to heal Native people across the United States, there needs to be a strong collective voice within tribal communities. Education is a tool to tackle the lack of recourses and information
needed in Indian Country. One unique attribute in tribal education are tribal colleges and universities. Research has shown that tribal college students perform better in and out of the classroom when a college environment is geared towards their tribal core values. The American Indian Higher Education Consortium is the hallmark to advance tribal education for student success. The reauthorization funding of Tribal Colleges and Universities Title III, which includes the Higher Education Act – Title III. These funds help develop more investments into tribal colleges and universities. As well as, support native languages and a training program.

These supportive actions help grant tribal colleges or universities better understanding of their native languages and cultures. It will only motivate them further to promote, preserve, revitalize, and sustain native language and cultural knowledge. As a result, tribal college students learn and gain a better understand of who they are and where they come from. That is a teaching in Navajo culture to not forget their you come from because our umbilical cord was places either in the livestock corral or near the maternal side of the family’s residence. To represent that where you come from matters and without cultural knowledge and language, we are lost in who we are as Navajo people.

Another investment for healing our intergenerational trauma is bolstering the Native American Languages Preservation Act, which funds programs or tribal entities “to preserve Native American languages.” Nearly $50 million dollars has helped native programs revitalize or preserve native languages. This investment in our tribal communities’ build a strong foundation for younger generations to relearn their heritage. Both of these recommendations help development Indian Country into preservation of native languages and cultures. Without spoken language and practice of cultural values, native people are lost in their own communities. The healing process cannot start without prayer and chants being sung loud for the people to hear.

Above all, is to have Congressional members honor our ancestors who went through hardship by supporting our tribal nations to live a long and successful life. It is with prayer that the Holy People will be able to guide our thoughts and planning into the right direction, not only as Native Americans but as people of Mother Earth.
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