

Who Cares for the Carers? A Holistic Approach to Teacher Wellbeing in a Tribal Head Start Context

Hilary Gourneau, Teresa N. Brockie, and Deborah H. Wilson

“We are a silent voice sometimes, and it's not too healthy. You know? Kind of like we're on the frontlines. In order to be a fruitful person, in order to be on the frontline with other people, you got to take care of your own self” -Head Start teacher from Fort Peck Native American Reservation, Montana, USA.

Often, our focus when investigating the stress and wellbeing of teachers is how it affects the students they teach. It is true that a teacher's levels of stress, depression, and wellbeing affect the socio-emotional and academic development of the children they teach (Herman et al., 2017), not to mention that students often carry a variety of physical, mental, social, or learning challenges that teachers are ill-supported in handling (Sun et al., 2024). Nevertheless, as pointed out in this book as well as our prior work, far less time and resources have been spent on valuing teachers as individuals who themselves need psychological support and resources to optimize their health and wellbeing (Dreer, 2023; Wilson et al., 2022). When working as researchers with a Tribal Head Start program, we became interested in the wellbeing of teachers as their human right rather than as a means to an end.

Positionality of the Authors

The research at the Fort Peck Tribal Head Start program began with Dr. Teresa Brockie, an Indigenous nurse researcher and professor whose work focuses on community-based prevention and intervention around suicide, trauma, and adverse childhood experiences among Indigenous communities. Dr. Brockie is a member of the A'aninin Nation from the Fort Belknap Reservation, Montana and has developed strong research-practice partnerships

with the Fort Belknap and Fort Peck Reservation communities. In collaboration with Tribal members on the Fort Peck Reservation she co-designed an intervention called Wakǰáŋyeža (Little Holy One) (Brockie et al., 2021). Little Holy One aims to instil traditional values in children to prevent adolescent suicide and substance use, and teach parents and caregivers methods for coping with trauma and stress and positive parenting practices.

Hilary Gourneau is a member of the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes and is the Fort Peck Tribes Head Start Director. Her expertise is in Counselor Education and trauma-informed services. Ms. Gourneau started her position as Fort Peck Tribes Head Start Director in July 2020 and quickly found herself in uncharted waters during a global pandemic. This only intensified her drive to advocate and provide services to Tribal Head Start students, families and teachers.

Dr. Debbie Wilson is a white European nurse who worked with Dr. Brockie while completing her doctoral work. Dr. Wilson first noticed that there were unmet needs regarding the health and wellbeing of the Head Start teachers, and this was the beginning of discussions that would result in the decision to adapt the existing Little Holy One for the wellbeing of the Fort Peck Head Start teachers.

Dr. Adrian Buckles is a member of the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes on the Fort Peck Reservation. She worked as a community based research team member for Little Holy One and was then trained as an interventionist for the teacher-based program. It was essential to us that the teacher program would be delivered by a Native person familiar with the community.

The Pilot Research Study

The Need

When we'd go into our meetings every week, you could see a lot of the teachers struggling because we lost a lot of people [during COVID]. And how we deal with it—well-- you could just see that we need more support now.- Tribal Head Start teacher

The school counselors were white and did not live in the area, and so they weren't familiar and accustomed to our culture. And just like the spirituality of the culture but also the poverty and the violence that happened and the traumas that took place. And so... you just didn't really visit the school counselor. -Tribal Head Start Supervisor

The first quote underscored that these Tribal Head Start teachers were interested and in need of support even more so after COVID, while the second quote illustrates how the pre-existing model of school counseling at the center was not culturally-sustaining, and therefore children and families and teachers simply couldn't make use of it. This fits with a growing awareness that the western paradigm of treating mental illness is not the worldview of Native American or Indigenous peoples. Interventions need to consider Native American worldviews and the damages done due to colonization if they are to foster healing and wellbeing (Blume, 2020; Gone, 2023).

Consistent with the Head Start model, having teachers and students from the same cultural background comes with enormous advantages, but it also means that both community strengths *and* challenges will be shared. Our interviews identified that these teachers were living with a high degree of stress and trauma within themselves, their family, and community, and that these needs become neglected as their attention is always focused on the children they teach or their family. This was potentially compounding the already existing historical traumas stemming from the systematic discriminating practices of colonization from the US government that are too vast to do justice to here (e.g., genocide, boarding schools, forced relocation to reservations) and that have been documented extensively elsewhere (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Brockie et al., 2015). On the other hand, interviews also revealed a people and community steeped in rich cultural and community strengths.

The Choice to Highlight Native Culture

I would think being a strong, resilient teacher is, living in the community that we live in, that through [our native] language and culture, that it saves families. Living the cultural way of life protects from the negative world, the drugs and alcohol or a toxic spouse. I think it helps them. It changes them into a better person. Of course, I don't want to push that onto a teacher that maybe isn't familiar with our cultural and traditional ways and language learning. But I think that, if we were able to incorporate that somehow in a teacher's life and show them that there is something better. You are worthy. You are worth it.- Head Start volunteer and mother

In this quote, a Head Start volunteer, mother, and cultural advisor was asked what a strong, resilient teacher looks like. Her recognition that reconnecting Indigenous peoples to their tradition and culture may be deeply healing, strengthening, and empowering comports with data showing Native peoples prefer culturally informed care that respects Native perspectives on health and wellbeing (Gone, 2023). Further, she was cognizant that many of her people have embraced the Christian faith taught by missionaries and thus it is a delicate process and traditional practices are not to be imposed. This discussion highlighted the context in which we would be working. We would need to gently work with the teachers since our choice to implement cultural lessons may trigger adults who potentially struggle with shame or resistance at not being so familiar with their Native cultural practices and beliefs.

The Findings

We engaged with our Tribal Advisory Board to adapt five lessons (see Table 1) from the Little Holy One curriculum to suit the teacher context using the findings obtained during the interviews and focus groups. Further details of the adaptation and implementation process are published elsewhere (Wilson et al., 2023a; Wilson et al., 2023b). One lesson was

delivered per week, during working hours with teaching staff who signed up to participate, at each center.

Table 1 Description of the Five Lessons Included in this Intervention

Cultural Sessions	Description of Sessions
Promoting Tribal Identity	Connects one to the Creator, responsibility to live a good life by walking spiritual path
Smudging to Reduce Stress	Therapeutic healing practice to resolve unsettling feelings and thoughts
Understanding your Emotions	Understand association among thoughts, feelings, and behavior
Healing Historical & Contemporary Trauma	Identify imbalances in physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual domains created by historical trauma.
Strengthening Family and Community	Therapeutic value of connectedness to relatives and community

While the adapted intervention for teachers was a brief, 5-week program and therefore not expected to create sustainable change, the intent was to create a framework for healing

and teacher wellbeing that, if shown to be promising, could be expanded into a new way of doing business center-wide. Results overall from the quantitative and qualitative evaluation were positive. There was a decrease in depression and increases in Tribal identity, communal mastery, and resilience, while life satisfaction remained unchanged and stress worsened. It is not unusual for post-tests in school-based research to decline (e.g., end-of-year distractions). Additionally, in short-term interventions, increasing people's awareness often results in higher "standards" at post-test. In the focus groups at the completion of the intervention, teachers expressed appreciation for the time spent and the time focused on them. They expressed appreciation to their administration for allowing them to do this during work hours. This also meant that there was no attrition during the intervention. Food was provided and a safe space that the teachers were familiar with, avoiding the need to travel. One teacher expressed:

Thank you. All these traumas I just thought they were part of my life. But [during the intervention] I got to know myself and how they still affect me. I haven't looked at it like that before."

Lessons of Healing from the Five Sessions

In the following section, we expand on each of the five program sessions, with quotes, anecdotal healing experiences, and lessons learned that we witnessed in each session when implementing the intervention. In this section, we deepen our interpretation of the study findings and target them for an educator, rather than a researcher audience. Here, we hope to paint a richer picture of *what healing can look like* among a Tribal community of teachers.

Lesson One: Tribal Identity

"I think there's a little piece in everyone, here especially, in the Native community here, that they want to learn their cultural ways, language, and traditions."- Participant.

In this lesson, participants were asked to reflect on what values they have, think of somebody they look up to and identify what values they display. The discussion then moved onto how they identify culturally and what Tribal identity means. The importance of relatives and greeting relatives in the community was highlighted, and then the session moved on to learning how to greet relatives/community members in the Nakota or Dakota languages. The lesson also addressed the topic of traditional names and naming ceremonies. The interventionist made sure to allow for the expression of other religious ceremonies of importance. For example, one participant contributed:

Thank god I have church. I can go and pray and try to calm myself down and ask the Lord to help me and pray for that other person or whatever the situation.

This helped highlight that the values discussed in the session (e.g., respect, honesty, empathy, knowing your relatives) were universal to all participants regardless of spiritual orientation. With this inclusive atmosphere the interventionist skilfully worked to enhance Tribal identity and re-engage participants with Tribal culture. It was interesting to note that the teachers who identified as Christian were still describing the importance of some traditional ceremonies in their lives. For example, they discussed preparing their children for pow-wows, and sewing special outfits for the occasion. With the positive shifts in Tribal identity in the post-test survey, it may be that by bringing consciousness to the value of tradition, Tribal identity, and encouraging participants to describe their experiences, participants had begun to heal connections that had been damaged through colonization practices.

Lesson Two: Smudging to Reduce Stress

We know about it [smudging] and what it's for, but it should be done more often. -Teacher focus group

Smudging is a traditional activity to remove negative thoughts, feelings, and promote positive energy by burning sweetgrass, cedar, or sage (Charleyboy, 2012). This session focuses on smudging—a simple cultural practice to connect one to the Creator. The session involved finding out what people knew about the practice, and performing the activity of smudging. This practice was then used before and after each subsequent session as a way to pave the way for good work and thoughts. Since these traditional practices were banned in the USA until the 1970s, some people have never seen smudging practiced, but the facilitator emphasized that it can be practiced by any religion and by the whole family. In subsequent sessions, teachers shared their favorite spots on the reservation to collect sweet grass or sage, and the facilitator asked willing participants to lead the smudging. The skill of the facilitator, her familiarity with traditional cultural practices, and knowledge of the community was evident in this session as she worked to bring everyone together.

“It’s really important when teaching these lessons to affirm why our families may or may not have continued these traditions and that it’s ok to not know certain things or do certain things. It’s about normalizing our cultural practices, beliefs, and understandings.” -

Interventionist

Lesson Three: Managing your Emotions

I don’t even think teachers have been asked about it [stress and coping], so I don’t even think it’s on their radar.... As Natives we are just taught to zip it up.- Head Start administrator

With this pandemic, mental health has really come under the spotlight. So those needs I think are becoming greater and greater and it’s hard to shy away from them now and turn a blind eye when people are struggling with depression, some form of trauma, grief. - Tribal Head Start supervisor.

These two quotes illustrate our findings in the original interviews and focus groups that Native Americans in this community don’t talk about stress, but COVID had pushed

stressors to the forefront. With so much loss and grief on the reservation during the pandemic, Head Start administrative staff were seeing teachers struggling and were seeking solutions to support them.

In this session participants were encouraged to describe if they could recognize how stress affected them physically, and identify one-time and long-term stressors. The same was done for recognizing and managing depression and anger. Some stress-relieving activities were practiced and the session was finished with a visualization activity.

This session was quieter than the others, perhaps because it was led by Dr. Wilson who is white because it was not a cultural lesson per se. Or maybe learning to speak about and identifying emotions takes practice. What was universally acknowledged was that COVID had pushed these teachers to the edge where they felt less able to keep pushing through stressful events. Everyone enjoyed the visualization activity and said they would like to continue learning more about stress and emotion regulation.

Lesson Four: Healing Historical and Contemporary Trauma

I feel that for my people, it's just like we have been trying to be wiped out for generations, genocide and everything. -Teacher

This teacher spoke clearly about historical traumatic events such as forced attendance at boarding schools, starvation, and being made to relocate to reservations away from traditional homelands and hunting grounds. She saw these acts by the colonizers as genocide and feels that current federal government policies continue these genocidal practices today.

The session on Healing Historical and Contemporary Trauma acknowledges these traumatic events but highlights that this history of colonization does not define Native Americans as a people; they are strong, resilient. However the effects of historical trauma are profound and can have effects such as depression, suicidal ideation, and lack of self-worth

(Gone, 2013). This session focused on engaging and showing the teachers that their life has value and that there are healthy ways to cope with the effects of these traumas.

This session included teachers sharing contemporary traumatic experiences that they had not had a safe forum in which to discuss before. There were community traumas that the group was still actively struggling with, that “spilled out” when this opportunity was provided. For example, a beloved community member and his family were killed in a fiery car crash that occurred outside one teacher’s home. Each participant clearly recalled that event and discussed its effect on them and the community. This was the first time they had discussed the trauma collectively and therefore they understood for the first time that they were not the only ones who were still impacted by the memory of it. Teachers spoke of other traumas or crimes for which they couldn’t forgive the perpetrators, and how this lingering pain had shaped their lives. The session then moved on to managing the effects of the traumas, describing healthy ways to release the feelings and take control. It was clear that this session provided a much-needed space for the teachers to center their own experiences, as opposed to the typical demands on them to always center the children or their teaching methods.

Lesson Five: Strengthening Family and Community

What really stresses me out is when I see our young Native Americans homeless, on drugs and not just dealing but stealing and breaking things. When I see that, I just go home and I pray and ask God to put a cover over our reservation, and that he could help our young people get off drugs or, you know, show us the light or something.- Teacher interview

This quote was one of many that highlighted participants’ experiences with family members struggling with substance use and criminal behavior. Evidence points to the fact of intergenerational trauma (the epigenetic effect of ancestral traumas on subsequent generations) results in high levels of psychological distress that manifests in unhealthy

behaviours, depression, shame, and suicidality (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Brockie et al., 2015). The quote also highlights the core value in Native American communities of connection to community, and to relatives.

In this session, the focus was on what it means to be a good relative. The facilitator and teachers agreed that this generally means a mutual “care and feeding” among individuals, the community, and the land. Exercises included a discussion of ways to be a good relative and drawing and sharing their family trees. The discussions of relatives past and present, and connections through marriage, adoption, and to other Tribes nearby were discussed with great animation. Even ancestral connections among teachers that some didn’t know about before were revealed. The power of community connections and kinship in the room was palpable. The importance of family to these teachers, extending way beyond the nuclear family, and also including non-Native ancestors, was striking. While the theme of trauma and struggles remained throughout as well, a number of teachers said there was no place else they would want to live. The discussion and activities shifted attention not only to the power, strength, and beauty of their Native American community, but their Head Start community as well.

All teachers can take a lot. All teachers can manage a whole lot. With what my years of being a teacher at Head Start [showed] was they’re all great supporters. You know, everybody helps each other out.- Teacher

This quote aptly captures what was demonstrated in all the teacher sessions—the strengths and troubles that Native communities must hold as they move towards healing.

Moving Beyond the Intervention

Results from our study provided evidence supporting the implementation of community level interventions as culturally safe psychological care. As a brief pilot program, it would require additional components, a multi-level approach, and sustaining efforts for the teachers’ continued wellbeing to be effective and comprehensive. Given Native American

communities have been harmed by past research, it was critically important to involve the Tribal Council and Head Start Administration to begin the process of constructing next steps. All data from the research was shared with, and is owned by, the Tribe and Tribal Head Start where it has been used to present at conferences and obtain funding. The following sections describe some ideas that came up in our discussions that could possibly apply to other Tribal communities, Head Start contexts, and early childhood education centers looking to repair the longstanding neglect of the wellbeing of their teachers.

Structural Change

A complaint that teachers had was that they didn't have equipment that ergonomically supported them such as no diaper changing tables, which forced them to change diapers on the floor. Given this was an aging workforce with 87% of the participants being over 50, the Head Start director quickly ordered new furniture including changing tables. Furthermore, each of the Head Start communities on the reservation were using pre-fab classrooms that were separated by a great distance. Plans were established with the Tribal Council to design and build classrooms and administration buildings that represented the dignity, importance, and safety of Head Start to the Tribal community. In addition, the new design is reflective of the community culture such as a Teepee at the center and murals painted on the walls depicting the buffalo and star people narratives.

Talking Circles

Plans were discussed to create in-service days focused on teacher wellbeing and healing. These days, called Talking Circles, came out of teachers' animation during and appreciation for time spent together during the sessions. The study revealed that these teachers have not had the opportunity before to acknowledge or start to process the fallout from COVID or the historical traumas and loss that Native American Tribes have endured. Having a facilitator who was from the community, who knew the reservation and Tribal

history thereby enabling them to receive culturally appropriate support, indicated clearly that having such an individual on staff full-time would be a critical piece of ongoing wellbeing for teachers.

Improving Physical Health

While physical health was not the specific focus of the intervention, it is well known that many of the Head Start teachers in this community struggle with diabetes, hypertension, arthritis, and depression (Lewis et al., 2021), and many teachers expressed these concerns. This was further compounded by this reservation being very rural which leads to lack of access to healthy foods and the reservation water supply contaminated with mining extracts. Weights, resistance bands, and ellipticals have been purchased for the Head Start community in the new building. More importantly, a plan for a weekly routine that gets the teachers outside for 30 minutes to walk or exercise is in the works, as the Tribal Council has approved 3.5 hours per week of employee paid time to help encourage staff to take care of their physical health. A further support from school leadership that would help sustain this plan would be an incentive, as by their own admission teachers do not have the time or energy to maintain a regular exercise regime.

Other Activities

Teachers spoke of wanting a spa day, a Head Start retreat, or a weekend away with other reservation-based Head Start teachers. Currently, Head Start administration is working with Tribal Council to facilitate an event to celebrate Fort Peck teachers and recognize their contribution to the community. This is one part of an ongoing conversation to focus on partnership and boost morale. Further, in response to teachers expressing concerns about children with depression or struggling with behaviour issues, the Head Start director is putting in place Safe Talk training (livingWorks, 2025). This training will provide teachers

with critical support in facing ongoing tragic issues for the Tribe including youth trauma and suicide.

Conclusion

This chapter outlines the implementation of a pilot intervention for Native American Head Start teachers. The goal was to focus solely on the teachers, to support their wellbeing, and find ways to help them manage and decrease stress and depression. There was no expectation that these sessions would make them “better teachers” or improve the socio-emotional learning of the children. Therefore, it not only focused on the teaching context but on the life experiences of the teachers, the richness of their culture and heritage, and the historical traumas that have occurred as a result of colonization practices. The success of this project rested on time spent developing a respectful and trusting relationship between the researchers, the Tribe and Tribal Head Start, centering the teachers and community throughout and using a Native American interventionist who is from the community.

While additional funding and sustainability efforts will be required, the stories from the sessions clearly indicated that the path to healing had begun, and that these teachers had sorely needed the opportunity to commune with one another around their collective traumas, aspirations, and strengths. Supporters of teachers in Tribal communities and other contexts suffering from multiple co-pandemics (historical and ongoing) would do well to savor the wisdom shared by the stakeholders in this chapter. The teachers in such communities have been holding too much—all the burdens and hopes of generations past, present, and future, quite literally. It is time for their supporters to see teachers as their own revered group, with unique needs for advocacy and wellbeing, not merely the “conduit” for other people’s needs. When we learn the sacred lessons from the Fort Peck Tribal Head Start teachers, we may begin to see an education system more aligned with elder wisdom, where “school” and

“community” function as interconnected parts of a living whole, healing becomes more shared, and thus more possible.

References

- Blume, A. (2020). *A New Psychology Based on Community, Equality, and Care of the Earth: An Indigenous American Perspective* (1 ed.). ABC-CLIO, LLC.
<https://doi.org/10.5040/9798400691201>
- Brave Heart, M. Y., & DeBruyn, L. M. (1998). The American Indian holocaust: Healing historical unresolved grief. *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research*, 8(2), 60-78. <https://doi.org/10.5820/aian.0802.1998.60>
- Brockie, T., Dana-Sacco, G., Wallen, G., Wilcox, H., & Campbell, J. (2015). The relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to PTSD, depression, poly-drug use and suicide attempt in Reservation-based Native American adolescents and young adults. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 55(3), 411-421.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-015-9721-3>
- Brockie, T., Haroz, E. E., Nelson, K. E., Cwik, M., Decker, E., Ricker, A., Littlepage, S., Mayhew, J., Wilson, D., Wetsit, L., & Barlow, A. (2021). Wakhányeža (Little Holy One) - an intergenerational intervention for Native American parents and children: a protocol for a randomized controlled trial with embedded single-case experimental design. *BMC Public Health*, 21(1), 2298. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-12272-9>
- Charleyboy, L. (2012). The ancient art of smudging: purify yourself and your home with a traditional Native American practice.(INNER + OUTER WORLDS: inner life). *Spirituality & health*, 15(6), 24.
- Dreer, B. (2023). On the outcomes of teacher wellbeing: a systematic review of research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1205179. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1205179>

- Gone, J. P. (2013). Reconsidering American Indian historical trauma: lessons from an early Gros Ventre war narrative. *Transcultural psychiatry*, 51(3), 387-406.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461513489722>
- Gone, J. P. (2023). Community Mental Health Services for American Indians and Alaska Natives: Reconciling Evidence-Based Practice and Alter-Native Psy-ence. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 19(Volume 19, 2023), 23-49.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-080921-072950>
- Herman, K. C., Hickmon-Rosa, J. e., & Reinke, W. M. (2017). Empirically Derived Profiles of Teacher Stress, Burnout, Self-Efficacy, and Coping and Associated Student Outcomes. *Journal of positive behavior interventions*, 20(2), 90-100.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1098300717732066>
- Lewis, M. E., Volpert-Esmond, H. I., Deen, J. F., Modde, E., & Warne, D. (2021). Stress and Cardiometabolic Disease Risk for Indigenous Populations throughout the Lifespan. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(4).
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18041821>
- livingWorks. (2025). *Safe Talk*. Retrieved April 9 from
<https://livingworks.net/training/livingworks-safetalk/>
- Sun, Y., Tamblyn, A., Morris, H., Boothby, C., Skouteris, H., & Blewitt, C. (2024). Early childhood and primary school Teachers' experiences and needs in working with trauma-impacted Children: A systematic review and thematic synthesis. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 156, 107344.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107344>
- Wilson, D., Plesko, C., Brockie, T. N., & Glass, N. (2022). The well-being of head start teachers: a scoping literature review. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2022.2147880>

Wilson, D. H., German, D., Ricker, A., Gourneau, H., Hanson, G. C., Mayhew, J., Brockie, T. N., & Sarche, M. (2023-a). Feasibility, acceptability and effectiveness of a culturally informed intervention to decrease stress and promote well-being in reservation-based Native American Head Start teachers. *BMC Public Health*, 23(1), 2088.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-16913-z>

Wilson, D. H., Nelson, K. E., Gresh, A., Ricker, A., Littlepage, S., Krienke, L. K., & Brockie, T. N. (2023-b). The Pre-implementation Process of Adapting a Culturally Informed Stress Reduction Intervention for Native American Head Start Teachers. *Global implementation research and applications*, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43477-022-00070-3>