WE Teachers Supporting Indigenous Youth Module
WE Teachers

WE Teachers is a free program for teachers across America, providing resources and training to support them in addressing critical social issues with their students. It ensures that teachers have access to the tools they need to succeed in the classroom, such as innovative experiential learning techniques, and helps students become active, engaged citizens.

WE

WE is a movement that empowers people to change the world through a charitable foundation and a social enterprise. Our service-learning program, WE Schools, supports teachers’ efforts to help students become compassionate leaders and active citizens, empowering them to take action on the issues that matter most to them. Currently partnered with 18,000 schools and groups, we are engaging a new generation of service leaders and providing resources for a growing network of educators.

Our free and comprehensive library of lesson plans is designed to be adapted to meet the needs of any partner school, regardless of students’ grades, socioeconomic backgrounds, or learning challenges. Skills developed through the program also increases academic engagement and improves college and workplace readiness. Third-party impact studies show that alumni of the program are more likely to vote, volunteer and be socially engaged. Learn more at WE.org.
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Section 1: Opening
Indigenous youth are bright and resilient. Providing culturally relevant support for Indigenous students is an important step for all school staff including educators and school administrators. However, traditional trauma responsive approaches have been found to be unsuccessful for Indigenous students due to the colonial influence within trauma work itself being created from a westernized medical perspective. Colonial systems and worldviews are the source of intergenerational trauma for Indigenous people as a collective; therefore, how we approach trauma within education is critical when supporting Indigenous students.

This module is designed to share a different perspective on trauma informed practice approaches for supporting Indigenous students through the introduction of decolonizing trauma work. With a focus on Indigenous academic research and the importance of understanding our colonial history, this module provides tangible ways for educators to transform their teaching practices to support Indigenous students to succeed. Changing the way we think about trauma and focusing our efforts on community healing, identity and access to traditional healing methods, are shared pathways for Indigenous students to heal.

Further, this module is not only helpful for educators looking to support Indigenous students, but also for educators looking to decolonize their teaching practice to make space for holistic healing of students from a multitude of backgrounds.

Also included in this module are practical activities for personal and student reflection to incorporate Indigenous worldviews into your classroom.
“Every stage of childhood was a celebration because children needed to develop a sense of belonging; that sense that “You are important to the people.” [If] a child doesn’t have a sense of belonging and responsibility as part of the whole, that’s the weakness that will tear up a community. That’s the weakness that the child will have in later years, in times of great need or difficulty. In the old days they might have even had to put their life [on the line] to save another community member. There was a flawless bravery that children learned in the past. We needed that sense of togetherness and that sense of belonging to live in the “wilderness.” Everyone had to work together to survive. [And children needed to learn] that there was order! There were boundaries, and so as children grew they began to learn family law, and community law. That’s the kind of disciplines that I had to learn, belonging to the community.

Mosôm Danny Musqua (2011)
Key Terms

Colonization: The exploitation of people by a larger power. (Joseph, 2019) Colonization has caused multiple injuries to Indigenous people and therefore many Indigenous people have experienced or experience trauma in a multi-traumatic context, thus living with trauma is a common experience. In North America, colonization meant defining Indigenous peoples as savage, uncivilized and dangerous; banning Indigenous culture and aggressive assimilative laws, policies and practices.

Decolonization: Refers to activities that weaken the effects of colonialism, facilitate resistance and create opportunities to promote traditional practices in present-day settings. (Yellow Bird, 2022)

Ethno-stress: Refers to confusion and disruption that people were experiencing inside their world. Ethno-stress is experienced by communities who share a colonial history and are now experiencing severe stress. (Hill, 1992)

Turtle Island: Original name of ‘North America’ before colonial names such as Canada and United States were coined to enforce colonial borders.

Indigenous Worldview: Focus on a holistic understanding of the whole that emerged from the millennium of existence and experiences. Traditional Western worldviews tend to be more concerned with science and concentrate on compartmentalized knowledge and then focus on understanding the bigger, related picture. (ICT, 2016)

Medicine Wheel: Contemporary teaching tools that are used to explain concepts, philosophies and traditional teachings. By nature, they emphasize wholeness and balance. Historically, the concept of medicine wheels arose from sacred sites located throughout central North America, specifically Alberta, Saskatchewan, Montana, South Dakota and Wyoming. Many practitioners develop models that divide the medicine wheel into four quadrants. Sometimes these quadrants are used to represent the four directions: east, south, west and north; the four sacred medicines: tobacco, sage, sweetgrass and cedar; or the four aspects of the self: spirit, emotion or heart, mental or intellect and physical or body. (Linklater, 2014)

Blood Memory: A collection of memories we are born with. (Linklater, 2014)

Pathologize: To view or characterize as medically or psychologically abnormal. (Mills, 2022)
Historical Trauma vs. Western Trauma Ideology

To provide culturally safe care, we must first decolonize our understanding of trauma and how pathologizing the impact of colonization on an individual basis is harmful for Indigenous community members.

Trauma, as we know it, is a term that is rooted in Western medical psychiatry. The term itself is meant to pathologize an individual’s mental state and behavior to determine the correct form of treatment for recovery. The Western medical model focuses on mind and behavior, an empirical model of evidence based ‘proof’ and separates the mind and body as two entities of their own. This medical model focuses on illness. Trauma is seen as an individual experience that has led to mental illness. It is an individual’s reaction or response to an injury. As a result, courses of treatment for trauma diagnoses are focused on ridding the mind and body of illness through varied approaches to healing.

Indigenous concepts of wellness differ greatly from this approach to ‘trauma informed care’. Wellness philosophies are holistic in nature embodying the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions of a person to encompass their entire being. While the Western model defines trauma as a person’s reaction or response to an injury, Indigenous perspectives advocate that trauma is not a disorder but a reaction to a kind of wound (Burstow, 2003). While the medical model focuses on illness, Indigenous healing philosophies are based on a wellness model. Indigenous concepts of wellness promote balance between these four dimensions through relationships with others and our environment.

The colonization of Turtle Island has resulted in many Indigenous people having lived through or living with trauma for generations. Colonization has caused multiple injuries for Indigenous people, meaning trauma is a common experience. Trauma is intergenerational and cumulative – meaning that emotional and psychological wounds over time are transmitted from one generation to the next. (Linklater, 2014)

“As many as three to five generations removed from externally induced trauma, the great-great-grandchildren of those who were originally traumatized by patterns of historical events and are now being traumatized by patterns that continue to be recycled in the families and communities of today.” (Linklater, 2014)

In fact, genetic research shows that traumatization of a parent can be passed from one generation to another, to their children, through electro chemical processes in the brain. The neural organization of memory systems in the parent would then be present in the child (Wesley-Esquimaux, 2004). From an Indigenous perspective, this is referred to as blood memory, a collection of memories we are born with. (Wesley-Esquimaux, 2004)

Indigenous Trauma Theory

Understanding trauma within the context of colonization in North America is foundational when supporting Indigenous people on our healing journey. We simply cannot use terms, systems or structures that were designed to oppress Indigenous communities when trying to find pathways for healing. European colonization, and the Western ideologies within it, are the root cause of trauma for Indigenous people who continue to face high rates of homelessness, experiences with the child welfare system, involvement in the justice system, acts of violence, suicides, accidental deaths and pervasive use of drugs and alcohol. (Linklater, 2014)

European colonization took many forms throughout the course of history, however one of the most harmful practices were boarding and residential schools. These government and church led institutions, while called schools, were not used with good intent to educate Indigenous children. Instead, they forcefully removed children from their families, cultures, languages, skills and values with the sole purpose of attempting to “kill the Indian in the child” (Aguir, 2015). This left multiple generations of Indigenous people with an emotional legacy of shame, loss, self-hatred, diminished parenting skills and low self-esteem. Colonial violence continues to occur while using Western trauma terminology.
which, as outlined in the previous section, implies that the individual is responsible for their response to a traumatic experience. Instead, we must look to the larger systemic practices that are implemented at a state level that continue to traumatize Indigenous people. This critical anti-oppressive approach to student care will lead to treatment approaches that are better suited to take into consideration how Indigenous people experience trauma. (Aguiar, 2015)

Indigenous people have had healing practices, ceremonies and structures in place since time immemorial. Indigenous trauma theory began to arise in academia within Indigenous communities from Indigenous health care practitioners and community workers that integrated an understanding of the complex manifestation of multi-generational or intergenerational trauma. Indigenous trauma theory captures that trauma is personal, collective and historical. (Linklater, 2014)

Lakota social worker Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart developed theoretical constructs incorporating mass cumulative trauma and oppression from an Indigenous perspective in 1988. (Brave Heart, The return to the sacred path: Healing the historical trauma and historical unresolved grief response among the Lakota through psychoeducational group intervention, 1998) Brave Heart describes “cumulative trauma” and “historical trauma” as “collective or compounding emotional and psychic wounding over time, both over lifespan and across generations.” (Linklater, 2014) Historical trauma connects a number of behaviors in reaction to this type of wound including substance abuse, self-destructive behavior, suicidal thoughts and gestures, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, anger and difficulty expressing thoughts and emotions. (Brave Heart, The historical trauma among Natives and its relationship to substance abuse: A Lakota illustration, 2004)

Brave Heart provides a foundation of understanding to the impacts of colonization across generations and how they can manifest. This theory continued to grow as Indigenous researchers and social workers captured the various ways trauma is passed from one generation to another rather than limiting trauma diagnoses to post traumatic stress disorder.

The shared experience of European colonization among Indigenous people is a source of historical trauma, specifically the attack on traditional ceremonies and healing practices.

Colonization in Canada and the United States attacked traditional Indigenous worldviews through the implementation of residential and boarding schools, the banning of traditional ceremonies, implementation of laws such as the Indian Act and violent acts of genocide. The United States government prohibited traditional spiritual practices from 1883 and 1940. It wasn’t until 1978, when the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed, which allowed Indigenous people to practice traditional ceremonies. (Linklater, 2014) Similarly in Canada, an amendment to the Indian Act in 1884 prohibited the “potlatch” and expanded to include Indian dances and ceremonies where gifts were given in 1985. (Linklater, 2014) This colonial oppression caused great harm to the transmission of knowledge within Indigenous communities and disrupted traditional practices to maintain balance and wellness linking back to the behaviors associated with historical trauma listed above.
Healing in the Classroom

Western approaches to healing westernized medical diagnoses do not always serve Indigenous people in the best way. So how do we best integrate opportunities to heal historical trauma in a classroom setting with students? In this section, we will explore ways that you can facilitate opportunities for healing in your classroom.

Sharing knowledge is a powerful form of healing that Indigenous people have been practicing resiliently since time immemorial. As an educator, this may be role-modeled in your classroom.

Though, how we share knowledge matters and can be a powerful tool to decolonize classrooms. But how?

1. Understand that the classroom hasn’t always been a safe place for the ancestors of your students.

Residential and boarding schools strategically implemented tactics of cultural genocide to the children who attended them. The conditions that children were forced to endure were not comparable to the experience non-Indigenous students had in government run schools. Indigenous children who attended these schools faced incredible hardships and even death. The legacy of these experiences continues to influence historical trauma in Indigenous communities. It is important to be aware of this when holding a position of power in a colonially influenced education system.

2. Reflect on your position in the settler Indigenous relationship (power and privilege).

Understanding your own identity and how it influences your power and privilege in the classroom is important self-reflection work for any educator. A reflection activity is provided in this module to support you in analyzing your position within these complex relationships.

3. Make space for Indigenous knowledge to be shared from Indigenous people in your classroom.

No one is expecting you to know everything. In fact, when supporting Indigenous students to reconnect with their culture, your role as an educator is a very important one. Use your position of power and your available resources to:

- Invite Indigenous knowledge holders, elders and storytellers into your classroom
- Bring an anti-oppressive lens to choosing your texts and learning materials to ensure that there are Indigenous perspectives present
- Together, with your students, use a critical lens in comparing perspectives from Indigenous and Western cultures to analyze how different worldviews are represented

4. Rethink your class seating plan.

Indigenous worldview operates relationally. No one relation or being is more important than another. As a result, coming together in a circle provides the opportunity for everyone to be heard equally, without one voice being more valuable than another. Traditional westernized teaching practices have students sitting in linear seating plans, often isolated from peers. This type of classroom environment does not reflect circular or relational perspectives and can evoke an intergenerational trauma trigger to past harmful school experiences. Examine your class seating plan; you can deconstruct colonial pedagogy and outdated methods to distributing knowledge by reconfiguring your seating plan to encourage equity in the classroom. This is a powerful way to decolonize your space and make it more welcoming for Indigenous students.

5. Reflect on how you approach challenges with student success (strength based).

There are many cultural differences that Indigenous students must translate within Western education systems to be “successful”. This is an additional step that the peers of Indigenous students do not undertake. When supporting Indigenous students to be successful, our education team must understand the challenges that Indigenous students overcome just to walk through the classroom door each morning. Ensuring that we are coming from a strengths-based perspective with supporting the resiliency of Indigenous youth in their education journey is important when empowering them to succeed. This can be as simple as saying “Thank you for showing up today, I know how hard that must have been for you” when a student walks in late instead of penalizing them, further diminishing their self-esteem.
6. Provide ways for your students to nourish their entire beings in the classroom – their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual selves to come back into balance to achieve wellness.

Western models of education focus heavily on the mental dimension in measuring student success. If we incorporate Indigenous wellness models into our classrooms, we begin to see that we must nourish all parts of our students to support them well on their journey. When focusing on historical trauma experienced by Indigenous students, reclamation of culture and identity is the most powerful healing pathway for students. When students strengthen their identity in relation to their community, we see increased positive outcomes. Finding avenues for Indigenous students to practice prayer, spiritual connections, experience love in relation to their community and build positive relationships, are ways that an educator can create space for Indigenous students to heal from historical trauma and reclaim the traditional wellness practices of their ancestors.
Section 2: Educator Activities
**EDUCATOR ACTIVITIES**

Activity 1: Educator Reflection Journal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How does this module make you feel as an educator? Provide an honest reflection of the emotions that came up for you. Where do you think they are coming from?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do you identify? (Example: I am a white, middle class woman from Nebraska). How does the history of Indigenous people where you are from interact with your identity? What implications arise for you in the classroom setting?</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>How does your identity influence how you teach?</th>
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What are some things that may not serve Indigenous students experiencing trauma in your classroom or school?

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How does this knowledge impact your role as an educator?

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What are three steps you are going to take to decolonize your classroom?

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## EDUCATOR ACTIVITIES

### Comparing Common Worldviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Dominant Worldview Manifestations</th>
<th>Common Indigenous Worldview Manifestations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rigid hierarchy</td>
<td>Non-hierarchical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear-based thoughts and behaviors</td>
<td>Courage and fearless trust in the universe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living without strong social purpose</td>
<td>Socially purposeful life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on self and personal gain</td>
<td>Emphasis on community welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigid gender roles</td>
<td>Respect for various gender roles and fluidity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materialistic</td>
<td>Non-materialistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earth as an unloving &quot;it&quot;</td>
<td>Earth and all systems as living and loving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More head than heart</td>
<td>Emphasis on heart over head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive to feel superior</td>
<td>Competition to develop positive potential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal empathy, humility and gratitude</td>
<td>Strong emphasis on empathy, humility and gratitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth as absolute</td>
<td>Truth is multifaceted, accepting and mysterious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigid boundaries and fragmented systems</td>
<td>Flexible boundaries and interconnected systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disbelief in spiritual energies</td>
<td>Recognition of spiritual energies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on theory</td>
<td>Inseparability of knowledge and action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time is linear</td>
<td>Time is cyclical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on rights</td>
<td>Emphasis on responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning is fragmented and theoretical</td>
<td>Learning is holistic and place based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social laws of society are primary</td>
<td>Laws of nature are primary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Worldview content shared in: Topa (Four Arrows), 2022
Section 3: Classroom Activities
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: Indigenizing Classroom Values

Values describe what is important to us. By incorporating an Indigenous worldview in balancing how our values connect to the values of our community, this activity can be practiced individually with your students, or together as a group.

**Step 1:**
Reflect on your own values. What matters most to you? Sometimes it is helpful to think of what qualities are most important to you in a friend or someone special to you. In the “My Values” section of the medicine wheel, record your values.

Value statements to consider are:
- I value loyalty
- I value spending time with people over having “things”
- I value few strong friendships versus many superficial friendships
- I value honesty
- I value humility
- It is important to me to have creativity in my life
- I value justice and fairness
- I value being challenged in my work
- I value equality and hearing what everyone has to say
- Balance is important to me
- I value spending time outside on the land

**Step 2:**
Reflect on the values of the people in your community and how they might have influenced you. How do these values keep you accountable? It is sometimes helpful to think of a family member or loved one that you feel accountable to.

Record your thoughts in the section titled “My Community’s Values”. Some community values to consider are:
- We value being prompt and punctual
- We value following through on a promise
- We value humor
- We value spending time together
- We value sharing a meal together
- We value being appreciated by others for our hard work
- We value our community
- We value respect

**Step 3:**
Now look at both of the spaces in the medicine wheel you have filled in. As a group, compile overlapping values from “My Values” and “My Community’s Values” into “Our Class Values” section of the medicine wheel. Post in the classroom as a physical representation of the communities coming together to learn and the values they each hold.

Debrief: How do these values overlap? Are there similarities between your values and the values of your community? If doing this as a class exercise, have students reflect on the importance of how community influences their values and how that makes up their identity. How can we create more opportunities for each student to represent their community?
Values Medicine Wheel

My Values

Family Values

Community Values

Class Values
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Activity 2: Tree of Me

Seeing ourselves in relation to others around us helps us build our support systems, community and wellness strategies.

Have students draw their hand, including their wrist on a piece of paper. Their hand will represent a tree, so students can explore their creative abilities turning their hand into a tree.

Next, have students write “I am supported by” on the wrist or trunk of their tree. In this section, we encourage conversation about support systems, and specifically with Indigenous students, access to ceremony, traditional ways of being, knowledge keepers, elders, etc.

If students cannot identify these cultural supports, you can connect them with community resources to access these things.

In the palm, students will write “I am grateful for” and draw or write things they are grateful for. For Indigenous students, this will give you an idea as their educator how you can incorporate more of what they value or what they need to succeed.

The fingers will include “I love” statements. This is an opportunity for students to share their interests. For Indigenous students, this is a way for educators to understand what aspects can be incorporated into a strengths-based approach to teaching. Taking it a step further, educators will have further insight on what motivates their students to succeed.

Leaves will represent “I am” statements. This is an opportunity to lead students through all their dimensions. Consider the Indigenous wellness model of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.

Explore descriptive words that fall within these dimensions to help students explore all the ways they present to the world and how to best care for them.
Tree of Me
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Activity 3: Decolonizing Our Worldview

Decolonizing the way we think takes practice. It is important that as allies, educators and peers of Indigenous students, we are aware of how worldviews differ so we can bring a critical anti-oppressive lens into the classroom.

**Group Activity 1**
Referencing the chart on page 15, apply the dominant worldview to current classroom learning practices. Do these statements align with students’ experiences? Do they align with the experiences and expectations of educators? Record your answers as a group by providing examples on sticky notes attached to the chart.

**Group Activity 2**
Next, explore the Indigenous worldview manifestations in relation to classroom learning practices. Do the statements align with students’ experiences? Do they align with the experiences and expectations of educators? Record your answers as a group by providing examples on sticky notes to the chart.

**Group Activity 3**
Debrief: Finding the balance. How as a class can we work with both worldviews to create an environment in the classroom that supports us all? What worldview statements are most inclusive? What worldview statements provide space for anti-oppressive learning?
Section 4: References
Recommended Reading List and Resources

**Books**


**Online Resources**


[https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4866.pdf](https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4866.pdf)


[https://www.a7g.ca/uploads/9/9/18202/79005_braiding_grassroots_wisdom_v3f.pdf?mc_cid=9b6c48795c&mc_eid=510c65357c](https://www.a7g.ca/uploads/9/9/18202/79005_braiding_grassroots_wisdom_v3f.pdf?mc_cid=9b6c48795c&mc_eid=510c65357c)


**Works Cited**


