

Honoring Indigenous Communities

SEL FOCUS: SOCIAL AWARENESS

Story: “Defining My Indigenous Culture for Myself and Others” by Liza Tuyuc

Story Summary: After feeling removed from her cultural roots, Liza goes on a journey in understanding her Indigenous identity.

Note: This is a two-day session. The first day focuses on the experience of the writer. The second day helps build group members’ knowledge of Indigenous peoples. The teen-written story and the activities on both days may contain vocabulary or require background knowledge with which your students are unfamiliar. Read the session plan and story carefully, and assess for any pre-work that would benefit your students’ understanding and engagement with the material.

Learning Objectives

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Defining “Indigenous peoples”
- Understanding the impact of systems on individuals
- Understanding one young Indigenous person’s perspective on her culture and how she is treated
- Learning about the cultures of Indigenous peoples outside the U.S.

Youth will increase their literacy by:

- Making meaning of text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Speaking ideas clearly and actively listening during collaborative discussions
- Responding thoughtfully to, and seeking to understand, diverse perspectives
- Using Internet sources to conduct research

Materials

- Session agenda posted
- Chart paper
- Pens, pencils, or markers
- Laptops or phones (for research activity)

Preparation

- Read the story ahead of time. Reflect on your personal response and how the group may respond.
- Read the session plan and prepare the agenda.
- Make copies of the teen-written story, one per group member.
- Prepare chart paper with the directions for Day 1’s Opening Activity **(in bold)**.
- Prepare chart paper with names of Indigenous cultures for Day 2’s Explore the Ideas Activity **(in bold)**.
- Prepare chart paper with the list of the Indigenous cultures groups will be researching for Day 2’s Explore the Ideas Activity **(in bold)**.

This lesson follows the same principles of Youth Communication’s SEL curricula, including *All In: Advocating for Yourself and Others in a Diverse World*. For more information, or to request a sample, please email Francisco Cruz at fcruz@youthcomm.org.

DAY 1: GETTING STARTED

(5 mins)

Formally welcoming group members and reviewing the agenda will let them know that the lesson is starting and what to expect.

1. Welcome everyone and invite group members to check in with each other through whole-group sharing or a brief Pair Share.
2. Review the Group Agreements, if any.
3. Preview the agenda:

Honoring Indigenous Communities**Day 1**

- Opening Activity: Concentric Circles
- Read and Discuss: "Defining My Indigenous Culture for Myself and Others" by Liza Tuyuc
- Closing Circle

Day 2

- Explore the Ideas Activity: Group Research
- Closing Circle

DAY 1: OPENING ACTIVITY

(15 mins)

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, tell the group that they are going to do an activity during which they will share their opinions with others.
2. While the group is seated, read aloud the activity procedure you wrote on chart paper:
 - "You will form two standing circles, one inside the other."

- "Each person will be facing a partner."
 - "I will read questions aloud and everyone will have a chance to respond while their partner listens."
3. Divide group members into two equal groups. One way to do this is to have group members count off by twos. (If you don't have two equal groups, you can join one.)
 4. Have the 1s stand and move into the open space you cleared and form a circle facing outward.
 5. Have the 2s stand and form a second circle around the first one, facing inward.
 6. Then explain to the group that the person they're facing will be their first partner
 7. Review the specific steps of the activity with the group (you may wish to write these steps on chart paper for group members' reference):

- **You will take turns responding to a question or prompt that I ask.**
 - **When one person speaks, the other listens.**
 - **When I say, "Switch," the speaker and the listener switch roles.**
 - **When time is up, I will ask one circle to rotate and everyone will have a new partner.**
8. Have partners greet each other by shaking hands and saying "Hello."
 9. Ask the group:
 - "How do you celebrate your culture? How does it feel to celebrate your culture?"

10. After both partners have answered the question, ask the inside circle to move one space to the right while the outside circle stands still. When new pairs form, have group members greet their new partners.
11. Time permitting, repeat the process using these prompts:
 - “Describe a time when your culture or background was taught in your school. How was it honored and celebrated? How did it make you feel?”
 - “Indigenous peoples are culturally distinct people who share ancestral ties to the lands where they live or from which they have been displaced by colonization. What have you learned about Indigenous peoples in the world?”
 - “Has what you’ve learned about Indigenous peoples in the world focused on their own stories and strengths or mainly how they were conquered and colonized? Why?”
 - “How do you think it would make an Indigenous person feel to learn positive lessons about themselves and their cultures in school?”
12. Have everyone return to their seats and thank group members for sharing.

DAY 1: READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY (25 mins)

By practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing as a group, group members build comprehension and support fluency.

- 1. Introduce the story.** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young person who learns about and reflects on her Indigenous identity.
- 2. Set expectations for reading the story.** Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it’s their turn.
- 3. Read and discuss the story on page 4 together.** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text. Ask the group this question and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.

Defining My Indigenous Culture for Myself and Others

By Liza Tuyuc

“I’m not Latina, I’m Indigenous,” I tentatively said to my good friend, Wena, one early winter morning before school started. I was in 10th grade, and we had just finished sweeping the stage floor with two other classmates as part of our technical crew duties. This was a volunteer position where we served as the backstage workers in anything related to school performances.

Waking up annoyingly early rewarded us with the temporary tranquility of the auditorium, not yet bombarded with the chaos that only high schoolers can produce. Sitting on the stage behind the stage curtains before the rest of school poured into the auditorium for morning announcements was a perfect place to confide tender secrets.

Plus, Wena was a trusted friend and I had been feeling uncomfortable for a while now about being misidentified. I tossed the idea around in my mind, of being Indigenous, yet never talked about it with any of my friends. So I chose to keep this discomfort to myself. Until now.

“What is that? Like, you’re Native American?” she asked, looking confused.

“I suppose I’m Native American, except from a different part of the world.” I had no idea of the answer.

As someone who couldn’t even spell out the Indigenous group I come from, “Kaqchikel,” (Kaq-CHI-Kel), who couldn’t point to Guatemala on a world map, and who couldn’t even define “Indigenous” without a dictionary, who was I to correct her?

As the students poured into the auditorium, the loud roars of chatter failed to wash away the brewing shame and sadness that I felt. A question echoed in my mind, “Who am I?”

Later that day, while I sat with my parents and siblings eating beans with tortillas at our table covered in colorful textiles, I wondered what Kaqchikel culture is, and what the difference is between Native American and Indigenous? Unfortunately, our identity was not a topic we discussed. My parents had never even told me about our heritage.

Was I somehow also less Kaqchikel for being born in America? Do I still call myself Latina? This confusion was something I had to resolve on my own.

READ-ALOUD
QUESTION

Although Liza knew it was important to let her friend know she was misidentifying her, this conversation brought up even more questions and concerns. What are some of Liza’s insecurities around her identity? Where do they come from?

Knowing I was Indigenous was a difficult subject to contemplate as a high schooler. The dictionary describes Indigenous as “originating or occurring naturally in a particular place.” Yet this didn’t make sense to me, a first gen kid. My parents were born in the homeland, Guatemala, but I was not. Originating from a particular place: the complete opposite of my existence. A diasporic Indigenous person. Both a juxtaposition and a question.

My knowledge of Indigenous groups was limited. In kindergarten, the teachers dressed us up in Pilgrim hats and feathers on Thanksgiving. In 5th grade, we had a small unit in social studies class squeezed in at the end of the year when no one paid attention to class anymore. We were taught of only the “ancient” groups, lumping together Mayans, Incas, and Aztecs into one pot of myths and assumptions that they were extinct.

In 10th grade global history, we repeated the cycle again, squeezing in the Mayans, Incas, and Aztecs at the end of the year with lazy presentations summarizing ancient history. Yet we were never told that these civilizations were Indigenous, too.

This lack of a more detailed and accurate history in school and everywhere else made me feel that I didn't exist. I yearned to learn more. I couldn't accept that my culture's history consisted solely of bloody sacrifices shown in National Geographic, or conspiracy theory documentaries from the History Channel of how aliens built the pyramids. Or that Indigenous groups seemingly disappeared after colonization in the Americas, mostly by the Spanish conquistadores. Or once existing in vast cities and societies, only to be dominated by better armed explorers.

Throughout 10th grade, I Googled keywords like "Mayan" and "Guatemalan" and started to learn what I wasn't being taught in school. The Maya civilization was not a single civilization at all, but instead a series of city-states with various languages scattered across Central America. These Indigenous groups actually did not just disappear after Columbus, but remained in their homelands despite being put under Spanish rule, and later as the region developed into the different Central American countries throughout the 1800s.

Today there are over 20 Mayan languages and groups, one of them being mine—Kaqchikel. Kaqchikel people typically originate from the highlands of Guatemala. Interestingly, Guatemala is mostly Indigenous people; an estimated 60 percent or more of the total population is Indigenous.

READ-ALoud
QUESTION

How did a lack of indigenous representation make Liza feel? How do you think Liza would have felt if her school had included her culture in the curriculum?

I was fortunate to be able to visit family that summer.

An exhausting plane ride to Guatemala couldn't stop my grin as I got off the plane and was surrounded by people who looked like me: same skin, same nose. Instead, I was the outsider for wearing t-shirts, as so many people wore their indumentarias: colorful rectangular blouses and long skirts (cortes), secured with a faja (belt) wrapped tightly around the waist.

No one ever sat me down and lectured me with PowerPoint. An accurate history textbook never arrived in the mail. Instead, bits and pieces of an accurate history about my people gradually came out by being immersed in the culture and the country.

My abuela would nod as my relatives teased each other in Kaqchikel. "Chan chik" they would say as a goodbye and "matyox" as thank you while passing the dinner plates. Still, these phrases were rare as only my grandparents spoke fluent Kaqchikel. My abuelo refused to teach his children when they were young because of stigmas that made knowing Kaqchikel shameful.

There is an idea in my culture called "mejorar la raza" or "improve the race," which is understood to mean being closer to whiteness, which is associated with many things: beauty, wealth, privilege. Opposing ideas are applied to indigeneity: ugliness, poverty, suffering.

Speaking Spanish instead of Kaqchikel is part of this denial of our heritage. Allowing the language to die out can bring us one step closer to "improving" our blood and bringing us closer to the "superior race." This belief is one example of the rampant internalized racism within the Kaqchikel and Maya communities of Central America.

Learning this made it easier to understand why I was never told of my heritage. Self-deprecating comments about our tan skin and teasing

young cousins to marry white people are other examples of how this shame manifested itself.

Still, the small hints of Kaqchikel that were spoken in my family served as welcome evidence that we are an Indigenous family.

READ-ALoud
QUESTION

Liza reflects on the phrase “mejorar la raza” or “improve the race.” How has this phrase affected how her family members see their Indigenous roots?

Every day that summer, my tias (aunts) dressed up in indumentaria. When we went to a local beauty pageant for Mayan women, I wore my first indumentaria. It was a yellow outfit embroidered with birds, borrowed from a tia. It was a bit big on me but I didn't care. The night was cold and my legs were freezing, my waist hurt from the faja (belt) pulled too tight. Yet as my outfit matched the models on stage, I felt powerful and beautiful. I had a sensation of belonging, as wearing indumentaria is one of the clearest indicators of an Indigenous identity.

I worked as an English teacher volunteer at my uncle's school. When I was free, I subtly listened to my uncle's classes and filled my notebooks with pages of notes in the Kaqchikel language.

I took marimba lessons, happily playing Guatemalan folk music as the mallets hit wooden panels. An instrument originating from Africa, marimba was adopted by Guatemala and used to create various folk songs. “Yo soy puro Guatemalteco” one song goes, “I'm pure Guatemalan.” As I played these songs, I felt pride in being able to create something directly related to my culture: music.

Culture is an experience. It's language, food, music. My attempts to define what being Indigenous meant was in part an attempt to become Kaqchikel. I prayed that if I knew the answer, I would immediately know how I could be Indigenous. But this immersion didn't make me Kaqchikel, it made me aware that I am Kaqchikel.

I didn't wear corte all the time. I am rusty at marimba, and both my Spanish and Kaqchikel skills are spotty enough to make the Duolingo bird cry. Still, these experiences connected me with my heritage and taught me that I don't need to prove my ethnicity to others.

READ-ALoud
QUESTION

How important are clothing, food, and language when it comes to culture? How are they more affirming than what Liza was taught—or not taught—in school?

Visiting my homeland felt like coming home. Saying "I'm Kaqchikel" suddenly had more meaning, as I finally understood what that entails: the music, the culture, the history, and the struggles. But I only felt comfortable sharing all I had learned with Wena, teaching her how to pronounce Kaqchikel, mentioning that I no longer wanted to be called Latina.

My senior year of high school, one warm spring afternoon, I walked with friends down a busy street in Flushing, Queens, seeking a store with air conditioning. We chatted about the food sold on the streets compared with the dishes we ate at home.

Then: "Liza, you're Native American aren't you?"

I froze up. Years of accepting people's assumptions was a habit I hadn't broken, even though I now took pride in knowing so much more about my roots. Self-doubt was a familiar companion of mine and she sat on my shoulder once more.

Behind me popped up my friend from the stage: Wena spoke up for me. "No, she's not Native, she's Indigenous actually. Kaqchikel to be specific."

I walked ahead, overhearing the other friend say, "Oh really?"

“They’re not the same,” Wena explained further.

The moment of clarity was greatly appreciated and felt like a milestone in my journey to reclaim my heritage and roots. Of course, there is still work to be done: dismantling the internalized racist ideologies within my family, becoming comfortable in establishing my identity by myself, and continuing my own studies of Kaqchikel culture and history.

I still wrestle with the feeling of being “less Indigenous” because the phrase “first-generation” Kaqchikel feels like a contradiction. “Indigenous” is defined as originating in a certain place. Belonging to the land. An awkward juxtaposition: belonging to a land that has never claimed me. Still, despite the world’s attempts to erase my heritage, I instead grab it, holding it close to my heart.

READ-ALOUD
QUESTION

How does Liza’s journey remind us that our identities are complex, and understanding them is a lifelong process?

A first-gen Kaqchikel activist and creative, Liza finds power through personal stories. She currently attends Queens College through the Macaulay Honors Program, studying English, Media Studies, and Business. When she isn’t writing for organizations such as Youth Communication (the publisher of this story) or The Meraki Story (an online publication that amplifies the stories and works of women, femmes, and non-binary folxs), Liza can be found baking cakes or tending to a small army of plants.

DAY 1: CLOSING CIRCLE (5 mins)

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

1. "What stood out for you in Liza's story, 'Defining My Indigenous Culture for Myself and Others,' and our activities today?"
2. Finish this sentence: "Learning and celebrating our own cultures is important because..."

DAY 2: EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY (40 mins)

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

1. Introduce the next activity by saying to the group:
2. "In the previous session, we read a story by a young Indigenous person who learned about and reflected on her Indigenous identity. Today, we're going to do some research about other Indigenous communities around the world."
3. Show group members a prepared chart paper with names of Indigenous groups from around the world:
 - **Amhara**
 - **Mayan**
 - **Taíno**
 - **Yora**
 - **Atayal**
 - **Adivasi**
 - **Inuit**

4. Divide the group into groups of three or four and assign each group one of the indigenous groups listed on the chart paper.

5. Explain that each group will research a Indigenous groups by finding:

- **Original location of Indigenous group**
- **Examples of the food they eat**
- **Description of their clothing**
- **Language(s) used**
- **Music, dances, and other art forms common to the group**

6. Pass out laptops, and/or let students use their phones for research purposes.

7. Give group members 25 minutes to research the culture of the Indigenous group they were given. As they work, circulate and make sure to help groups that may need support.

8. After 25 minutes, bring everyone back to the group. Ask groups to share one new thing the group learned from their research.

9. Thank group members for sharing.

DAY 2: CLOSING CIRCLE (5 mins)

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to this prompt:

Finish this sentence: "One thing I learned about Indigenous peoples around the world is..."

WRITING EXTENSION

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives students the opportunity to share their point of view and provides additional literacy practice.

Write a proposal to your school arguing for the importance of learning about more Indigenous communities in the world.

Include what you think the current problem is with how the school teaches—or doesn't teach—about Indigenous peoples, a thorough description of your suggested solution, and the impact your proposal will have.

Give examples from the story and activities about why it is important to learn about other cultures, specifically about Indigenous cultures.

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- Over the course of this two-day session, the group read and discussed a story by a young person who was able to develop a better understanding of her Indigenous identity. How did the group respond to hearing the experience of an Indigenous person outside of America? How did the group research help members learn about cultures they may not have known about?
- How are you making sure that Indigenous people are highlighted in your work with young people? What can you do to make sure that honoring Indigenous cultures isn't just a one-off event or a history of their colonization?