

Healing Roots of Racism and Creating New Narratives for Healing: The StoryWork Project

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**HEALTHY
start**
TA & SUPPORT CENTER

NICHQ
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I. Background

The Supporting Healthy Start Performance Project (SHSPP) assists 101 Healthy Start (HS) grant recipients (grantees) across the nation who represent an interdisciplinary workforce and community leaders aimed at improving Maternal and Child Health (MCH) outcomes. The HS Program provides grants to communities with infant mortality rates at least 1.5 times the U.S. national average and high rates of other adverse perinatal outcomes (e.g., low birthweight, preterm birth, maternal morbidity, and mortality). HS works to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in maternal and infant health outcomes. To support these 101 HS programs and communities, SHSPP's Technical Assistance (TA) and Support Center (TASC) at NICHQ provides capacity building assistance (CBA), including ongoing TA, training, and education to HS grantees.

On this project, the TASC worked in partnership with Dr. Janelle Palacios, Founder and Director of Encoded 4 Story. At the intersection of history, storytelling and maternal/child outcomes is Encoded 4 Story, an immersive opportunity helping individuals and organizations draw forward their story for greater health equity. Fellow story strategists along with Encoded 4 Story founder, Janelle Palacios, guide participants through history and StoryWork, to tell their and their community's stories to change hearts, minds and actions for thriving individual, family, and community health.

II. StoryWork Project Components

COMMUNITY BUILDING

Building community is essential in order to write deeply moving and engaging stories. Participants must feel comfortable — for sharing their own story is a sacred and revealing act. Three general activities are employed to cultivate group cohesion and bonding. First, group Touchstones are discussed and provide ground rules for entering this sacred space. Second, different grounding exercises help ease transitions between emotionally charged content. Finally, entertaining activities help speedily create bonds and stimulate creative processes.

STORY SCIENCE

Participants learned how the ancient art of storytelling creates meaning, understanding, provides a venue for learning, and how storytelling can be a transformative catalyst for change.

INTRODUCTION

The StoryWork Project was hosted by the Healthy Start Technical Assistance & Support Center (TASC), and designed in partnership, and led by nurse midwife, researcher and storyteller, Dr. Janelle Palacios. The StoryWork Project is a novel project that aims to provide Healthy Start staff with an increased knowledge of US-based Indigenous histories and an increased awareness of how historical policies have shaped and continue to shape American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) outcomes, while integrating the latest research on storytelling affecting health outcomes and changing policies and practices.

The overarching goal of the StoryWork Project was to create an increased readiness among diverse MCH leaders to shift narratives that are strength-based at the intersection of history and storytelling in order to authentically engage with families and communities on a journey of healing and repairing, affecting MCH outcomes.

Storytelling is an ancient form of learning and communicating. Science is just now catching up to what many cultures and communities understood, that stories have the power to change hearts, minds and actions.

The StoryWork Project works with participants to reveal how a Western dominated cultural perspective has historically shaped values, practices, and policies throughout the US, framing BiPOC health in a deficit-based framework, with an emphasis on AI/AN history and maternal/child outcomes.

Through participation in the StoryWork Project, participants focus on integrating history to gain a deeper understanding of current and ongoing maternal and child health (MCH) outcomes and processes by exploring the roots of racism and identifying how structural racism has permeated policies and practices affecting outcomes, while integrating these learnings to identify new positive narratives that center family and community, through the healing art of storytelling.



COMMUNITY BUILDING

INDIVIDUAL STORYTELLING

There are two forms of individual storytelling that participants learn. Participants learn how to tell a concise story of a moment through a strategy known as a "Six word story" and participants learn how to expand on this moment to tell a personal compelling story that has shaped them knowing as a "Personal Anchor Story".

Participants crafted and told stories connected with prompts such as "I knew this was the work I was meant to do," and "I felt visible in the world I do..." Or "I knew I could make a real difference..."

LEARN YOUR HISTORY

By providing a brief review of world history, American Indian history within the United States, and a synopsis of contemporary issues, participants are able to see how systemic racism has infused US and State policies affecting AI/AN people and communities.

COMMUNITY ANCHOR STORY

The culminating storytelling product was a three to five-minute narrated Community Anchor Story. This Community Anchor Story incorporated the historical research the participants gathered throughout the project on their Healthy Start program and the surrounding AI/AN community.

III. Case Study

STAR STORYWORK PARTICIPANT

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Scan this QR code for more information about Devin's work

"It was an honor to participate in the StoryWork Project (SWP). This opportunity has enlightened my journey as an advocate for the Indigenous Healthy Start communities in Michigan. It was through the SWP storytelling process that I was able to obtain a greater understanding of the consequence of the historical events, treatment and experience of our AI/AN ancestors... Not only have I learned the structure of the storytelling process, I have gained skills that have allowed me to grow as a person.

There is an element of trust that exists in storytelling... almost a sacred joining of people who gather to share their own story and listen without judgement of others' stories.

There is no doubt in my mind that I will incorporate the tools that I have learned in this StoryWork Project! I believe that this work is lifechanging and there is a great opportunity to heal our Indigenous community through the cultural practice weaved throughout our history which is Storytelling.

I believe that the Creator placed me into this project for the chance to exam my past life experiences that made me into the person that I am today. As a 53-year-old Anish woman, I was very surprised that I was able to trust and share a vulnerable story that has never been shared with anyone.

The StoryWork process develops the opportunity to share in a safe space and without judgement. I would absolutely recommend all Healthy Start Grantees to attend StoryWork Project. By completing this project, I have gained valuable tools that will impact my ability to gather the stories and experiences of the people we serve."

IV. Conclusion

The StoryWork Project and its focus on community building and storytelling, individual storytelling, story science, and historical grounding; builds upon our innate ability to employ storytelling to both understand and learn.

The StoryWork Project demonstrated how the intersection between history and storytelling has the power to make systemic policies and practices more visible such that they are not forgotten but rather acted upon for the better.

This aspect is critical to ensuring that US-based Indigenous histories are not forgotten and rather held in action and reflection to create better maternal and child health outcomes for AI/AN families.

The StoryWork Project participants journeyed through this work together and held space for each other to process this history, to ground themselves in their own stories, and to gain a deeper understanding of the story of their communities.

"The StoryWork Project is an act of resilience and resistance that can change maternal and child health outcomes."

Dr. Janelle Palacios

