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Mindy Wisman: Hello and welcome to Working Well, a podcast series with a diverse group of educators from across the country discussing how to improve the wellbeing of the workforce. I'm Mindy Wisman with the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments or NCSSE.

In this episode, NCSSE training specialist, Melanie Goodman, speaks with Elvina Charley, school psychologist for the Kayenta Unified School District of the Navajo Nation of Northeastern Arizona. They discuss her journey to become a school psychologist, the importance of having a bilingual Navajo psychologist in the Navajo school system and incorporating mindfulness into her work with students and staff. But they began their conversation talking about her family and cultural history.

Elvina Charley: So I am Elvina Charley, Elvina Charley [foreign language]. So, it is customary a traditional way to be able to introduce yourself with your four clans. As Dine' people, we are a matrilineal society. The first clan is our mother's clan, and then our second clan is our father's clan. The translation for the two first clans, my mother's clan is Zuni-Edgewater, and my father's clan is the Red Street People.

Originally, I was born and raised in Chinle, Arizona, which is the central part of the Navajo Reservation. Our land exceeds three states, and so in those three states, we are on our traditional territory, which the Navajo people have been blessed to have our ancestors be able to advocate for us to return.

When they were taken from this region by Kit Carson, they're in the encampment of our Navajo people. I believe it was 1864 to 1868. That is a traumatic event in which we were forced from our lands. We were forced into Bosque Redondo, where we were, our ancestors were kept as an encampment, were prisoners, essentially.

During that time, our courageous chiefs and leaders negotiated our returned back to our land. We refer to that encampment as [foreign language], and that's referred to as a place of suffering. That is a part of our history as Dine' people, and we continue to heal from those historical traumas that have been imposed upon us. We have found a way, essentially, to live in both worlds.

As a school psychologist, being bilingual as well as I was raised by my grandmother who did not have a day of education in her life. She was a caretaker in her family, [foreign language], Margie Gorman; and then my great-grandmother, [foreign language], Helen Walker; and my great-grandfather, Raymond Walker.

With that upbringing, being able to be raised by such strong women, because my mother was also trying to navigate the two worlds, and so as a young mother, she gave me to my grandmother, and my grandmother raised me. She provided that real strong foundation for me in that language. I didn't recognize it 'til later, but truly is a deep blessing.

I'm forever grateful to my mother and her strength and resilience to be able to do a selfless thing like that. My mother is Alice Gilbert, and she's also a special ed teacher for over 35 years. She just retired in the midst of COVID. She taught at Seba Dalkai boarding school, which is one of the government boarding schools that continue to be here on the reservation, and that's propelled me on my journey to be able to be accessible within the schools as a school psychologist.

Melanie Goodman: How is it that you decided to become a school psychologist?

Elvina Charley: In the midst of my struggles as a teenager, trying to navigate life and coming to the understanding of what education is going to do for me or how it's going to benefit me, I guess I really struggle with the identity part. I remember my grandmother coming to school. I remember her coming to my class, and then I remember the students vividly snickering, and she was dressed in her traditional attire.

She always wore Navajo skirts. She always had a bun. She was just the perfect image of a Dine' woman, and just remembering the shame I felt, even though it was a predominantly Navajo reservation school, a public school on the reservation, there was still that sense of shame.

When I entered kindergarten as well, my first language was Navajo. I spoke broken English, and so just the beginning of my educational experience and just that Western's education way of saying, "You're not good enough." So, that story really propelled me. Well, education's here to stay.

My great grandma's actually, she worked for the VIA system as well. She worked as a door maid, and she worked different aspects in the VIA government, but she's always told us that you do need to get education. So, we knew education was important, and then also from my grandma, she was a caretaker and helped her parents being able to take care of her sibling, "Having that, I didn't go to school, you need to do this."

It's hard not having an education to support yourself. Think having a combination of those life experience and then coming to high school and realizing that I'm not learning anything. In high school, you're dealing with identity, you're dealing with peer pressure, you're dealing with family drama, and just different aspects that you're navigating.

So, in my junior year, I realized that I didn't learn anything in my high school and that I really needed to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I made up my mind, I'm going to go to school and I'm going to help kids. At that time, I was using drugs. I was abusing alcohol. At some point, and just really those emotions you have when you're kind of a teenager and trying to really understand who you are, not having anybody really in the school to understand.

Melanie Goodman: So, there was no school psychologist in that school system.

Elvina Charley: There was no school psychologist. There was a social worker and there was a counselor but-

Melanie Goodman: But not helpful.

Elvina Charley: In my experience, they were always preoccupied with something else.

Melanie Goodman: It wasn't like you saw somebody in this role that was like, "I want to do what that person's, I want to be like..." It was just you imagined there's a need for help and there's a role for that, and I'm going to figure out what that is and go for that.

Elvina Charley: Exactly. Then I just decided I want to go to school, started talking to the counselor, and they're like, "Huh, well, you haven't really been serious about school, so that might be a problem." And I just thought, well, but there has to be a way, and I had one counselor who said, "Well, we can give this a try," and I applied to a community school.

I knew I didn't want to go to where the rest of my friends were going, because of that peer pressure part. So, I applied to Utah. I applied there, and I met with the lady that was the liaison, took care of the Indigenous students area, and she was like, "We can do this. So, we'll just start from remediating your basic skills and we'll go from there." That's how I began my journey in college.

Melanie Goodman: Began your journey, that's really interesting. We know that adolescents, one of the biggest ways that they can be supported is through relationships and models and all of that. You didn't find that person until college, but you did eventually find that person who saw your potential and was willing to support you.

Elvina Charley: And it just takes that one person.

Melanie Goodman: It's amazing, isn't it? I mean, it's a very familiar, well, you know better than me. It's a very familiar story. So, I know you work in various school settings, and now you're in what looks to be like a pretty large public school district, is it fairly?

Elvina Charley: Yeah. Kayenta Unified School District is on the Navajo Reservation. It's near the Utah border, and we are serving roughly over 1500 students. Myself and my

colleague, who's also a wonderful strong Dine' woman who's bilingual. The recruitment of Indigenous school psychologists was also so important to me and my Indigenous American subcommittee is a group under the Multicultural Affairs Committee.

Melanie Goodman: I did read about that.

Elvina Charley: San Diego State University, which had the wonderful grant supporting school psychology, school counselors. We read a lot of Indigenous scholars, and we had a space for that discussion. That was the first time actually to truly have a place on a university level, especially at San Diego State.

Melanie Goodman: So, is that where you went to next, San Diego State, in other words?

Elvina Charley: Yes. Anyway, that grant was at the time, a Native American collaborators project that really inspired. Me as a school psychologist, that field itself is a very colonial practice. So, how as an Indigenous woman am I going to go home and begin to put labels on our children to oppress them?

So, being able to voice that within that group and then being able to have that support, and I think that's helped me really want to be a voice and an advocate within our community. They just help facilitate my voice, get stronger.

Melanie Goodman: Kayenta then, where you are now, that school, is it exclusively an Indigenous school?

Elvina Charley: It's not an exclusive, it's a public school, but it's on the reservation, so-

Melanie Goodman: It's primarily.

Elvina Charley: ... a percentage. So, there's a large percentage of Navajo students.

Melanie Goodman: How many public schools are there on reservations in the country? Do you have any sense of that? How many schools exist?

Elvina Charley: Well, the Navajo reservation is huge. So, we have Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. We have a combination of public schools, community schools, and then government schools.

Melanie Goodman: And you worked in those settings, it sounds like, before you came?

Elvina Charley: Yeah. I have worked at Rough Rock Community School for about a year and a half when I returned.

Melanie Goodman: Is a community school like a charter school?

Elvina Charley: It's ran under the Navajo Nation. The Navajo Nation does have an educational board, so they oversee the community schools.

Melanie Goodman: Got it.

Elvina Charley: Then there's the schools. A lot of the VIE schools work directly with the government, so the community schools were run in that way until the Navajo Nation took that under their wings. So, there's just few government schools left. I'm not sure in terms of the numbers, but those are the three systems that are in operation to educate our community or our children.

Melanie Goodman: So, I assume as a school psychologist in this setting that you're working directly with students individually and maybe in groups. I'm also interested in both your formal and informal work with your colleagues, teachers, other professionals, practitioners in the school. Can you talk a little bit about that, what you're doing in that area, whether it's formal or informal with your colleagues around their issues, their balance, their wellbeing, all of what you bring to your approach to wellness?

Elvina Charley: So, in terms of the work and wellness, and then my service delivery as a school psychologist, being a Dine' woman, and how do I frame that within the schools and how do I navigate that in terms of assistance space? Because as school psychologist, it is a well-known fact across the country, we are short on school psychologists.

We need more school psychologists within the field, but more as a part of the NAS initiative in the Indigenous. We really also wanted to emphasize the recruitment of Indigenous school psychologists, because what we were finding is that, and visibly here on the Navajo reservation, there's a lot of non-natives that work as consultants that come into our community for one day, assess and then leave without really interaction with our community.

As a part of our initiative even across the nation, and we found that that was a problem. So, we really wanted to recruit more relatives into this field. That's important. You're not going to have a school psychologist that's visible within your community and be available. How are you going to facilitate that support of wellness?

Of course, there's all the other ethics sets attached to that. Really starting off with that is that we need to make sure that our schools are supported, but then our staff is supported as well.

Melanie Goodman: It's interesting, because in addition to these conversations that I'm having, we are also producing a resource directory of podcasts and research, just all kinds of materials that are relevant to the topic of wellbeing. But in the process of doing the research to pull these resources together, we found over and over again, it was cited that this would be true of psychologists. They were talking

about it as teachers being one of the most difficult professions or one of the most stressful, especially today, and especially with all the pandemic consequences.

There was a pushback on the idea that wellbeing and mindfulness and individual practice was the way to address these issues, the stress that teachers are under. In fact, teachers were like, "These are systemic issues. There needs to be work done at the systems level to create an environment where all of this is welcome and can happen in a fluid way."

Elvina Charley: In terms of wellness as a whole within the school, I think that push for social emotional learnings within the school is just so important, not just for our students, but for our teachers' wellbeing as well. In embarking on my journey of healing, I found mindfulness. I suffered multiple losses within my family and was holding onto this immense grief that I had.

I just delved into my work without suppressing the emotions and the grief and just putting myself in there and just working all these crazy hours and not really realizing how that was impacting myself, but impacting my child as well. As professionals, it's very important to have that first awareness of being burnt out and being overloaded, and then having that realization of creating more unnecessary suffering for yourself.

In the name of helping others, you forget the most important person, which is yourself. And I found myself at a retreat, a mindfulness retreat, a meditation retreat, but really didn't know what to expect. But within that silence and within being able to bring awareness to my breath and just being present really just helped me to heal immensely. Well, in combination with other things in my own traditional ways as well, that put me on that journey of this is something that you just don't hold onto. This is something that you have to share.

So I was like, well, I'm going to learn how to teach this-

Melanie Goodman: I see.

Elvina Charley: ... and I'm going to help my community with this. So, I entered Mindful Schools. I did my training there, and every opportunity I get during the summer, I continue to do my retreats.

Melanie Goodman: So at Mindful Schools, is that oriented towards all different kinds of school professionals?

Elvina Charley: Yes.

Melanie Goodman: So, it's not just school psychologists or teachers, or it's everybody.

Elvina Charley: It was a lot of educators, a lot of people that work with children. It was a combination of different professionals. It wasn't just school psychologists. So, I entered that program and learned how to teach it to children, and I brought that back.

It really was impactful for me, because this is Dine' way of life. This is Dine' way of teaching. This is the Dine' way of being. Within the Buddhism teaching, more specifically Tibetan. There's that real strong correlation there, and so that really struck a chord for me. So a lot of the words, the vocabulary, I began to translate that into my own language, being able to teach that. Anything that you bring or anything that you teach within our community, it has to be meaningful and it has to come from that cultural perspective.

Melanie Goodman: When you say teach, who are you teaching, in that case?

Elvina Charley: The children and then later on, I did it for the teachers. There, I began just introducing the concept and being able to do that when we began a meeting. Then here at Kayenta, I was able to facilitate that same process for my colleagues in the midst of COVID, did a lot of mindfulness-based stress reduction process, doing chair yoga, being able to have a safe space for them to be able to have the outlook, because my colleagues were being impacted. We were all being impacted. Twice the national level our relatives were being impacted by COVID, and we were-

Melanie Goodman: Is that work still going on?

Elvina Charley: I do my best to continue to hold those kinds of spaces, but it's less. It depends on who your director is, and then also just the demand on me as a professional as well. As school psychologists. We have to navigate a lot of different things working, but we have to meet state mandates for timelines. So, sometimes that makes it tough for us to really have that rich, diverse service delivery.

But more importantly, the consistency has maintained in terms of counseling my students sometimes from that transition to one school to the next or the transition administration, sometimes those things impact how that consistency of it. But the holding of it in terms of having made those connections with some of the teachers and some of the colleagues that they understand that they can come to me if they need help.

Melanie Goodman: You're a resource for that. So, I know that in lots of industries, the unexpected benefit, so to speak, of the pandemic was that it broke a lot of things and new things had to happen. This whatever works attitude started to bubble up out of desperation or for whatever reason. So, I wonder if some of the work that you were doing during the pandemic and others, or do you think some of that is here to stay? Some of that work will continue to evolve generationally?

Elvina Charley: That is my hope, yes. As long as I am in a space and in a place and have the support from my administrator to do that type of work, it's always going to be there. Maybe the district feels, or the teachers feel like, "Well, now I don't need it anymore because the pandemic's over and we're okay."

But that stress of being within the school environment post COVID and having to navigate all that our children came back with, we're still seeing the unfolding of that and how it's impacted our community. There's definitely the recognition of stress behind that, and then also mindfulness, approaching it from that level. I know that you always have to have a buy-in. Any type of program, any type of thing that you introduce within at least the Indigenous community, there has to be that buy-in.

In my community, it was like, okay, this is a part of who we are. Our culture is tight. There's parallels to our culture and our teaching and [foreign language] is the middle way. That is the path, and how do we maintain that? Because as human beings, we are meant to be here, and so for the cornerstone of our teaching, which is clanship, love, [foreign language] and those love and compassion, those are the groundedness and those are the middle way, not just for each other as relatives, but for ourselves.

It seems like within our profession, we always forget ourselves and our teachers.

Melanie Goodman: Absolutely, absolutely.

Elvina Charley: They forget themselves because they care and love so much. Even also part of that barrier as well is they feel like, "Well, I don't have time to do that now. I'm okay now." But I think my job is just to put that to the forefront and say, "I'm here if you need this, you want to do this."

I'm also sensitive to, we don't want to require it and push it down, but we also want to make sure that they know that they feel support. If they call on it and they need it, I'm there.

Melanie Goodman: I know you work in this Indigenous setting and you bring all that rich understanding and awareness and history, and it really dovetails beautifully with the mindfulness ethic and what that's all about. But for those non-Indigenous school psychologists out there who you must bump into occasionally, I'm assuming you do.

Elvina Charley: Oh, yeah. We have a lot of allies.

Melanie Goodman: In all kinds, what would you say to them? What could they be doing right now for their own benefit or to improve their conditions in their schools? From your deep and long experience, what are your conversations like with them?



Elvina Charley:

We have many allies and many dedicated colleagues out there that do the meaningful work, but definitely have the best hearts and the best intentions. They do the work within our community. I know there are some struggles there in terms of, am I doing this right? What should I be doing?

Or learning about the communities from which they're working with really learning about not just the challenges that we face, because we all know within our communities, we deal with the isms probably about two times the national average. So, coming in with that intentional heart, that desire to help is good. But there does actually have to be some groundwork for that as well though.

You yourself, as a person, you need to ensure that you have done some self-healing for yourself. I think that's the most important is that, because in mindfulness, we bring attention to how we cause ourselves suffering and bringing that attention to that suffering. But there also has to be action.

Doing some of that healing is necessary to ensure that reciprocity, that reciprocal relationship, establishing those relationships. You don't just come into a community and demand respect. There has to be that legwork and that groundingness of and that understanding of, because people know ultimately the reasons why you're there.

So, that intent is just so important, and then building those reciprocities is that two-way relationship. Ultimately, we know when somebody's just coming to our community for their own reason and really working on what are those triggers. If you work in a community that is not from your own dominant cultural background or is different, and even just speaking from working in different Indigenous communities as an Indigenous person yourself, there's always protocols and ways in which to engage.

I think that's a really important understanding to have. But self-healing and just that intentional healing is so important for myself, being a relative, it's helped me to be a better relative. It's helped me to be a better colleague. It's helped me to be a better mother. Mindfulness may not... From the approach of the science perspective is working in the schools, is working in many schools, but being able to implement that, you need to do your own self-healing. I guess that's what I'm coming down to for...

Melanie Goodman:

Do you also feel like in your field of school psychologists that that is lacking? Are we in a new period? Maybe the pandemic spurred this on that people are more in touch with their own needs and their own perspectives and assumptions and biases and all of that stuff, that there was some kind of forced self-reflection. We had to stop and rethink a whole lot of things. Have we snapped back and now we're just back to the way we were before?

Or do you think there's some lasting, genuine, "It starts with me and then I'm okay. Then I can help other people be okay, but if I'm not okay..."

Elvina Charley: I think there's always that hope. The way in which some of our community members have framed the COVID period, from the cultural perspective, it is meant for a reason. It was meant for us to reset, as you said. For some people, it has brought such awareness, such blessings there in terms of being more engaged and being grateful and being more compassionate. So, those are all gifts that COVID has brought. There is the suffering, but there has been some great awareness for us.

Melanie Goodman: That sustained?

Elvina Charley: Yes, I think you're right. There is a phase of, now we've come out of this, we're okay. Now, it's back to the old patterns.

Melanie Goodman: It's really hard to resist. It's really hard to resist.

Elvina Charley: But we can't afford that, and I think some people have recognized that. We can't afford to live that way anymore. We can't just exist anymore. We have to actively make our world a better place. Let's hope it's enough so that it can continue to propel us forward.

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