

Shíyazhi Sha'a'wéé' Diné Nilih. A'daayoo nééhlagoh

My Child, You Are Diné:

A Critical Retrospective Inquiry of a Diné Early Childhood

by

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A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Approved April 2011 by the  
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2011

## ABSTRACT

Early childhood is a special and amazing period in a child's development. It is a period during which all facets of a human being—cognitive, linguistic, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual—are rapidly developing and influenced by a child's interactions with her socializers and environment. Fundamentally, what happens during this critical period will influence and impact a child's future learning. Much of what is known about children's development comes from research focusing primarily on mainstream English speaking children. However, not much that is known about Indigenous children and their early period of child development. Therefore, this thesis research focused on Diné children and their early childhood experiences that occur during the fundamental time period *before* Diné children enter preschool. It also examines the contemporary challenges that Diné parents and other cultural caretakers face in ensuring that Diné infants and young children are taught those important core elements that make them uniquely Diné. The research questions that guide this thesis are:

1. What do Diné people believe about children and their abilities?
2. What do Diné children need to learn in order to become Diné?
3. What are the Diné childhood rearing beliefs and practices?
4. Why aren't Diné parents and grandparents teaching their children how to be Diné?

Findings reveal an early childhood experience in which children are viewed as true explorers and highly intelligent, inquisitive learners and included as integral participants and contributors to the family and community. This thesis

concludes with a discussion of the multidimensional transitions, such as the shift from the Diné language to English in Diné homes and communities that have occurred in the Diné way of life and how they have impacted how Diné children are socialized. Creative alternatives for increasing Diné childhood speakers on and off the Navajo reservation are also considered.

## DEDICATION

This Master of Arts thesis is dedicated to my late brother, Andrew E. Bia, Jr.

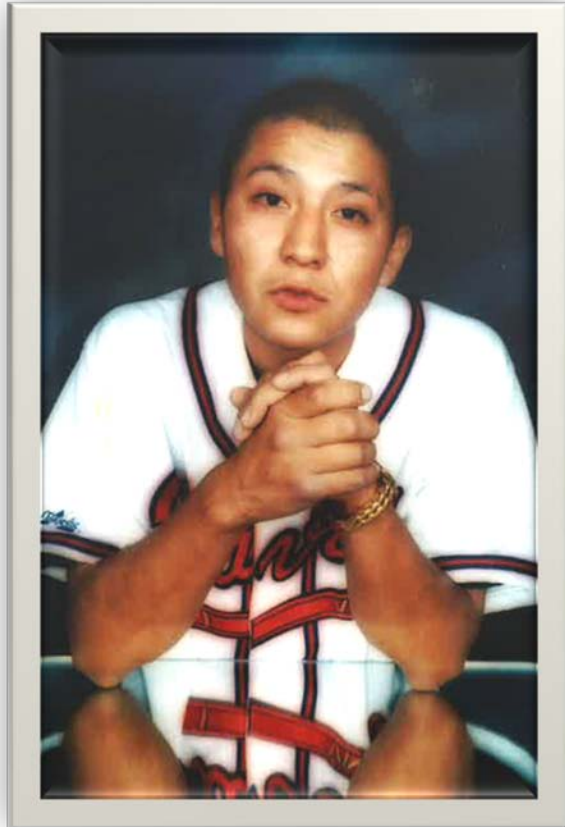


Figure 1. Andrew Emerson Bia, Jr.

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a part of my Diné identity. So, as I have been taught, before I begin my thesis, I will introduce myself:

Ya'et'eeh, shí éí Sunshine Sallie Bia yinish'yéh. Diné nish'Li.  
TŁ'áashchi'í nish'Li, Má'íideeshgíizhiinii éí bashishchíín. HashtLishnii éí dashichei. Todichíinii éí dashinalí. Shádí, shinaaí, dóó shideezhí doo' holó.  
Shima éí Ethel Jean Bia wolyeh adóó shizhe'e éí Andrew Emerson Bia wolyeh. Shíma éí No Water Mesa, Arizona dę'naa'ghá adóó shizhe'e éí Whitehouse Overlook, Canyon De Chelly, Arizona dę'naa'ghá.

Shimasaní'yęę éí Mary Kitseallyboy wolyeh ni't'ęę. Shichei'yęę éí Kee Kitseallyboy wolyeh ni't'ęę. Shimasani bíma aden shimasani nahást'éé binaa'haigo. Shimasaní'yęę adóó bima'yęę éí McCracky Mesa, Utah dę'naa'ghá' ni't'ęę. Shimasaní bímasaniyęę' éí Mt. Taylor, New Mexico dę'naa'ghá ni't'ęę. Shichei'yęę binali éí Kit'sil'í dę'naa'ghá' ni't'ęę. Shichei'yęę éí do'na'iL'haash'dah' ni't'ęę. Shinali' Hastiih'yęę éí Spider Rock, Canyon De Chelly, Arizona dę'naa'ghá ní't'ęę. Shinali' Hastiih'yęę bi'zhé'é éí Spider Rock, Canyon De Chelly, Arizona dę'naa'ghá' ni't'ęę. Shinali Hastiih awéé ni'Liigoh bima bitsaa aden. Shinali Hastiih'yęę éí Thomas Brown Bia wolyeeh ni't'ęę.

Shínali Asdzaą éí Kin'nijnaghai Tseyi' bi'da'dęę na'ghá. Shínali Asdzaą éí Lousie Price Bia wolyeh. Shínali Asdzaą éí Hastiin Dághá'yęę bi'chei nit'éé. Hastiin Dághá'yęę Tséyideę nijiyá nit'ęę. Hastiin Dághá'yęę éí Hwéeldí Mą'jį Bızaanaast'a, Coyote Ceremony ayiiLa jíni . Hastiin Dághá'yęę éí Ma'íideeshgíizhinií nihlih'ni't'ęę. Shizhei éí Hastiin Dághá'yęę



yitsaadęę yighaaŁ. Hastiin Dághá'iyęę éi Bizahalaní adóó Hozhoojí Naata Ni'Lin'ni't'ęę. NaaLts'oos Soní Biká Jí aŁ'tse aŁnáa'a'dzooh. NaaLts'oos Soní éi Diné hasht'é'dit'éegoh abiil'laa. Article VI éi bilagháanaa bizaad dóó beeoolta' dóó bee'eLj bi'kq.

Éi bininaa shí éi inishtá. AŁchini éi baainishtá. Diisjjidí aŁchin'í dóó baa'adáha yaqadáh. AŁchini éi baadahajoobá'í. Dr. Mary Eunice Romero-Little éi bajjnishtá. Éi shí mentor dóó shí Advisor ninlih. Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona di inisht'á. Indian Education, Curriculum and Instruction éi shí bóhoosááh. AŁchini éi ba'inisht'á. K'ad éi yá Arizona State University dí biyaadóó "Jish" shá aLyáá.

Shinali Hastiin'yęę éi winter stories yaahalne'nit'ęę. Ma'ii éi trickers dóó philosopher niLjigo tadiyá nit'ęę. Akoo dii'jñh éi Diné Amá' dóó Diné Azhé'é éi Diné AŁchini dooyeenideenitin. Achei dóó Amasaní dóó Analí Hastiin dóó Analí Asdzaq éi bihtsoo'keh Englishjí aŁ'tseh yihch'yaŁt'í. Akoo dóó yááshqodá. Éi ko't'áao shinaltso bi'kq. Éi bininaa aŁchini ayóó adeeninooní. Diné bizaad dóó nihee alj' bee nanotin.

Hello. My name is Sunshine Sallie Bia. I am Diné (or Navajo). I belong to four clans. My mother, sisters, older brother, nieces, nephews, and I belong to the Red Cheek Clan. I am born for the Coyote Pass People (Jemez Clan). My maternal grandpa (*Shichei*) belonged to the Mud Clan and my paternal grandpa (*Shinali Hastiuh*) belonged to the Bitterwater Clan. My Diné name is *Shandiin*, it means *sunbeam*.

On my father's side of the family, I am the descendant of Chief Barboncito. Chief Barboncito belonged to the *Má'údeeshgúzhiníí*, Coyote Pass People (Jemez Clan). He was the spokesman for the Navajos during *Hwééldi*, "The Long Walk."

I am a graduated from Sweetwater Preschool, Arizona; Rough Rock High School, Arizona; Diné College, Tsaile, Arizona; and Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona. I am pursuing my Master of Arts in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in Indian Education. My mentor-advisor is Dr. Mary Eunice Romero-Little.

My parents are Andrew and Ethel Bia. I was born in the summer at Sage Memorial Hospital in Ganado, Arizona. My mother (*Shímá*), father (*Shízhé'é*), and late maternal grandma (*Shímasaní*) raised me at No Water Mesa, Arizona. We live three miles south of the Utah state line. My late maternal grandma's (*Shimasani*) and late maternal grandpa's (*Shichei*) are Mary and Kee Kitseallyboy. They resided in No Water Mesa, Arizona. *Shimasaní* and her mother's names were *Asdzqá TL'ááshchi'í* and they were originally from McCracky Mesa, Utah, an area along the San Juan River. My great-maternal grandma (*Shicho*) came from the north side of Mount Taylor, New Mexico; this is where the Red Cheek Clan came from. My late maternal grandpa (*Shichei*) and his father were originally from No Water Mesa, Arizona. *Shichei* and his father's names were *Kít'sil'í biye'*. My great maternal grandpa (*Shichei sani*) was from *Kít'sil'í*, Black Mesa, Arizona. My late paternal grandpa's (*Shinali Hastiih*) named was Thomas Brown Bia, he was from Spider Rock, Canyon De Chelly,

Arizona. *Shinali Hastiih* late father was from Spider Rock, Canyon De Chelly, Arizona. This is where the Bitterwater Clan comes from.

My paternal grandma's name is Louise Bia. I call her *Shinali Asdzq*. She currently resides at Whitehouse Overlook, Canyon De Chelly, Arizona. *Shinali Asdzq* is the descended of Hástiin Dághá'í, Chief Barboncito, also known as "Man with Whiskers." *Shinali Asdzq* is the one who told me stories of Colonel Christopher "Kit" Carson and "The Long Walk" (*Hwééldí*). She explained how Diné people were killed *before* and *after* *Hwééldí*. Many of the elders were shot from the canyon wall, their crops destroyed, their homes were burned and their livestock were slaughtered. Because of the fearless Diné warriors, including women, who fought the United State Army, the Diné people are still here today. *Shinali Asdzq* heard the *Hwééldí* stories from her late parents and grandparents. They described Chief Barboncito as a great leader. Chief Barboncito was known as "The Orator," *Bizahalaní*, and "The Peace Leader," *Hozhoojí Naat'aa*. Chief Barboncito protected and led his people when they were attacked in and removed from Canyon De Chelly, Arizona, in 1864 to 1868. During *Hwééldí*, the Diné people walked more than three-hundred miles from Canyon De Chelly, Arizona, to Santa Fe, New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico, and finally to Bosque Redondo reservation at Fort Sumner, New Mexico, where they were imprisoned for four years. After the Civil War, Chief Barboncito went to Washington, D.C. to meet with the President of the United States to request that the Diné people be returned to their ancestral land. When Chief Barboncito returned back to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, he immediately

conducted the Coyote Ceremony, *Mq'ii Bizaanaast'q*. If it was not for the brave and skillful leadership of Chief Barboncito, Diné people would be placed in Oklahoma territory among the Cherokee, Ponca, and Chickasaw Nations.

#### Background: The *Diné*

According to the 2000 Census, Navajos comprise the second largest group of American Indians in the United States. There are close to 270,000 Navajo people. The Navajo people also refer to themselves as *Diné*, which means “The People.” About half of them reside on the 26,897 square mile Navajo Nation reservation, an area which includes the states of Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico and is equivalent in size to the state of Western Virginia. The other fifty percent of the Navajo people reside outside of the reservation in border towns and cities such as Phoenix, Arizona, Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Denver, Colorado.

Linguistically, the Navajo belong to the southern Athabascan language family, *Na-Dene Phylum*. Driver (1969) notes that the distribution of the Athabascan language is “found in the Yukon and Mackenzie Sub-Arctic, on the North Pacific Coast, in the Southwest, and in Northeast Mexico” (p. 48).

American Indian groups linguistically related to the Navajo include the Hupa, Sekani, Beaver, Sarsi [*Diné NaahoŁohnii*], Eyak, Kiowa-Apache, Chiricahua Apache, White Mountain Apache, and Mescalero Apache. Some of these dialects are mutually intelligible. Locally, Diné speakers are subdivided into regional dialects or agencies. For example, the central Navajo word for snow is “yaz” whereas the northern Navajo word is “zas.” In addition to regional linguistic

differences, there is also the influence of other languages such as Spanish. The Diné people have adopted Spanish words like *mon'dii'gii'yah* which means “butter.” It comes from the Spanish word *mantequilla*. Another borrowed word is “beeso” which means “money.” It comes from the Spanish word *peso*. These are simple examples of the Navajo language, but in reality the Diné language is considered one of the most difficult languages to learn. It is so complicated that in World War II the Japanese failed to break the code of the Navajo Code Talkers, the bilingual Navajos who sent secured military messages over the radio.

In addition to linguistic differences among the eastern, southern, central, western, and northern Navajo agencies, there are cultural differences. For example, a central Navajo elder's stories will be different from an western Navajo elder's stories. Reflected in the Navajo elders' stories are their respective language and their unique *sense of place* and *being*, associated with geographic location, clans and their spiritual orientation.

## Chapter 2

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This research focuses on Diné children and their early childhood experiences through the story of one Diné childhood—mine. Through self-reflections documented in both a digital audio journal and a written journal and general observations documented in field notes, I tell the story about my own upbringing as a Diné child in a Diné home and community. Specifically, this research focuses on the fundamental time period *before* Diné children enter preschool and concludes with a discussion of the multidimensional transitions that have occurred in the Diné way of life.

I chose a digital audio journal (as well as a written one) because I wanted to document my recollections of my early years as a child in the Diné language, my mother tongue and the language I am most proficient and comfortable in. I also wanted to preserve the integrity and authenticity of my Diné teachers, my Diné experiences and my Diné epistemology—our way of thinking about and understanding the world. I do this best in my mother tongue (L1). I realize that a weakness of my methodology is that my reflections and findings are basically mine and subject to my own biases. However, this is why I kept a written journal to reflect on not only my early childhood but also about my research journey which includes my dilemmas and challenges as a self-study emic (insider) researcher—it was like someone looking into a mirror for the first time. As well, keeping a digital audio journal required me to listen and relistened to my thoughts

as I transcribed and translated my dialogue from Diné to English. At first it was very awkward but after several tries I became more competent in recording my thoughts and reflecting on their significance. Overall, this research serves as only a start in understanding the Diné childhood rearing beliefs and practices.

Additional Diné childhood studies are needed before any generalizations can be made about the childhood rearing beliefs and practices of Diné people. As well, cultural changes to the Diné way of life, such as Diné language socialization practices with children, must be considered.

In the past, the early childhood experiences of a Diné child occurred through sociolinguistic interactions in the Diné language (L1). Oral traditions were a critical part of these interactions. Today, however, with the rapid shift from the Diné language to English in Diné homes and communities, many Diné infants and young children's early learning experiences are occurring primarily in English therefore not learning the Diné as children. Despite this, this research attempts to capture the core elements or the funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) that Diné socializers of children believe is important to teach Diné children. It also examines the contemporary challenges that Diné parents and other cultural caretakers face in ensuring that Diné infants and young children are taught those important elements that make them uniquely Diné. The research questions that guide this thesis are:

1. What do Diné people believe about children and their abilities?
2. What do Diné children need to learn in order to become Diné?
3. What are the Diné childhood rearing beliefs and practices?

4. Why aren't Diné parents and grandparents teaching their children how to be Diné?

Note that the ASU formatting system cannot accommodate Navajo font, therefore Navajo words in this thesis may not be authentically represented.



## Chapter 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW: THE EARLY CHILDHOOD OF DINÉ CHILDREN

Our culture provides us the framework for socializing children. In each cultural community, there are cultural plans (Romero, 2003) that guide us on how things should be done. In the socialization of children, the belief is that children are being given a language, a means to communicate in ways that will allow the child to function successfully in their home and community (Vygotsky, 1978). In that socialization process, there are methods for imparting what a people truly believes children ought to learn. What is it that people believe about children and what and how they should learn?

Based on their own cultural experiences, people will answer differently. Indigenous people around the world have culturally specific beliefs about children and their abilities. The Eskimo childhood, for example is an important time for Alaska Native children to learn the collective knowledge that has sustained their Indigenous culture for centuries. In their research of *Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Alaska Native Ways of Knowing*, Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005) identify critical values and practice that young children must learn, one of which is “sharing.” Infants and young children are taught early on about sharing. They witness their parents and older siblings going out on a hunt or fishing trip and bringing back to the family their catch. Young children are included as integral contributors at fish camps, berry picking excursion and hunting trips. Through

their contributions to these important subsistence activities, they learn the essential practice of sharing.

In my literature search I found limited literature on the early childhood of Diné children. Much of what is known about the early socialization of Diné children comes from historical boarding school and anthropological accounts (Aronilth, 1992). John Collier (cited by Acrey, 1978), for instance, described Diné childhood rearing beliefs and practice as follows:

Navajo boys and girls were educated in the traditional way by their families or the extended family. Here they received an education which prepared them for the lives they were expected to lead. They were taught how to live within the own society, its rules and taboos, as well as how to make a living from crops and livestock in the time honored, traditional way. The role of a man was taught to the boys while the girls received continual training in the role of women within the group. Each, according to his age, was expected to assume certain duties and work along with the adults in all aspects of family life. This process of “learning while doing” had long been a part of a young Diné person’s education. How else are they to learn what is expected of them except by actual participation and practice? The young people were not set aside from the group, but were permitted and encouraged to join the adults in work, social life, and certain ceremonials. They learned cultural values through everyday activities as well as through the stories, legends and ceremonials of their people. (p. 123)

As the above excerpt highlights, the family plays a critical role in passing on its cultural values to the younger generation. A key in this early socialization process is the inclusion of children as important participants in the daily life of the family.

The New Mexican Pueblo societies have their own distinctive cultural plan for socializing their children. In her study, Romero-Little (2003) found that throughout their lives, Pueblo children will experience a number of these events which contribute to a child's development of self identity. They have many socializers (for example, siblings, parents, grandparents, extended family, and so forth) that provided them the guidance they needed to learn the traditions of their collective Pueblo culture.

Learning about these Indigenous peoples and how they instill their young children with the critical tools they need to become “Indigenous adults” made me think about my own Diné upbringing. What did my socializers (teachers) do to ensure that I “became Diné?” Who were my important socializers? Why did they work so hard to make sure that I learned what it means to be Diné? To find answers to these questions, I turned to my own memories of my early childhood, the topic of the next chapter.

## Chapter 4

### DISCUSSION: MEMORIES OF A DINÉ CHILDHOOD



Figure 3. No Water Mesa, Arizona

#### Growing up Diné in No Water Mesa, Arizona

I grew up within the Navajo reservation within the six sacred mountains: Mount Blanca (*Sisnaajini*), Mount Taylor (*TsoodziŁ*), San Francisco Peaks (*Dook'o 'oosŁiid*), Mount Hesperus (*Dibé Nitsaa*), Huerfano Mesa (*DziŁná 'oodiŁii*) and Governador Knob (*Ch'óol'í'ti*). Each mountain is like a home with its own stories, songs, prayers, representation, symbols, colors, rituals, and values. According to Diné teachings and beliefs the Diné people cannot be protected if they reside outside of the six sacred mountains because the mountains represent the boundary line of the Holy People, *Diyin Dine'é*, our Diné Creators (Yazzie, 1971).

From my home in No Water Mesa, Arizona, one can see six different mountains; Ute Mountain, Carrizo Mountain, Blue Mountain, Navajo Mountain, Mount Hesperus, and Bears Ears. There are four Diné names for No Water Mesa,

Arizona, and the names are: *Tóadindahaskaní*, *Asdzqan Naglahi Bi'da'ei'keh*, *Łįį'ahánahakahí*, and *Gáagii biTŁoh'chinií*. There are many stories, songs, and prayers tied to the land.

My people are the southern Athabaskan. Like the northern Athabaskan people in Northern Canada and Alaska, my people have their own unique cultural beliefs about and practices for teaching children which is embedded in the Diné language. As a young girl, I heard the mother tongue spoken daily by my parents, grandparents, and other family members. I learned to speak Diné *first*. I recently asked my parents, “Whose idea was it for me to speak Diné *first*?” My mother answered, “Your father.” Probing them further, I asked my father what made him come to the decision to speak Diné to his children so they (including me) would have Diné as their *first* language. He explained that it was conscious decision because of his lonely experiences he had in the 1970s when he attended Haskell Indian Junior College in Lawrence, Kansas. “There was no one to speak my Diné language to and no place to practice my Diné culture so I longed for my language and culture. It was hard being away from home, Diné people, and my language. So I made a promise to myself, when I have children of my own, my children will speak our ancestral tongue *first* because English can always be learned in school. I don't want to rob my children of this luxury and their identity.” I was glad that he made this conscious decision to raise us as Diné *first* language speakers!

Alongside the Diné language, my three siblings and I were taught to live according to the Diné principles and the Diné traditional calendar, our seasonal and cultural guide for us. As a family, we moved and relocated according to the

sheep, vegetation, and seasons. When there were no vegetation, gaming, and/or fire wood, then we moved to a new place. Basically, we had spring, summer, fall, and winter camps. Although rich in Diné culture and our mother tongue, we had no running water or electricity so we hauled water, woods, and coal. In the winter, my mother disciplined and encouraged us to roll in the snow early in the morning before sunrise. We also had a sweat lodge and used it according to Diné protocols. If we had no water in the winter, we put out buckets to collect snow. Melted snow was used for cooking or to washing up. At night, flash lights, candles, kerosene lanterns, and Coleman lighters provided us light.

I grew up in a hogan (a traditional Diné home) and a log cabin. We did not have separate bedrooms but we slept safely and comfortably on the lamb skin on the floor near grandpa's fire. Our grandparents were special people in our lives. As young as I can remember, *Shimasani* was always busy and active. She never sat around. She was either weaving, cooking, cleaning, herding sheep, or telling a story.

One story I remember was told to me by my mother; it goes like this: “*Shimasani* paternal grandma (*Nali Asdzqan*) was eight-year-old herding sheep along the Walker Creek, *Tó Ch'iniLini*. Four Spanish men captured her and seven other Diné girls. They were held captive for four months at Alamosa, Colorado, but she escaped and returned home.” *Shimasani* saw her *Nali Asdzqan* and she had sheep skin and deer hide wrapped around her legs in the winter time, she was very old but still determined.” Back then, the young girls were taught and prepared early for anything to come, good or worse. The Diné girls were told, “If

you get caught, this is what you do to get back to Diné homelands.” Because *Shimasani* paternal grandma listened to her parents and grandparents, her *Nalii Asdzqan* made it back safe. My late maternal grandma, *Shimasani*, used to say, “If she never made it back, we would not be here.”

My maternal grandma, *Shinasani* had skills and talents that I never realized until I become older. She encouraged us to appreciate a ranch lifestyle. This kind of lifestyle required us to rise early in the morning and spend most of our day outside doing various chores. We did not have toys so we played house, school, restaurant, kick the can, hide-and-seek, and had horse and donkey races around the sweat lodge and sheep and horse corral.

Since we grew our own food and grazed our own flock of sheep, cows, and horses, there was no such thing as ordering happy meal from McDonald. Our meat, vegetable and fruit departments were in our front yard. When we had no money, we sold the livestock. Caring for livestock required us to become young veterinarians. We had to learn to care for them, brand them, and give notches to their ears. As a young girl I knew how to make hot milk for new born orphan lamb.

I learned so much from my *Shimasani*. *Shimasani* teachings were harsh but I knew she meant well. She taught me many things like how to weave Navajo Chief Blankets, traditional cooking like making kneel down bread (*Nitsidigo’i*), and about herding and butchering sheep, and how to care for and ride horses. In the summer, we moved with *Shimasani* to summer camp following the sheep to new vegetation areas. On top of Carrizo Mountain (Teec Nos Pos mountain), my

sisters and I were taught to pick summit berries (*ChiiLchin*), We cleaned, dried, and stored them for winter food. My favorite part about summer camps was eating wild blue berries and strawberries.

I learned so much from my paternal side of the family who lived in Canyon De Chelly, Arizona. My late paternal grandfather, *Shinali Hastiih*, was from Spider Rock, Canyon De Chelly, Arizona, and he had two homesteads where he had winter and summer camps. *Shinali Asdzqq* is from Whitehouse Overlook, Canyon De Chelly, Arizona, and she has two homesteads where she had a summer and winter camps also. So we moved to four different locations each year.

*Shinali Hastiih* and *Shinali Asdzqq* had different teachings and we had to learn them as young as we were. One teaching I recall is “family comes *first*.” *Shinali Hastiih* and *Shinali Asdzqq* made time for their grandchildren, children, and in-laws; the family was valued. We learned and did things as a family according to the seasons. In the spring, *Shinali Hastiih* and *Shinali Asdzqq* gathered everyone, including children, adults, and in-laws. As a family, we planted at *Shinali Asdzqq* summer camp inside Whitehouse Overlook, Canyon De Chelly, Arizona. Everyone helped and contributed in various ways. The children carried old coffee buckets full of dried corns, the women butchered young lambs, the older girls took care of the infants, the men taught the children how to plant the corn, squash, watermelon, and cantaloupe, and grandchildren herded sheep while the family planted.



We took care of our *Shinali Asdzq* and *Shinali Hasti* (farm) all summer. In early July, as a family, we moved our summer camp to Spider Rock, Canyon De Chelly, Arizona, where *Shinali Hasti* is from, which is 16 miles east of Whitehouse Overlook, Canyon De Chelly, Arizona. We moved to a new location because of the vegetation and resources. In Spider Rock, Canyon De Chelly, Arizona, *Shinali Asdzq* taught me how to dye sheep wool from materials gathered from the area. We used cotton trees to make yellow colored yarn. *Shinali Hasti* taught his grandsons how to hunt deer and wild turkey. In the evening, we had fresh deer meat stew and listened to *Shinali Hasti* tell oral stories. In the fall, we picked apricots, apples, and peaches. We cleaned and dried apples, peaches and apricots against the canyon walls, and then stored them in can jars that were distributed them to relatives and in-laws. We did things as a family and shared our food, this is one precious teaching I value.

My childhood memories in Canyon De Chelly, Arizona, included playing in the water with my cousins. We played in the sand due, slid down on the canyon walls, and rolled in the sand. When we were hungry, we went back to *Shinali Asdzq* hogan and made our meal. As a family, we played, laughed, ate, sang, and prayed together. Nobody was left out. As young children, we were taught how to take care of each other and care for one another.

Winter is a sacred season for the Diné time. This is the most important time of the year to capture, listen, and hear oral stories. Diné elders used oral stories to teach children and pass on important cultural knowledge. Their way of teaching was by telling, explaining, expressing, and describing. Winter time was

also a time to play Diné string games, *TsidiL* (traditional stick game), and moccasin games. *Shinali Hastiih* was a great story teller. Coyote stories and oral stories are *only* told in the winter.



Figure 4. Navajo String Game

*Shimasaní* also taught my sisters and me how to be respectful to others. She told us never to “look at people directly in the eye because it’s rude.” Staring is considered impolite. So I learn to communicate nonverbally and to “use less gaze” (Peterson, 1975). As her young granddaughter, I looked down when *Shimasaní* talked to me, this is a sign of politeness and respect in the Diné culture. I don’t say much when *Shimasaní* was talking, I listened intently. For young girls, learning to weave is important. At *Shichei* summer camps on top of Carrizo Mountain, as a young child, I watched my mother and grandma weave all the time. *Shimasaní* told me, “This is Changing Woman’s Loom.” She sang beautiful weaving songs and explained the Navajo weaving tools, where they come from, and how to take care of them. We made Navajo weaving tools with my late maternal grandma.

I never meet my late maternal grandpa, *Shichei*, he left when I was one-year-old. *Shichei* has two summer camps on top of Carrizo Mountain. Both places were beautiful and amazing; each place offered many richness and resources. I remember the lambs were so fat and healthy that when *Shimasaní* took a lamb to an Enemy Scalp Dance, *Ndaá'*, the butchers said “They had no problem taking off the lamb skin when butchering.” This was a compliment. *Shimasaní* talked to her sheep, cows and horses. When she was alive, there were even ceremonies done for the livestock.

Back in the day, my grandparents spoke and used old words like *Shíyazhi*, *Sha'a'wéé'* and *Wéé'* which meant “My little one, precious little one, and my baby.” They used these words of endearment all the time, to greet, discipline, encourage, and express love and feelings. I long to hear those old words because today’s Diné parents don’t speak them with children today, most likely because they did not learn these words and therefore they cannot use them with their children. I was fortunate to hear my grandparents use these words and to learned their significance. I believe this is why I find it very disheartening when today Diné children are yelled at, embarrassed, or belittled in public by their parents. The Diné parent is unable to effectively communicate to and calm down their children. The old words nourished the child’s mind like a rope unraveling; they learned respect and compassion with these Diné words and gestures. Fundamentally, a Diné child makes this connection between respect, compassion and discipline by understanding the mother tongue *first*.

One of my earliest memories of my *Shinali Hastiih*, my late paternal grandfather, was sitting on his lap as he sung to me. His songs were sung according to the seasons and contained words and phrases about the Diné way of life. I also learned about infants and young children from *Shinali Hastiih*. According to my late *Shinali Hastiih*'s teachings, when a couple finds out they will be having a baby; the unborn child is automatically included in the daily activities of home, including the daily prayers. To bring a child into this world is a "holy act" because the unborn child is a treasure and gift from the *Diyin Dine'é*, the Holy People; it is a spiritual being. When an unborn is created in the womb, its sacredness begins the second he is conceived. That is why you must give them protection, love, shelter, prayers, songs, healthy food, attention, and the Diné language *first*.

There is a lot of preparation between the time the unborn child is in the womb up until she is four years old. To bring a child into the community is good news. It means there will be a new member coming into the village, band, and clan. The expectant father and mother will need to sing to the unborn child. The child will become a part of the Diné society by learning Diné clanship, community rituals, songs, cooking, and home chores. The child will become aware of his or her surrounding and soon learn what it means to be Diné.

During the prenatal period there are many things the parents-to-be cannot do such as: attend any social activities, funerals, and ceremonies; go fishing, cut fish or eat any seafood; purchase anything for the unborn child; and make anything for the unborn child. The unborn child *first* home is inside the mother's

womb and it is in the womb that the mother and child develop a connection and bond through communication and growth. The couples have to be reserved, patient, and careful what they say and do while the unborn child is developing in the womb. The expectant mother must get comfortable during pregnancy. The father should be right by her side and make sure she and unborn are both alright. *Shimasaní* used to say, “The minute you find out your pregnant, remember it is not about you. It is about the unborn child.” She explained that a pregnant mother is in control of her own future birth experience. *Shimasaní* said, “You decide what kind of birth you want. The best way to prepare yourself for a good delivery is to discipline yourself.” This requires eating healthy traditional food, drinking a lot of water, Navajo tea, exercise, doing light home chores, and keeping busy. To ensure a smooth birth, a *hozhoojí* ceremony needs to be conduct for the mother-to-be and the unborn child before the delivery.

After birth of the child, *first* a pinch of corn pollen is placed in the Diné child’s mouth to accept them into the physical world. It is very important a mother to breastfeed her child to prevent any sickness. Gifts may now be accepted from relatives and friends. The father will need to take the *awéé bishch’íd* (the afterbirth) back home and return it to Mother Earth with a corn pollen offering.

The father will need to make a home for the newborn. The *second* home for the child is a handmade cradle board made by the father. The child will live inside the cradle board (home) for 12- 14 months. After a couple of months, when the baby’s *bi’tséé’* (umbilical cord) falls off, the father must bury it outside the Hogan to keep the child’s mind and heart at home. Or the grandparents may

bury the umbilical cord at the sheep or horse corral to make the child a rancher. A newborn should not be taken to public activities like rodeo, fairs, and country western dances. The newborn lungs are fresh and soft so she must be kept away from dirt and kept in a warm home. If it is winter, do not wash the infant.

From birth to six months, the child will be sleeping the majority of the time in the cradle board (*second* home). During this special time the child and mother will communicate to one another through verbal and nonverbal means. The mother will sense the child and intuitively think, “*Shoo shiyazhí óózhinęę’ę.*” The newborn will communicate through its cries. Certain cries communicate the infant’s needs. Parents and grandparents, for instance, will intuitively sense that the Diné child is crying for her home (cradle board) or because she is hungry, cold, or frightened. When a newborn was crying because she was tired, *Shimasaní* used to say, “Oh! She is crying for her home, her cradle board! Don’t be carrying her around like that. She needs to be stable. Tie her back up. She needs to rest and be reconnected to her home. Make sure to sing to her in Diné and cover the cradle board with a sheet to protect her from people who might distract her when she is sleeping. Keep her near you and don’t depend on someone to take care of your child. Take care of your little one and know what she expresses her needs and desires through her cries. It is important to communicate with the child verbally, orally, and by sense.”

Below are some of the things my late paternal grandfather *Shinali Hastiih’yęę* taught me about Diné childhood rearing beliefs and practices:

- 0- 9 months: The child will communicate his needs and desires through its different cries. It is important to have a sheet covered the child face when he sleeps so people don't have to put their sticky hands on the child. For spiritual protection, ghost beads need to be around the cradle board or around the child's hand (8 months old to 10 years old). When the Diné child laughs for the *first* time, a "first laugh" dinner is held for the child to celebrate and rejoice with the child. Prayers and songs are said for the innocent child who through her first laugh brought the family, community and village together with good mind and heart. The person who made the baby laugh is the sponsor of the dinner. A prayer, song, and salt are shared among the relative. The reason why the *first* laugh is celebrated is so that the child won't be selfish to others but will be understanding and *jóó'ba* (forgiving and giving).
- 10-16 months: The child will slowly be moving out of the cradle board (*second* home) and learning to sit on its own on Mother Earth. Soon she will be crawling up on things and holding on things, and standing. The child will still be sleeping and may still be using her cradle board (*second* home). When the child grows out of the cradle board, the mother has to take the cradle board apart and put it away neat for the next baby.
- 17- 24 months: The child is introduced to ceremonies. He will need to learn how to sit and observe during ceremonies. They are given rattles to shake when the men are singing. The child needs to explore and be monitored all the time.

- 2- 3 year old: The child will need to interact with others outside the home and needs to see and be with other children her age. The child needs sun light and the physical world to explore and to hear grandparent's voices.
- 3- 4 year old: Teach the child manners. A child needs to learn how to say in the mother tongue: I am sorry, I love you, I apologize, you're welcome, thank you, I appreciate it, and I forgive you. Teach the child to be accepting of diversity rather than to be prejudice.

#### Learning the mother tongue

A Diné child should learn Diné as her *first* language. The first words I learned from my mother were *Ya'at'eeh* (hello), *Ahxe'hee'* (thank you), *Shíma* (mother), and *Shízhé'é* (father). Below are some basic words (Yellowhair, 1989) a young Diné child will hear and learn:

#### Directions

- East- há'a'aah
- South- Shádi'ááh
- West- e'e'aah
- North- Náhookos

#### Months

- October- Ghąąjı'
- November- Niłch'ihts'ósi
- December – Niłch'ihtsoh



- January- Yas NiŁt'ees
- February- Atsábiyáázh
- March – Wóózhch'ııd
- April – T'ąąchil
- May-T'ąątsoh
- June – Ya'ııshjáášcılı
- July – Ya'ııshjáášhtsoh
- August – Bini'anıt'ąąts'ósí
- September – Bini'anıt'ąątsoh

#### Four Seasons

- Spring- Daango
- Summer- Shııgo
- Fall- Aak'eego
- Winter- Haigo

#### Fruits

- Watermelon- ch'ééhjiyáán
- Peach- didzétsoh
- Bananas- hashk'aan
- Apricot – didzétsoh yázhı

#### Animals

- Horse- Łıı
- Lamb- Dibé

- Cow- béégashii
- Pig- bisóodi
- Turkey- tǎzhii
- Chicken- na' ahóóhai
- Duck- naal' eeŁi
- Fish- Łóó'

#### Describing the weather

- Rainy- nahaŁtin
- Cloudy- K'os diilkϕ'
- Snowy- NíchííL
- Sunny- adinídíín
- Windy- níyol

#### Days of the Week

- Sunday- Damóo
- Monday- Damóo Biiskání
- Tuesday- Naakijj Nida'anish
- Wednesday- Tágíjj Nida'anish
- Thursday- Dj'íjj Nida'anish
- Friday- Nida'iinísh
- Saturday – Damóo Yázhí

## Numbers

- One- t'ááŁá'í
- Two- naaki
- Three- táá'
- Four- dijí'
- Five- ashdla'
- Six- hastaąą
- Seven- tsosts'id
- Eight- tseebíí
- Nine- náhást'ée
- Ten- neeznáá

## Colors

- White- Łigai
- Blue- yágo dootŁ'izh
- Green- TátŁ'idgo dootŁ'izh
- Purple- Tsédídeéh
- Yellow- Łitso
- Orange- Łitsxo
- Red- Łichxíí'
- Pink- Dinilchíí''
- Black- Łizhin
- Brown- DibéŁchí'í or yishtŁizh

## Chapter 5

### FINDINGS: WHAT MAKES A DINÉ CHILD, DINÉ

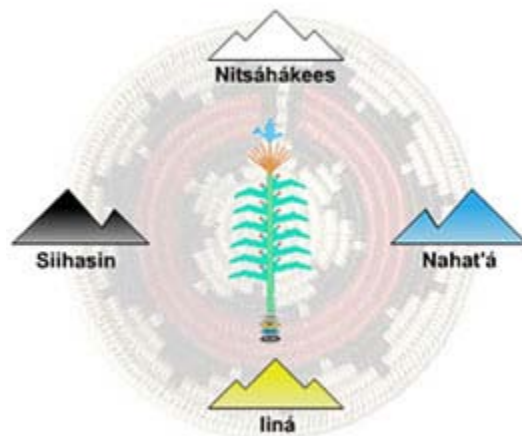


Figure 5. Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hozhoo

#### Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hozhoo

East- Nitsáhákees (Thinking), Spring, White, Birth, Whiteshell

South- Nahatá (Planning), Summer, Blue, Youth, Turquoise

West- Iiná (Living), Fall, Yellow, Marriage, Abalone shell

North- Siihasin (Assuring), Winter, Black, Old Age, Black Jet Stone

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As a way to sift through all the information I collected on my own early learning as a Diné child, I asked myself: What should a Diné child learn in order to be Diné? The first thing that came to my mind was the Diné calendar, prayers, songs, and kinship (K'é). Prayer is an important part of being Diné. Diné people identify themselves according to their mother tongue (L1), stories, clans,

ceremonies, prayers, songs, and epistemology. To speak to the Holy People with the mother tongue is powerful, sacred, and meaningful. English words don't even come close to how we want to express our self in our ancestral tongue. To develop competency and knowledge in the Diné world, a Diné child needs to learn the mother tongue (L1) *first*; without the mother tongue, a child will struggle with her identity! Yet, today speaking the mother tongue is a luxury because not many children are learning the Diné language in their early childhood. I thought deeply about as a young child how I learned about prayer and about its importance.

I recalled one evening when I was four-years-old, I saw my father with his abalone shell, chief blanket, yellow corn, bow guard, and turquoise necklace. I heard him speaking quietly in Diné. I asked my father in Diné, "What are you doing?" He said, "I am praying to our Holy People, *Diyin Dine'é*." He then proceeded to teach me how to pray; the process includes learning the names of the *Diyin Dine'é* in chronological order. It required memorization and years of practice. As an adult I am still learning the *Diyin Dine'é* names. I asked my father who taught him how to pray, he replied "My father."

My father went on to explain that it's natural for us to pray when we get up and before we go to bed, before we eat and after we eat, at ceremonies, when going through rough times, and so forth. It is good to tell the Great Creator your problems. The Great Creator is the best listener, teacher, counselor, psychology, and friend. My father told me, "My daughter, I don't have much to give you

materially. But I encourage you to pray each day. Pray, pray, and pray.” So for most of my life, I have been calling the Holy People collect.

My father explained to me that a Diné child must learn her clans. Clans are very important for the Diné people. *K'é* means clanship in Diné language. Clanship is kinship; it is a form of belonging. Today the Diné people still identify themselves according to the clans they were born into. Each clan has its own rightful ownership of representations of certain sacred colors, ceremonies, teachings, and leadership skills. Our clans are our identity. The *first* clan is the mother's clan and that clan is continuous. The *second* clan is the father's clan. The *third* clan is the maternal grandfather's clan and the *last* clan is the paternal grandfather's clan. When a child is about seven-years-old, she must introduced herself at a ceremony by saying:

*Ya'et'eeh, shí éí TŁ'áashchi'i nish'li*

*Má'údeeshgúzhiníí éí bashishchín*

*HashTŁishnii éí dashichei*

*Todichíinii éí dashinalí*

With respect, the Diné child informs the audience who her important relatives are (for example, her grandparents). This tells people where they come from.

Now, imagine how many parents teach their children about clans? It is important for children to know their clans because it identifies them as “*being Diné*.” The reason why we have clans is to prevent intermarriage, in breeding, stealing children, miscarriage, and tradition teaching of not being with your own clan, that may cause birth defect. Our clan system protects us from in-breeding.



Figure 6. Nine Night Chant, the *TŁée Ji Hataal*. Andrew Bia, Artist

Diné children need to learn about their Holy People (*Diyin Dine'é*), oral stories and ceremonies because that is the root of Diné faith and belief. Diné Holy People are called *Hashch'eit'í'í*, (First Talking God), *Hashch'eiwaan* (Second Talking God), *ÁŁtsé Hastiin* (First Man), and *ÁŁtsé Asdzqá* (First Woman). The Holy People are the founders, caretakers, protectors, and providers of the Diné people. Children will learn about the *Diyin Dine'é* through their participation in the summer and winter ceremonies. One of the summer ceremony is called the Enemy Scalp Dance (*Ndáá*) and the winter ceremonies are called *IŁnazi'í Ji HataaL* or *IŁnásjin Ji HataaL*. The *Ye'iibichei Ji HataaL* is called *TŁée Ji Hataal*. The *Yei'bi'chei* dancers are impersonating the *Diyin Dine'é*.

I recalled the first time I saw the *Yei'bi'chei*. It was one winter when our family came together to celebrate life through prayer, songs and ceremony, and I was sitting in the hogan with 30 cousin brothers and twenty cousin sisters. We were all mesmerized when we saw *Shinali Hastiih* dance *Yei'bi'chei*. *Shinali Hastiih* taught his children, my father and aunties, how to dance *Yei'bi'chei*.

They performed with perfection in ceremonies. They both began learning how to dance and sing as young children. But today what do Diné parents believe is important to teach their children?

I recalled the songs, prayers, smells, *sense of place*, and good feelings it brought me. While sitting inside the hogan we also listened to Diné medicine man tell us stories of how he learned to be a medicine man. The hogan was our classroom where learning from giving, knowledgeable Diné elders and philosophers was a true blessing. It is one of my fondest memories of learning to become Diné.

Diné child must learn how to dance in Diné ceremonies. They will be guided on the ceremonial dance floor by their elders, grandparents, and parents. My parents and grandparents made me sit in ceremonies with them. I observed the ceremonies when I was a child. I was guided, supervised, and encouraged. I was not afraid to express myself in ceremonies because my grandparents were there for me. I hid behind them when I was shy, tired, and often fell asleep.

Children have a special role in this ceremony that takes from two to three years to prepare for. There are important protocols to follow which require adults (parents and grandparents) to mentor and guide young children who are instructed to observe, listen, and learn the process. This way of learning is very different from learning than by asking questions and constant talk. A closer look at my childhood participation in ceremonies reveals some important Diné childhood rearing beliefs and practices are:



- Children learn beside their caretakers, most likely their parents. They sit inside the hogan with their children and grandchildren;
- Diné children are included and are actively involved in activities of the home and in ceremonies such as the Yei'bi'chei and Hozhóojí
- Children have several teachers, a special group of caretaker-teachers are Diné elders. Diné grandparents taking the time to teach their grandchildren how to dance, sing, pray, and conduct themselves in Diné ceremonies.

Another way young Diné children learn is through oral stories. Through oral stories one learns not only how things are done but “why things happen.” To be able to understand through why things happen in the Diné worldview, Diné children need to learn about the creation stories, 1<sup>st</sup> World, 2<sup>nd</sup> World, 3<sup>rd</sup> World, and 4<sup>th</sup> World (Aronilth, 1991). Diné children will come to know that oral stories are told *only* in the winter. In these stories are the winter characters such as Whiteshell Woman, Changing Woman, the Sun, Spider Woman, and Coyote. My late paternal grandfather would go into detail and explained everything about these stories including the important messages about life they contained.

A deeper look at a Diné early childhood

In recollections of my early childhood and general observations of Diné families, there are some prominent themes that arose from all that I learned during this period. First of all, the Diné language was a crucial part of my learning. Even before Diné children are born, when they are still in the womb, the Diné

language was given to the unborn child through songs, prayers, socialization, and just plain talk. Also, as young children, we listened and watched our parents and grandparents praying and listened carefully when they sang. The prayers and songs sung in the Diné language are powerful teaching tools for learning the cardinal directions, plants, mountains, rivers, human and spiritual beings, and about what is valued in Diné culture (Neezzhoni, 2010). Secondly, important in this early socialization process is teaching through our oral traditions. As a young child, I remember my parents placing me next to them when we visited family and friends or when we attended a ceremony. Just by having children present at an activity or in the home, they observe, listen and begin thinking about the Diné world. Diné children, for example, when placed in their cradle board, he or she will watch, listen and absorb what is happening around them. This is what is amazing about infants and young children. As a popular saying goes, “They are like sponges, they soak everything up.” This is true for Diné children. Rogoff (2003) calls this kind of firsthand learning through actual participation, “intent participation.”

A third significant theme emerging from my self-reflections and observations is the learning of relationships, especially Diné clans and family members. In Diné childhood rearing beliefs and practice, it takes four clans to raise a child. This requires everyone to do their part to provide for the child. To put a child on earth is a lifetime commitment to the Holy People that you will take care of that child. My siblings and I were fortunate to have our parents and grandparents instruct us about the Diné clan system but we also learned it in our

social lives when we went visiting. I recall my parents and grandparents explaining ‘who was who’ in regards to clan relationships at social gatherings like ceremonies.

These are some of the prominent themes that emerged from my early childhood reflections. As a young Diné speaking child, I was able to learn important knowledge that contributed to my conceptual, social, emotional, physical and spiritual development because I heard and learned to speak Diné as my *first* and only language until I went to preschool where I began to learn English. Although I struggled to learn English at school, eventually I learned English. But, I never forgot my Diné language which I still speak every day.

I was fortunate to have so many caring and loving people in my early childhood. They not only cared for me but taught the knowledge that I need to know to become a competent, responsible and compassionate Diné adult. In the previous section, I talked about the importance of young Diné children learning oral stories. I talked about how my late paternal grandfather Thomas Brown Bia told stories to his children and grandchildren. *Shinali Hastiih* was a great story teller. But, in addition to oral stories, *Shinali Hastiih* taught us about life, *Iiná*, and how to conduct ourselves through “direct instruction.” Some may call it “lecturing,” but to me it was guidance from a wise, loving and caring person. Even as I left for college at age 21 he said to me, “Wait a minute nali. Where are you going? How are you doing in school? Remember to stand tall and be proud of who you are. You are my grandchild and you are beautiful. You are my “Sunshine.” When others are doing wrong, don’t follow them, or you will be led

astray. You need strong people in your life that sing and pray. Seek good and positive people in your life and for your family.”

My late maternal grandma and my late paternal grandpa are the ones who exemplify the Diné teachings. They are my *first* teachers, my counselors, and friends; they are the backbone of my life and education. Therefore, it is appropriate for me to acknowledge them because they learned their philosophy and knowledge from their late grandparents and forefathers. This intergenerational learning ensured that the children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and so on learned what it meant to be Diné. My grandparents are the ideal Diné teachers and representation of the Diné way of life. Like their forefathers and ancestral were expert in Diné education, epistemology, philosophies, prayers, songs, ceremonies, and oral stories. Diné people travel far and wide just to visit my grandparents to learn about their Diné knowledge and wisdom. A few of their Diné teachings are as follows:

- Express yourself in Diné *first*.
- Believe in yourself.
- Be proud to be Diné. You are rich in Diné culture and clans and do not need to imitate other cultures.
- Acknowledge and respect your elders.
- Pray with corn pollen each day and thank the Holy People for their blessings.
- Do not favor one parent over another and, vice versa, the parent should not favor one child over another.

- Contribute at the ceremonies.
- Be positive by being around positive rather than negative people.  
For example, do not gossip. When people are gossiping, walk away.
- Keep yourself busy and do not stand or sit around like you have nothing to do. In other words, do not be lazy, be self-initiating.
- Keep your house clean and warm, and always have something cooking.
- Walk your talk. If you want something good in life, it will take hard work and dedication. For instance, go to school, get a job and provide for yourself. You have to get up and do it for yourself. Nobody is going to do it for you. It has to be you, you have to want it. You have to experience it to understand the struggle and to cherish the reward (*T'aani init'éego eiyá*).
- When you start a project, finish it. Don't get half-way done and then give up.
- Value and respect your body. Do not draw, disfigure or tattoo your body or pierce your lips, nose, tongue, eye brows, and body (an exception is ear piercing). Do not dye your hair dyed pink, blue, or green.

One of the most important teachings given to me by my late paternal grandfather, late maternal grandma, and late little brother was wherever you may go: “Don't forget that you are Diné. Never ever deny yourself being Diné. Speak

Diné first. Do not imitate another culture because you have a rich and unique culture. Be proud to be Diné.”

I could recall *Shimasani* teaching how the Rainbow Clan Society and Red Cheek Clan prepared young warriors for war. During this time, space, identity, and *sense of place* were all important pieces of this old teaching, my late maternal grandma called it *Nidahidzood Yéé Dqq’*. It means when the Diné people lived in fear. Before sunrise, young men, warriors, runners, and riders were disciplined to be physically fit to escape from non-Diné. They were trained to be messengers, Diné out run the enemy and carry messages to another village that their village is being attack. The Diné men and women were discipline and nothing was taken for granted. These teachings, I learned from my late maternal grandma, *Adzqq TĒ’ááshchi’i*. The teaching originally came from her mother and maternal grandma. From both side of the family, mother and father, I was taught to be proud to be Diné and if it was not for my parents, my *first* teachers, I would not be the Diné woman I am today.

## Chapter 6

### CONCLUSION

As I thought deeply about my early years as a child and what and how I learned, I realized that things have greatly changed for today's Diné people and children. "We live in an extremely dynamic world, a world which is rapidly changing with an ever-increasing number of people moving across a diversity of culture" (Dien, 2000). The more I contemplated about my own upbringing, the more questions I had about today's Diné children. In retrospect, I realize I am fortunate to be blessed with so many loving Diné caretakers who took the time to teach me (and my siblings and cousins) and who spoke to me only in the Diné language. As well, in my studies I learned that growing up speaking an Indigenous language in early childhood is rarity (Romero-Little, 2010) and that the majority of American Indians, including Diné children enter school as primary speakers of English. Furthermore, along with language loss is cultural loss! Are contemporary Diné children learning the Diné language? According to Benally and Viri (2005), the Navajo language is at a "crossroads": There is a 50-50 chance that the Navajo language will survive into the next century. If this is true, why aren't parents and grandparents speaking to their newborns and young children in the Diné language? This can reverse the language loss before it even begins! If language as key to identity, is the carrier of culture and Diné worldview (Hinton, 2002), then why are we not doing more to ensure that our Diné children learn the Diné language in childhood? I realize that this is a very

complicated question. And, at this point I must say that I am not a parent (yet) so I may not realize the deeper complexities of raising a Diné speaking child.

However, I have observed some significant changes in the Diné way of life that have impacted the way Diné adults interact with and what language they value most for their children. I remember that *Shinali Hastiih* was a seven-foot tall Bitterwater Clan man who went directly to the point, always in Diné. His house rule was “Do not speak English to me. I do not understand English. Speak *only* Diné in this house.”

But today, how many parents have this strong language ideology, let alone time and patience for children. Because of all the outside and insider pressures to speak English to children and because it is easier to speak English than Diné to them, the majority of Diné children are not learning the Diné language as their *first* language and therefore not learning the important things that make them Diné.

In my self-reflections, I thought about today’s Diné children. I thought about who teaches them, what and how they learn, and why they learn certain things. I remembered one of my observations of contemporary Diné adults and children. In this particular observation, I witnessed a young Diné father playing with his three young daughters. They were playing a hand-clapping game and singing this song in English:

Say pink, you stink. Say penny, you don’t got any. Say white, you're getting married tonight. Say yellow, you’re a jello. Daddies are mean, made out of bean. Mommies are nice, made out of rice. My mother, your mother, live across the street. Eighteen, 19, Alligator Street, every night



they have a fight and this is what they say: Girls are sexy, made out of Pepsi. Boys are rotten, made out of cotton.” (field notes)

Watching the Diné father with his children made me think about how different my early childhood experiences were. I recalled how my late *Shinali Hastiih* and late little brother (Andrew Emerson Bia, Jr.) participated in summer and winter ceremonies. My late little brother at four years of age was initiated in the fire dance ceremony, he was the fire dance clown, a special dancer for this ceremony. He was guided by my father and older brother. He was the smallest fire dancer clown. He followed my father and older brother around at the ceremonial like a coyote pup. Although this sounds “cute,” his role as being the fire dance clown was taken serious and as young as he was, he was contributing to an important ceremony and an important purpose.

Today, parents may teach their children it is important to be diverse, independent, multicultural, humble, and respectful but at the same time children are learning not just from their parents. They are learning from video games, PSP, IPod2, X-Box 360, Blue Ray, Lego, Barbie Dolls, and Leap Frog Pen. Young Diné girls are influenced by Walt Disney characters like Dora, Spice Girls, and Tinkerball. They listen to Justin Bieber and Lady GaGa songs. Diné teenage boys and girls want the latest Blackberry cell phone, a 3-inch television, and a digital camera. When one considers the amount of time Diné children spend with these modern “fun” technological gadgets that are all in English *first*, one sees that the Diné language is taking a backseat to English. Moreover, Diné parents

aren't spending much time with their own children. Understood in this light, one can understand why Diné is no longer important to Diné families.

In my search to capture Diné childhood rearing beliefs and practices, I came to a deep realization that by instilling in our children those essential elements that make them Diné we are actually remembering our *nihizazí* and *chohsoní*, “Our Way of Life” and our Forefathers teachings and their instructions: “Do not forget. Do not forget who you are. You are Diné. Speak Diné first.” Being Diné is about the spirit people, the ones who have left us and entered into the spirit world. Christian people called them “angels” and Indigenous people called them “Eagle, Hawk, Coyote, and *Diyin Dine’é*” because they still continue to watch over us. They are on the *other* side of the world and only the Holy People and our Creator can communicate with these spirit people. And, they do this through the Diné language (L1). This is why when I have children; I will speak to my children in Diné *first*. English will come later. It will be important for my children to learn the Diné traditional way of life *first* so they will know who they are and keep connected to the “old people” who sacrificed so much so that we always remember that we are Diné. Enjoy and do things in Diné *first*.

As my important forefathers and foremothers have taught me, I will end my reflections of my early childhood with a story about the rainbow and Diné children. I was told this story by my late paternal grandfather, *Shinali Hastiih*. I prefer to tell it orally in Diné, but for this academic purpose I will have to tell it in a written story in English:

Long ago Diné parents along with their children left their homes, ceremonial grounds, and elders to find fortune at *Tse'di'yin shi'jaa* somewhere toward Sandia Peak and Taos Mountain. After arriving without anticipating the consequences of their greed, they *TsidiŁ* (gambled) from sunrise to sunset and lost track of time, days, and seasons. They lost their precious belongings without attending to their children because they were caught up in traditional stick game. Nobody was taking care of the children except for a ten-year-old boy, who was the oldest child. This boy was a natural leader, teacher, mentor, and protector. He voluntarily accepted the responsibility of caring for the thirty young Diné children while the parents were at the *TsidiŁ*!

While their parents gambled into the night, the Diné children camped outside of the *TsidiŁ* and slept at their camp fire. At night, the children shared only four blankets and slept closely to one another to keep warm. The youngest ones were kept in the center of the huddle for warmth and shelter. The ten-year-old boy gave piggyback rides to Diné children that had no moccasins and yucca sandals. He took them to the play areas and the children play. The Diné children played hike-and-peek outside of the *TsidiŁ*. Before bedtime the ten-year-old removed thorns from each child's feet and doctored them. This is how he provided love, comfort, attention, and nourishment to them. The children imitated the ten-year-old boy by playing doctor. They doctored each other's feet. The children smiled and laughed without realizing the absence of their parents

One day, the children went to the East. They played all day along the riverbanks and made things out of the white clay like pottery bowls, a hogan, and

toys in the shape of a coyote, mountain lion, bear, and wolf. The children left their footprints and handprints in Mother Earth. That evening, they returned to *Tse'di'yin shi'jaa*. The parents found white clay around their children's mouths, hands, faces, and feet. The young ones only wore raggedy clothes but not all of them had moccasins and yucca sandals. The parents saw the ten-year-old boy taking care of their children. The next day, the children went to the South and played in the blue clay. The third day, the children went to the West and played in the yellow clay. The children went back to *Tse'di'yin shi'jaa* and slept there. The fourth day, the children went to the North. They played all day along the riverbanks and made small pots, dolls, and toys out of the black clay. Again, they left their footprints and handprints in Mother Earth.

The children went North and kept going north. Then the Diné parents and adults noticed something was wrong; there were no children around, and the children were not making any noise outside of the *TsidiŁ*. The parents thought the children were playing hide-and-seek but the only thing to be found were fresh children-size footprints that were a day old. "Where are the children?" asked a young Diné mother. The Diné parents quickly traveled three directions, East, South, and West but there were no children to be found. The only evidence of their children was their footprints, handmade pottery, and toys. The children had left a trail of footprints and handprints along the edge of each riverbank. They also left behind small shelters made out of twigs and evidence of a deer killed by the ten-year-old boy.

Then, the Diné parents traveled north following the children's trail for three days. The Diné parent knew the yucca sandal prints belonged to the ten-year-old boy who had given piggyback rides to the children who had no moccasins and yucca sandals to wear. In addition to seeing camps where the children had stayed, the parents found, saw, witnessed, and touched where their children had played. The Diné parents were not far from rescuing them. From a distance, the Diné parents saw a beautiful lake. Then, the parents stop and heard the children talking, laughing, and giggling. The ten-year-old was very loud, he made fun of the adults, and he imitated how the adults acted. Then, one would get up and say "Like this" and all of the children laughed and laughed.

Then from a distance, a beautiful rainbow appeared from the sky. The Diné parents saw their Holy People coming down, *Hash'ch'ei't'i'í* and *Hash'ch'eiwaan*. The Holy People stood on the rainbow. The rainbow touched Mother Earth, then the lake, and then the Diné children. The rainbow went underneath the Diné children's sore feet and magically lifted them from Mother Earth. The children saw *Hashch'ei't'i'í* and *Hashch'eiwaan* carrying the ceremonial rattle, heard the beautiful sound of the rattle, and followed them. The Diné children saw their parents from a distance and waved to them. The parents ran toward the rainbow and yelling, "Come back!" But the children kept walking up and up the rainbow. The rainbow was traveling fast. The Diné parents cried and mourned as they saw their children disappear into the sky. Feeling pitiful, the Diné parents then left *Tse'di'yin shi'jaa* and returned to their homes without their children.

In the spring, a mocking bird came to a Diné parent's Fork Hogan. The mocking bird brought a message back from the spirit world and told the Diné parents that their children were safe and happy. This is the story of what happened to earth parents who did not take care of their children because of distraction caused by greed, and the Holy People had no choice but to take their children because they had been neglected.

The moral of the above story is that children are sacred and because they are sacred parents (and grandparents) must not neglect them; rather, they should exemplify the teachings of Diné childhood rearing beliefs and practices. And, if they are speakers of Diné, they must do this in Diné *first*. It is the best way that we can ensure that children will come to know what it truly means to be Diné. They, in turn, can pass on this sacred knowledge about parenting to their children.

Because of growing Diné language loss, the Diné people need to think of creative alternatives for increasing the number of Diné childhood speakers both on and off the Navajo reservation. Some of the alternatives are the community-based approaches such as those found in Cochiti Pueblo, New Mexico, and New Zealand. Another alternative method of teaching Indigenous languages is the Montessori approach, an approach that stresses children are true explorers, highly intelligent, and inquisitive learners who need a nurturing, supportive and flexible context for learning. I was raised in a supportive environment such as this where Diné was my *first* language. Children must be spoken to daily in the Diné language starting during their infancy so they can be fluent speakers and teachers, as parents and grandparents, of their Diné language. If they are going to truly

know that they are Diné, this process of cultural survival must start *before* they enter preschool, where they will learn English as a second language.

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