CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING
Because children reflect their family values, beliefs, and strengths, in order for teachers to meet their students’ needs, they must understand and appreciate the values and relationships within the student’s family. Nowhere is this more appropriate than with the American Indian/Alaskan Native family where Tribal practices and traditions may be established as the underpinnings of the family’s identity.

NATIVE VALUES
As in every culture, it is very important to consider the stage of personal identity development when looking at family practices, values, beliefs and attitudes. While it is true that there are many shared values and beliefs among Tribal people, it also bears acknowledging that there are over 500 Tribes across the United States, and their customs and practices vary widely in areas of spirituality, foods, ceremonial practices, language, and other important beliefs and practices which cannot be accurately described in written word. It is also important to recognize that values and behavioral patterns common to many traditional Native American tribes may vary with Tribal members and families who have adopted customs and attitudes while living within the dominant Anglo American society of the United States.

Resiliency Sense of Place
The one experience that all Native people on this continent have in common is a history of oppression and racism beginning at the time of “discovery” with theft of their lands which they had occupied for millennia. European governments did not acknowledge Native title to lands in the “new world” despite international law dicta that advised of such. Despite the atrocities and suffering endured for centuries, Tribal people have been able to survive and to overcome the genocide and oppression with a strong sense of resiliency derived from their collaborative way of living (George-Kanentiio, 2000). The resilient character of Tribal communities is prominent in their oral histories. The late Wilma Mankiller, first woman chief of the Oklahoma Cherokee Nation, spoke of her peoples’ ability to endure displacement and pick themselves up and rebuild a new place of being after they were subjected to a Trail of Tears removal from the southeast region of the United States to Oklahoma. (Reid & Tenorio, 2007).
Resiliency

Resiliency itself is tied to another strong value among Tribes: the ability to raise children in their traditional ways of life, passing on Tribal beliefs and customs. The teaching of life skills and passing on the strengths of the Tribe are not new concepts for Tribal nations (Brendtro, L., Brokenleg, M., & Van Bockern, S., 1990). Elders, relatives, and clan leaders have always played a role in watching youth grow and guiding them towards adult responsibilities by sharing stories which taught the right way to do things based on Tribal values. (Earle, 2000). Young adults coming of age were given certain freedoms but this was always tempered by accepting responsibility for making positive contributions to their families and Tribal community, and caring for those who are younger and weaker (Dobrec, T., French, R.F., Braden, J.M. & Fields K.T., 1989a).

Children regarded as sacred beings

Community responsibility for their children derives from a strong regard of the child as a sacred gift, and young parents were often cautioned by family members to respect the child as an intelligent being because they come so recently from Creator. Such a perspective was clearly a strong impetus for the 1978 passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act which was initiated in response to the extremely high rates of removal of Indian children from their homes and subsequent placement into non-Indian foster and adoptive homes. A familiar cry reverberating throughout Indian country at the time of the Act’s passage was, “Without our children there can be no Tribe.”

Respect for Child as Unique Being

Historically, childhood was marked by a community responsibility to nurture, protect, and guide (Bullerdick, 1999), followed by a period of being taught responsibility very early as in older children being taught to care for younger members of the family and to set an example of good behavior. Young adulthood was marked by accepting more responsibility including participating in traditional ceremonies, often, during puberty, showing their ability to endure hardship or exhaustion with grace (a pleasant disposition) which often marked a coming of age (Graham, T., Cellarius, K., Clothier, P., Moore, L.A., & Hawkins, J., 2001).
Such rites of passage, involving the young person’s family, tribal family and elders, were supported by special dinners, dress, and gifting. It marked an occasion when the young person would be recognized as a young man or woman, and would be expected to become more responsible for his or her own well-being (Clay 1992). While each child was viewed as a unique person with the potential to examine and define themselves without interference, choosing their own life path was acceptable as long as that choice did not interfere with the well-being of the group (Witt, 2002).

**Family Support**
Importantly, while the journey of transition from young adult into adulthood is regarded as a time to define and examine oneself, the family and tribal community always provided assurance that they would continue to be there for support (Yazzie, 1996). Such family/Tribal connections are critical to helping the young adult establish permanent, positive pathways on their journey to adulthood and forming healthy relationships. The concept of independent living can seem inconsistent to traditional teaching that a strong support system within extended family living is the successful path to follow.

**Balance and Harmony**
For traditional Indigenous peoples, relationships with their environment were based on living in balance with the natural cycles of the world. Reciprocity, a reverence for natural law, produced harmony. These were not and are not abstract philosophical concepts, but formulas for daily living. Living a good life, one free from sickness and conflict, requires that one strive to maintain social and spiritual harmony and balance (Hanohano, 1999).

The above described values are used by Tribal communities to help their children overcome negative life experiences and develop as healthy adults, while also preparing them to respect themselves and others (Bullerdick, 1999) along their journey. The Passages curriculum for American Indian Youth with Disabilities in Transition incorporates these values in its materials and activities to provide a Native context to a results-oriented approach defined by IDEA and the Rehabilitation Amendments in promoting a successful passage from school to post-school.

**Sources**

