



Educational Studies

A Journal of the American Educational Studies Association

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/heds20>

From Professional Development to Native Nation Building: Opening Up Space for Leadership, Relationality, and Self-Determination through the Diné Institute for Navajo Nation Educators

Angelina E. Castagno

To cite this article: Angelina E. Castagno (2021) From Professional Development to Native Nation Building: Opening Up Space for Leadership, Relationality, and Self-Determination through the Diné Institute for Navajo Nation Educators, *Educational Studies*, 57:3, 322-334, DOI: [10.1080/00131946.2021.1892686](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2021.1892686)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2021.1892686>



Published online: 26 May 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 13



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



From Professional Development to Native Nation Building: Opening Up Space for Leadership, Relationality, and Self-Determination through the Diné Institute for Navajo Nation Educators

Angelina E. Castagno

Northern Arizona University

ABSTRACT

Many of us have multiple stories that would be appropriate to tell given the theme of this Special Issue. I am compelled to tell a story about my work with teachers, teacher leaders, and other allies on the Navajo Nation. The Diné Institute for Navajo Nation Educators (DINÉ) was started by teacher leaders who envisioned a collaborative professional development institute specifically for K12 teachers on the Navajo Nation. In their rural, Indigenous-serving schools, teachers are often asked to deliver scripted curriculum that is decontextualized, dehistoricized, and therefore, dehumanizing for their students, themselves, and their communities. Their vision for the DINÉ was developed and honed over many years in response to this context. In this essay, I will briefly describe the DINÉ, how and why it began, and its current status. I will focus on three critical spaces that have opened up in and through the DINÉ: teacher leadership, connection/relationality, and activism/self-determination. In reflecting on these three spaces, I suggest that our work in the DINÉ is fundamentally about Native Nation building.

“It’s like I’m back in the boarding school.” I’ll never forget walking along the streets of a northeastern town, through the old buildings and courtyards of the Ivy League university where I was for the week with sixty K12 teachers from around the country, including a handful from the Diné¹ Nation. I had been working with the Diné teachers for about a year to collectively build a professional development (PD) institute that would be centrally focused on the vision and needs of teachers in Navajo-serving schools. We were spending a week on the East Coast as part of a national teacher PD program that was building the capacity of teachers across the United States.

Auneka² and I walked with our coffee-shop cups in hand, on our way to the first meeting of the morning. When she likened her boarding school experience to the way she felt at this Ivy League institution, as part of a program that she had been participating in for 3 years, I felt it in my gut. She was an accomplished teacher in her community, proudly bilingual, deeply knowledgeable about her culture and traditions, and had

CONTACT Angelina E. Castagno  angelina.castagno@nau.edu  Educational Leadership & Foundations, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ 86011, USA.

© 2021 American Educational Studies Association

earned a Master's degree many years prior. Yet she likened her current experience to that of being a young girl in some of our nation's most traumatic schools. I don't recall how I responded. As I think back on the conversation now, I have a similar pit in my stomach. But that pit feeling was—and still is—also the hope, the possibility, and the energy that drives the work we do back home.

When I received the solicitation to contribute an essay to this special issue of *Educational Studies* that reflected on “experiences of teaching about, writing about, and/or doing research on educating hope, radicalizing imagination, and politicizing possibility, particularly in hard times” (Special Issue invitation letter, April 2020), I was immediately compelled to tell a story about my work with teachers, teacher leaders, and other allies on the Navajo Nation. As a White woman, I have negotiated conflicting emotions about my work in and with Indigenous communities for at least the past 20 years. But the Diné Institute for Navajo Nation Educators (DINÉ), and especially the teacher leaders who have built this Institute with me, offers an incredibly poignant example of “educating hope, radicalizing imagination, and politicizing possibility.”

The purpose of this essay is to offer the DINÉ story as one example of these themes that guide this special issue. It is a deeply personal story, as told by me, but it is only possible because of the expertise, commitment, long hours, and kinship of many teachers. The collective work that has gone into the DINÉ has pushed me to rethink teacher professional development and, more importantly, to lead a university-based PD initiative in ways that align to and advance Native Nation building. While this is not a perfect effort, I hope to illustrate what it looks, sounds, and feels like to open up and sustain space for leadership, relationality, and self-determination in a professional development program for teachers in Indian Country.

Situating the story

The Navajo Nation spans 27,000 square miles in the states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. Approximately 333,000 people are enrolled tribal members, and roughly half of them reside within the Navajo Nation (Navajo Tourism Department, 2020). On the Nation, it is estimated that 40% of families do not have running water, and 30% do not have electricity in their homes (Dig Deep & US Water Alliance, 2020). There are six grocery stores spread out across the entire Nation, and children ride the bus up to 3 hours one way—often on bumpy dirt roads that are impassable during the monsoon rains—to get to school. But the Diné people have a reputation for being proud, deeply connected to Diné Bikéyah (Navajo lands situated within the Four Sacred Mountains), and resilient. Many Diné people have a strong association with Chief Manuelito's messages about pursuing an education and maintaining Navajo language and traditions. The schooling options for Diné children are complex, and families often move between various systems. The most common options include schools that are operated by the federal Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), schools that are tribally controlled and operated but still funded by the federal government, and traditional public schools in one of the 17 small districts that are located on or adjacent to the Nation. It is estimated that around half of the school-aged children do not have access to reliable internet at home (Irish, 2020).

The systemic inequities that have long impacted Diné communities received national attention in the Spring and Summer of 2020 because the COVID-19 pandemic hit the Navajo Nation especially hard. By mid-May, they had the highest COVID infection rate of anywhere in the United States with 3.4% of the Nation's population contracting the virus (Mozes, 2020; Silverman et al., 2020). On a Monday in early April, I received the first email from a teacher friend about how much she was hurting from all the friends and family who were ill or had already passed. Over the next nine days, I received multiple other texts and emails from other teacher friends echoing the same message and familiar ache. By late December, I was still hearing about the deaths, hospitalizations, and emotional and spiritual toll this was having on teachers across the Navajo Nation. The story I want to tell here is not about COVID-19 and the structural, historic, and ever-present disparities impacting Indian Country that gained visibility during 2020. This is important context, but the story I want to tell is about the important spaces that open up through the work we're doing in the DINÉ. These spaces were being cultivated before the pandemic, but their impact became especially visible during this challenging time.

Reflecting on these spaces helps me to understand that we have reimagined teacher professional development. It is not a banking process (Freire, 2000) of imparting knowledge to teachers, nor a purely technical process of assisting teachers to write a curriculum unit. Instead, the professional development partnership we have developed is fundamentally about Native Nation building, which is in turn about knowledge production, relationality, self-determination, and the honoring of teachers as fully human (Darder, 2017; hooks, 1994; Paris & Winn, 2014; Tuhiwai Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2018). As a scholar who has long been committed to educational equity, I entered this professional development project with a limited understanding of its potential—namely, that if we could support teachers in growing their content knowledge and developing culturally responsive curriculum, then we could move the needle on the systemic inequities³ that continue to plague Indigenous-serving schools. I still believe this to be the case; but I've come to understand that our work in the DINÉ is also a project in radical democratic practice (Giroux, 1992; hooks, 1994; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Olson, 2004) and, most importantly, in Native Nation building.

Indigenous scholars and community leaders have written extensively about Native Nation building (see, for example, Coffey & Tsosie, 2001; Cornell & Kalt, 1998; Deloria & Lytle, 1984; Native Nations Institute, 2012; Smith, 1999), but for the purposes of this discussion, I share this summative explanation:

Tribal nation building refers to the political, legal, spiritual, educational, and economic processes through which Indigenous peoples engage in order to build local capacity to address their educational, health, legal, economic, nutritional, relational, and spatial needs... [I]t is an intentional, purposeful application of human and social capital to address the needs of tribal nations and communities. (Brayboy, Castagno, & Solyom, 2014, p. 578)

In this essay, I will illustrate how the DINÉ engages and advances Native Nation building by centering K12 teachers as key stakeholders in this effort. It might seem paradoxical to suggest that teachers are critical Native Nation *builders* since schooling in the United States (and, indeed, globally) has been a mechanism for the building of

the U.S. nation state, and the assimilation of Indigenous people through schooling is a central feature of this generations-old strategy. But schooling has also been a site of resistance, of possibility, of imagination, and of hope for just as long as it has been a site of colonization and assimilation (Love, 2019; McCarty & Lee, 2014; Spring, 2001; Tuhiwai Smith et al., 2018; Willis, 1977). These simultaneous legacies set the foundation and provide continued guidance for our work in the DINÉ.

A brief introduction to the DINÉ

The DINÉ is a partnership between Northern Arizona University (NAU) and Navajo schools aimed at strengthening teaching in schools serving Diné and other Indigenous students. The DINÉ developed through the Yale National Initiative[©] (YNI), which began 40 years ago as a partnership between Yale University and the New Haven Public Schools to strengthen teaching in that community. YNI has grown to include the establishment of local Teachers Institutes[©] in other “high need” communities across the United States. Navajo teachers began participating in the Yale National Initiative in 2011, and in early 2016 *at the invitation of these teachers*, NAU entered into a formal partnership with Navajo educators to establish a local institute in northern Arizona. The DINÉ is the first local institute through YNI to partner with a Native Nation and the first to serve rural communities.⁴

The DINÉ professional development model emphasizes (1) multi-grade and cross-content-area collaboration among teachers, (2) teacher-developed instructional units, and (3) culturally responsive approaches to teaching and learning. These innovations are particularly critical for teacher professional development efforts in Native-serving schools. Because of the rural context and large geographic distances between schools and communities on the Navajo Nation, teachers rarely have access to professional development, and what they do receive is generally district-led, short-term, and not content-specific. Teachers need and crave professional learning spaces that are collaborative, intellectually stimulating, and relevant (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Matherson & Windle, 2017). The DINÉ model does just that; and it takes collaboration even further by structuring seminar groups with teachers from diverse grade levels, content areas, and schools. Furthermore, most teachers in reservation-based schools are constrained by either lack of curricular resources or mandates to use one-size-fits-all, scripted curriculum provided by their districts. In either case, it can be challenging for teachers to fully engage culturally responsive instructional practices (Castagno, 2012a; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; McCarty & Lee, 2014). The DINÉ model addresses this challenge by supporting teachers in the development of self-authored curriculum units that are aligned to state content standards and Diné cultural standards.⁵

In rural, Indigenous-serving schools, teachers are often asked to deliver scripted curriculum that is decontextualized, dehistoricized, and therefore, dehumanizing for their students, themselves, and their communities. The vision for the DINÉ was developed and honed over many years by a group of Navajo teachers in response to this context. What did it mean to imagine a space where teachers lead? Where rural, reservation schools house high-quality curriculum? Where Indigenous students are engaged through

culturally responsive approaches to teaching and learning? A critical step in radicalizing our collective imagination was to develop a set of guiding principles for our work. Through many meetings, conversations in both English and Diné, and input from various stakeholders, we arrived at these guiding principles:⁶

- Diné and other Indigenous youth, teachers, elders, and communities are rich sources and sites of knowledge.
- Culturally responsive schooling is a best practice, and the DINÉ integrates Navajo traditional knowledge throughout all aspects of our teaching, learning, and leading.
- Initiatives that strengthen teaching through culturally responsive professional development will in turn improve the educational attainment of Diné and other Indigenous youth, which is a necessary component for the tribal nation (re)building goals of sovereign Native Nations in the U.S.

Given the pervasive deficit views that still exist about Indigenous youth and communities, it felt like a radical exercise of imagination to articulate and then make public these statements. As we've worked to actualize these principles, I've observed three critical spaces that have opened up in and through the DINÉ: teacher leadership, connection/relationality, and activism/self-determination. These spaces are both physical and ideological, and they are both necessary for and constituent of Native Nation building.

Teacher leadership

Teachers are rarely positioned as formal leaders in their schools, let alone their communities. Although Diné women have always carried considerable authority and exerted influence in their families and communities, they have received less recognition in the spaces of formal leadership (Denetdale, 2006; Lee, 2012). But the DINÉ was born from a group of strong, bilingual Diné women who have been teachers on their Nation for decades. Honoring teachers as leaders is especially important now given the deskilling of the profession and neoliberal assault on education that is happening across the United States (Anyon, 2005; Apple, 1986; Ayers, 2016). What does it mean, and what does it look like, to cultivate and honor teacher leadership in a teacher professional development program?

The answer to this question must be contextual—that is, teacher leadership must begin from the teachers and communities themselves, and be responsive to the particular and ever-changing contexts in which teachers live and work—but I'll offer a few examples of what teacher leadership has come to mean in the DINÉ. We cultivate teacher leadership in tangible ways that may be replicable. For example, we have a formal teacher leadership team that makes decisions about the vision, direction, and operations of the DINÉ. This team meets regularly with me (as the Director) to discuss and decide things such as how and where will we recruit teacher applicants to the program, who will be admitted to the program, what seminar topics will be offered, what the annual calendar will look like, what changes need to be made from the prior year, what data do we have and what does it mean, and what gaps do we need to consider in our work. This leadership structure

is not without its challenges, which largely center around timelines and group coordination, but those challenges are part of the navigation of leadership roles and responsibilities. Teachers also serve in formal mentor roles for their colleagues, present at staff meetings and regional conferences about their work, and share information about the DINÉ in their local communities.

We also cultivate teacher leadership in less tangible, and more informal, ways. For me, this is the more important cultivation of teacher leadership, even though it is harder to pinpoint and articulate. I think that's because it's largely dependent on one's fundamental ideologies and deep-seated beliefs about teachers, gender, and Indigenous people. Engaging teachers as leaders in the DINÉ requires an unwavering rejection of Whiteness, sexism, colonialism, and neoliberal narratives about teachers. This is manifested through the ways we talk, listen, interact, relate, and share spaces with one another. Some of this can be intentionally signaled with language, such as when we talk about the expertise that each person brings to the program, and the explicit positioning of teachers' experiences and opinions as important knowledge. But this sort of cultivation and honoring of teacher leadership is also, more often, simply felt.

The development of teacher leadership is widely recognized as an important contributor to school improvement, higher levels of student achievement, and teacher retention (Cosenza, 2015; Lieberman, 1987). But what I'm suggesting is that the cultivation of teacher leadership within a professional development program like the DINÉ is a fundamentally more radical act in Native Nation building. The DINÉ's centering and building of teachers as leaders is not simply a move to improve schools or see gains in student achievement. It is a disruption of generations of colonizing ideologies and systems. It is a rejection of the gendered narratives that say women and teachers in general are docile, simple, nurturing childcare providers. It is a rejection of the racist narratives that say Indigenous people are at their best when assimilated to White, mainstream norms. These explicit acts of disruption and rejection are necessary for Native Nation building. Also necessary is the strengthening of teachers and culturally responsive curricular materials since Native Nation building is centrally about growing the capacity of Indigenous communities, people, and resources in self-determined ways.

Connection and relationality

Scholars have suggested that teacher leadership is fundamentally about collaboration, rather than about authority or status (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). And the DINÉ is intentionally structured for collaboration among teachers, as well as among teachers and university faculty. But beyond collaboration, the DINÉ opens up space for connection and relationality. We cultivate connections between the various people affiliated with the DINÉ because we know that connectivity keeps us spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and physically well. The Diné people have a concept of K'é, which references the clans (family lines) to which each person belongs and the family connections that bond people together. Introductions almost always include the naming of one's maternal, paternal, maternal grandfather's, and paternal grandfather's clans; in this way individuals can understand how they are related to one another. Within the DINÉ, it is not uncommon for teachers who have never met each other to quickly learn they are

related. In addition to the kinship connections that emerge, the DINÉ has opened up space for multiple, intersecting connections that often cross race and ethnic identities, age gaps, and school- and community-based athletic rivalries.

Relationality also emerges among and across ideas that are shared in the DINÉ. Educators are socialized through binaries and silos. For example, within mainstream educational frameworks, math is distinct from English language arts, which is distinct from science, which is distinct from social studies, which is distinct from “foreign” languages. Similarly, educators often think about core content as separate from culture. In Navajo-serving schools in the Southwestern United States, this is evidenced when teachers talk about Navajo “language and culture” as a distinct class, during a separate period, and taught by a specialized teacher. But the DINÉ rejects these binaries and silos, and the teachers in the DINÉ know them to be false representations of how the world, their communities, and knowledge exists. Every DINÉ teacher has a relational responsibility to make connections between and across subject areas, and to do this in ways that center and lift up Diné culture.

Brayboy and Maughan’s (2009) articulation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems is useful here:

A circular worldview that connects everything and everyone in the world to everything and everyone else, where this is no distinction between the physical and metaphysical and where ancestral knowledge guides contemporary practices and future possibilities, is the premise of many Indigenous Knowledge Systems ... Curriculum and subject matter must be tied directly to the lives of students and their Indigenous teachers. Separating the two makes them arbitrary and fails to recognize the knowledge system that is rooted in the ways of the community. (pp. 13–14)

The curriculum units the teachers write each year in the DINÉ provide multiple and varied examples of the ways they *both* leverage Indigenous Knowledge Systems, *and* continue to build them. All of Auneka’s curriculum units center issues, people, and texts that cross content-area standards and represent her students’ families and communities. She has, for example, explored the connections between traditional and contemporary Diné culture, the way Diné leaders have used eloquence in their oral stories for generations, and public health patterns on the Nation.⁷

Within the DINÉ, recognizing and honoring the knowledge systems that teachers possess is fundamental to both their own professional growth and the way we attempt to support their development of curriculum for their students. This is another way Native Nation building is operationalized through the DINÉ approach to teacher professional development. I am regularly humbled by the realization that this is a radical space within which to work considering the long history of assimilatory and colonizing efforts of schools, teachers, curriculum, and universities (Adams, 1995; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Olson & Worsham, 2007; Spring, 2001). And yet, somewhat paradoxically, the DINÉ is also not a radical space because it is grounded in, and consistent with, the traditional knowledge systems of the teachers and the communities to which they belong.

Activism and self-determination

Given the historical and ongoing systemic inequities impacting Indigenous students, there exists significant opportunity for teacher activism across the Navajo Nation.

Picower (2012b) notes that the literature on teacher activism is somewhat limited and dispersed, but that teacher activists “tend to make similar choices” (p. 562) that align to broad principles of advancing social justice both inside and outside of their classrooms (Kumashiro, 2004; North, 2008; Picower, 2012a). Picower’s research with self-identified teacher activists highlights three commitments among this group: (1) reconciling their vision of justice with the reality of inequality they witness in their communities, (2) developing caring relationships and democratic spaces by engaging culturally responsive, community-centered approaches to teaching, and (3) participating in collective action against the ways schooling reproduces the status quo. She also notes that teacher activists tend to be deeply empathetic, can see and analyze systems of oppression, and understand that they have a role to play in undoing injustice.

Although none of the teachers in Picower’s study identified as Indigenous, the commitments and characteristics she identifies are ones I’ve observed multiple times among the DINÉ teachers. But “activism” is not a word that I’ve heard used among the teachers in the DINÉ. They are just teaching. They are just Diné. Based on my conversations with the teachers, I know that the activism they practice is centrally about self-determination and sovereignty, but these too are words rarely used by most of the teachers. Tribal Critical Race Theory tells us that Indigenous peoples have a “desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429), and that “self-determination rejects the guardian/ward relationship currently in place between the U.S. government and tribal nations” (p. 434). This is evidenced in the teachers’ decisions to build curriculum units that center Navajo people, both past and present; in the way they talk about their students as their own children, nieces and nephews, and even sisters and brothers; and in their seamless weaving of the Navajo language throughout their English conversations, even when they know not everyone in the room will understand.

In other words, the space that opens up for teachers in the DINÉ is one that an outsider—including me—would recognize as ripe with activism, and yet one that I suspect the teachers themselves would not characterize in this way. But I see the investment the teachers make in the development and recognition of themselves as intellectuals (Giroux, 1988), and by extension, their students as intellectuals. This is connected to the themes discussed above because part of the teacher leadership evidenced in the DINÉ is that teachers share their knowledge and collectively produce knowledge that extends, and sometimes pushes against, the knowledge shared by faculty members. This knowledge production does not always adhere to the norms university personnel have come to expect in classrooms since, for example, it may not have a written or published citation, it may include a ceremonial impact not explainable by western science, or it may be told through Navajo words that the faculty member doesn’t know. As Brayboy and Maughan (2009) point out, “recognizing [their] ingenuity is essential for Indigenous educators; they must have multiple sources of strength to draw on in their work with students to disrupt the ongoing damaging impacts of deficit thinking and colonization” (p. 18). Leveraging these sources of strength is an active engagement of self-determination and, by extension, of Native Nation building. Through this modeling of knowledge production and intellectual capital, the DINÉ teacher leaders are building their own capacity, and the capacity of their young students.

Unbounded space

These spaces for teacher leadership, relationality, and self-determination that have opened up through the DINÉ are important for the teachers in our program, but they have also been important for me. At the risk of centering myself, and by extension Whiteness, in this writing, a few words are needed to unpack my role and my negotiation of that role vis-à-vis Whiteness and colonization. When the conversations were just beginning about developing the DINÉ, I was feeling particularly conflicted about my work within higher education. I was continuing to fulfill my teaching, research, and service responsibilities, but I was also thinking about how to more directly and explicitly advance educational equity in schools and communities. I was also seeking professional spaces that were not organized in such paternalistic, zero-sum, and competitive ways as I perceived the academy to be. The timing was fortuitous when two Diné teacher leaders came to my university to talk about their vision for a partnership between the Navajo Nation and the university that would provide long-term, culturally responsive professional development to teachers in Indigenous-serving schools. These two women were compelling and committed to a teacher-driven initiative. I was all in.

Part of what I have come to learn from the teachers in the DINÉ is that these spaces need not be bounded, transactional, or viewed as a zero-sum phenomenon. When I engage teacher leadership, relationality, and self-determination, that does not mean that the teachers have less of it available to them. In fact, these spaces seem to expand exponentially as more of us leverage them. Having studied, taught, and written extensively about Whiteness (see, for example, Castagno, 2012b, 2014, 2019), I have been perhaps hyper-sensitive about my positionality as an outsider, as White, and as a member of an institution that has long engaged in assimilatory and colonizing projects. Said another way, I was—and in many ways, continue to be—cautious of the space I was taking up within the DINÉ. But when I decentered myself, stepped back from voicing ideas, or otherwise deferred my engagement, the teachers and other Indigenous stakeholders nudged me forward. They did not seem to be concerned that if I “took up space,” that there would be less for them.

I will admit that I’m unsure what this means for my role—and that of other non-Indigenous allies and accomplices (Indigenous Action Media, 2014)—in Native Nation building. At this moment, I do my best to follow the lead of the DINÉ teachers, seek counsel from diverse Indigenous leaders and colleagues, and trust that I am where I’m supposed to be right now. We also intentionally allocate resources to Indigenous students and junior faculty, with the idea that at some point, it will be time for someone else to step into the role I currently occupy.

Reframing Indigenous teacher professional development as Native Nation building

This is not a “normal” way to do teacher professional development, and perhaps that is the greatest lesson learned in sharing this story and reflecting on my involvement with the DINÉ. Typical teacher professional development is top-down, short-term, and siloed. The DINÉ offers a model that is teacher-driven; long-term; and collaborative across grade-levels, content areas, and school-types. Typical curriculum used in Navajo

schools is standardized, outdated, corporately-developed, and disconnected from Indigenous knowledge and cultural wealth. The DINÉ supports the creation, utilization, and institutionalization of curriculum that is uniquely teacher-developed, culturally responsive, and academically rigorous. Shifting standard practices around professional development and curriculum delivery is critical for building healthy, strong Native Nations. Said differently, our work in the DINÉ is fundamentally about Native Nation building.

When the DINÉ teachers see their students as extensions of themselves (Matias & Liou, 2015), their work is not necessarily best understood through a mainstream lens of activism. Instead, it is about K'é, family, relationality, and therefore, self-determination. Giving back to their own communities, and working in service to the families that raised and sustained them, is a significant aspect of what it means to be a teacher activist for people of color (Matias & Liou, 2015; Urrieta, 2007, 2010). This is part of the reciprocity that is foundational to Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Leveraging the knowledge of teachers—and the communities and elders from which they come—has resulted in the cultivation of spaces for robust teacher leadership, deep connection and relationality, and teacher activism through self-determination, all of which in turn advance Native Nation building.

Thus, our work in the DINÉ has been about possibility from day one. And efforts that work toward Native Nation building and greater educational equity are always political, which requires both imagination and strategy. The imagination and the strategy that we've drawn on in the DINÉ only works because of spaces that we've managed to cultivate; but those spaces have also only opened up because of our collective imagining and strategizing. What this circular, symbiotic process has shown me is that the possibilities embedded in the DINÉ for transformation are exponential. And it is in this possibility for transformation that I find myself consistently returning to the words of Indigenous scholar Tsianina Lomawaima (2000), who describes Indigenous education as a "battle for power." The battle is fought on many fronts and against diverse enemies. In explaining how a current shared experience connected to the traumas of her boarding school days, Auneka invited me into a small part of this generations-old battle. She continues to lead, teach, and guide me with her stories, knowledge, and examples. The battle for power requires this, and battles are won through the sisterhood we share and the broader kinship relations that bind all of us in the DINÉ.

At a time when public universities are seeing their budgets slashed and enrollments plummet (Hubler, 2020; Whitford, 2020), the DINÉ is a hard sell, and harder still is the idea of growing our partnerships and impact across Indian Country. But we do this because we know how important it is. In reflecting on their own experiences as activist teachers of color, Matias and Liou (2015) explain, "we recognize much of the emotional strength was inspired by the resiliency we developed over time in the school system, and therefore, we also see the various ways in which our students are harnessing their own resiliency in this process" (p. 616). There is a deep, generational bond that connects teachers in the DINÉ to their students. When Auneka and others evoke their childhood experiences to talk about their current roles, relationships, and responsibilities as teacher leaders, they are leveraging the hope and possibility that has sustained the Diné people and will continue to sustain them into the future. In those moments where I am fortunate to witness this, it similarly sustains me.

Notes

1. Diné is the term used by many Navajo people to describe themselves, and it translates to “the people” in the Navajo language. In this essay, I use Diné and Navajo interchangeably, and I privilege Diné in most cases because it is the term preferred by most of the teacher leaders with whom I’ve worked.
2. Auneka is a pseudonym, inspired by Annie Dodge Wauneka, for a woman who gave me permission to share this story but asked that I not use her real name.
3. I do not have the space here to fully unpack how the DINÉ addresses systemic inequities, but the overarching rationale is that increased teacher capacity impacts student outcomes, community outcomes, and school resource availability.
4. There is much more that could be unpacked about the relationship between the DINÉ and YNI, but that story is not within the scope of this particular essay.
5. These standards were developed by the Department of Diné Education, and are available at <http://www.navajonationdode.org/resources.aspx>. They are intended for use in schools on the Navajo Nation, and the DINÉ requires all participating teachers to explicitly link their curriculum to at least one of these standards.
6. These principles find resonance in multiple bodies of literature, but they were developed largely independently by the DINÉ teacher leaders through multiple conversations with me and other stakeholders.
7. Two other teachers’ curriculum units are described at length in Castagno, Tracy, Denny, Davis, and Kretzmann (2020).

Funding

This work was supported by the National Science Foundation [1908464].

References

- Adams, D. (1995). *Education for extinction: American Indians and the boarding school experience, 1875–1928*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.
- Anyon, J. (2005). *Radical possibilities: Public policy, urban education, and a new social movement*. New York: Routledge.
- Apple, M. (1986). *Teachers and texts: A political economy of class and gender relations in education*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Ayers, W. (2016). *Demand the impossible!: A radical manifesto*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.
- Brayboy, B. M. J. (2005). Toward a tribal critical race theory in education. *The Urban Review*, 37(5), 425–446. doi:10.1007/s11256-005-0018-y
- Brayboy, B. M. J., Castagno, A.E., & Solyom, J. (2014). Looking into the hearts of Native peoples: Nation building as an institutional orientation for graduate education. *American Journal of Education*, 120(4), 575–596. doi:10.1086/676908
- Brayboy, B. M. J., & Maughan, E. (2009). Indigenous knowledges and the story of the bean. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(1), 1–21. doi:10.17763/haer.79.1.10u6435086352229
- Castagno, A. E. (2012a). Moments of suspension and other instances of whiteness in the academy. In K. Dace (Ed.), *Unlikely allies in the academy: Women of color and white women in conversation* (pp. 112–123). New York: Routledge.
- Castagno, A. E. (2012b). “They prepared me to be a teacher, but not a culturally responsive Navajo teacher for Navajo kids”: A Tribal Critical Race Theory analysis of an Indigenous teacher preparation program. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 51(1), 3–21.
- Castagno, A. E. (2014). *Educated in whiteness: Good intentions and diversity in schools*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

- Castagno, A. E. (Ed.). (2019). *The price of nice: How good intentions maintain educational inequity*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Castagno, A. E., & Brayboy, B. M. J. (2008). Culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous youth: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 78(4), 941–993. doi:10.3102/0034654308323036
- Castagno, A. E., Tracy, T., Denny, D., Davis, B., & Kretzmann, H. (2020). “You are never too little to understand your culture”: Strengthening early childhood teachers through the Diné Institute for Navajo Nation Educators. *The Journal of Indigenous Early Childhood Education*, 1(1), 1–14.
- Coffey, W., & Tsosie, R. (2001). Rethinking the tribal sovereignty doctrine: Cultural sovereignty and the collective future of Indian Nations. *Stanford Law and Policy Review*, 12(2), 191–221.
- Cornell, S., & Kalt, J. (1998). Sovereignty and nation-building: The development challenge in Indian Country today. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 22(3), 187–214. doi:10.17953/aicr.22.3.lv45536553vn7j78
- Cosenza, M. (2015). Defining teacher leadership: Affirming the teacher leader model standards. *Issues in Teacher Education*, 24(2), 79–99.
- Darder, A. (2017). *Reinventing Paulo Freire: A pedagogy of love*. New York: Routledge.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Wei, R. C., Andree, A., Richardson, N., & Orphanos, S. (2009). *Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the U.S. and abroad*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Deloria, V., Jr., & Lytle, C. (1984). *American Indians, American justice*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Denetdale, J. (2006). Chairmen, presidents, and princesses: The Navajo Nation, gender, and the politics of tradition. *Wicazo Sa Review*, 21(1), 9–28. doi:10.1353/wic.2006.0004
- Desimone, L. M., & Garet, M. S. (2015). Best practices in teachers’ professional development in the United States. *Psychology, Society, & Education*, 7(3), 252. doi:10.25115/psye.v7i3.515
- Dig Deep & U. S. Water Alliance. (2020). Retrieved August 20, 2020 from <http://uswateralliance.org/organization/digdeep>.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Giroux, H. A. (1988). *Teachers as intellectuals: Toward a critical pedagogy of learning*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
- Giroux, H. (1992). *Border crossings. Cultural workers and the politics of education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hubler, S. (2020). <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/26/us/colleges-coronavirus-budget-cuts.html>.
- Indigenous Action Media. (2014). *Accomplices not allies: Abolishing the ally industrial complex, an Indigenous perspective*. Flagstaff, AZ: Indigenous Action Media.
- Irish, L. (2020, June 3). Covid-19’s impact on Navajo Nation students, schools. AZEdNews. <https://azednews.com/covid-19s-impact-on-navajo-nation-students-schools/>.
- Kumashiro, K. K. (2004). *Against common sense: Teaching and learning toward social justice*. New York, NY: Routledge Falmer.
- Lee, L. L. (2012). Gender, Navajo Leadership and “Retrospective Falsification”. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 8(3), 277–289. doi:10.1177/117718011200800304
- Lieberman, A. (1987). Teacher leadership. In J. Soltis (Ed.), *Reforming teacher education: The impact of the Holmes Group Report*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Lomawaima, T. (2000). Tribal sovereigns: Reframing research in American Indian education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 70(1), 1–23. doi:10.17763/haer.70.1.b133t0976714n73r
- Lomawaima, T., & McCarty, T. (2006). *To remain an Indian: Lessons in democracy from a century of Native American education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Love, B. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- Matherson, L., & Windle, T. (2017). What do teachers want from their professional development? Four emerging themes. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 83(3), 28–32.

- Matias, C., & Liou, D. (2015). Tending to the heart of communities of color: Towards a Critical Race teacher activism. *Urban Education*, 50(5), 601–625. doi:10.1177/0042085913519338
- McCarty, T., & Lee, T. (2014). Critical culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy and Indigenous education sovereignty. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 101–124. doi:10.17763/haer.84.1.q83746nl5pj34216
- Mozes, A. (2020, June 9). Covid-19 ravages the Navajo Nation. *WebMD*. <https://www.webmd.com/lung/news/20200609/covid-19-ravages-the-navajo-nation#1>.
- Native Nations Institute. (2012). *Who we are: What is Native Nation building?* Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy, University of Arizona. <http://nni.arizona.edu/whoweare/whatis.php>.
- Navajo Tourism Department. (2020). Retrieved August 15, 2020 from <https://www.discovernavajo.com/fact-sheet.aspx>.
- North, C. (2008). What is all this talk about “social justice”? Mapping the terrain of education’s latest catchphrase. *Teachers College Record*, 110(6), 1182–1206.
- Olson, G. A., & Worsham, L. (Eds.). (2007). *The politics of possibility: Encountering the radical imagination*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Olson, J. (2004). *The abolition of white democracy*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Paris, D., & Winn, M. T. (2014). *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Picower, B. (2012a). *Practice what you teach: Social justice education in the classroom and the streets*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Picower, B. (2012b). Teacher activism: Enacting a vision for social justice. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 45(4), 561–574. doi:10.1080/10665684.2012.717848
- Silverman, H., Toropin, K., & Sidner, S. (2020, May 18). Navajo Nation surpasses New York state for the highest Covid-19 infection rate in the U.S. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/18/us/navajo-nation-infection-rate-trnd/index.html>.
- Smith, L. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. London, UK: Zed Books.
- Spring, J. (2001). *Deculturalization and the struggle for equality: A brief history of the education of dominated cultures in the United States*. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.
- Tuhiwai Smith, L., Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2018). *Indigenous and decolonizing studies in education: Mapping the long view*. New York: Routledge.
- Urrieta, L. (2007). Identity production in figured worlds: How some Mexican Americans become Chicana/o activist educators. *The Urban Review*, 39(2), 117–144. doi:10.1007/s11256-007-0050-1
- Urrieta, L. (2010). *Working from within: Chicana and Chicano activist educators in whitestream schools*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.
- Whitford, E. (2020). <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/05/05/public-higher-education-worse-spot-ever-heading-recession>.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs*. Farnborough: Saxon House.
- York-Barr, J., & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(3), 255–346. doi:10.3102/00346543074003255