

Using Parental Involvement to Help Diné Students Learn Their Unique Clan System

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Context

I came to Ganado Unified School District in the summer of 2019 to teach seventh grade social studies. Ganado is a rural community, located in the Northeast corner of the Navajo Reservation. Prior to that, from 2007 -2010, I taught at White Cone High School, which was located in a more rural setting than Ganado. After completing my Master's in Counseling, in December of 2021, I accepted my current counseling position at Ganado Primary School, where I work with students from preschool to second grade. I am still defining my role at Ganado Primary School, while at the same time redefining my role within the Ganado community. Prior to my present position as a counselor, I was known as the teacher/coach who was friendly, open, took the time to speak with parents within the community and respected the Navajo people and their culture. In addition, I have been told by many parents that my being an "outsider" who is not afraid to speak his mind, has earned me their respect. As I have gotten more comfortable in my counseling position, that narrative, I am told, has begun to change to the "new counselor" who is the preferred person to talk with angry parents, especially those whose children I taught, in order to calm them down and diffuse different situations.

I recognize that all of the goodwill I have received from the Ganado community gives me the opportunity to do some very good targeted interventions with the students and families at Ganado Primary School. So, as I enter my first full year as a Guidance Counselor, I see one of my roles being to build and strengthen community and parental involvement to promote academic achievement and social/emotional well-being for the students attending the Primary School.

The great majority of the students I work with are Navajo with a very small percentage of biracial, African American, Caucasian and Filipino students. The Navajo Reservation itself has communities located in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. A good percentage of my students live in poverty and lack access to supportive resources such as mental health services. I also counsel several students who are being raised by their grandparents due to their parents being absent from their lives, for different reasons. Many children at the Primary School already have attendance and behavior issues due to lack of parental support, and are in need of some type of intervention. However, the community of Ganado is overall supportive of their schools, and encourages its children to embrace education as a way to lift themselves out of poverty. As a result, there have been several graduates who have earned scholarships to attend colleges and universities around the country.

Rationale

Historically, Native American/Alaska Native tribes have not received the equal treatment from the United States government. Past government policies, such as broken treaties, the forceful relocation of various tribes thousands of miles away from their ancestral lands, and suffering through years of involuntary integration where thousands of NA/AN individuals were forced to attend boarding schools where they suffered mental, physical and sexual abuse while being forced to give up their diverse languages, customs and other cultural practices. Garcia (2020) stated that the Indigenous peoples of the Americas are among the most resilient, as a result of what their people have survived. This resiliency developed despite the historical trauma that

many generations of NA/AN people carry with them. This historical trauma has contributed to NA/AN communities experiencing some of the highest academic, social-emotional and mental health issues in the United States.

When examining certain aspects of the historical trauma NA/AN have suffered, the practice of taking children and forcing them to live in boarding schools, or with white families, has had lasting negative effects, to this day. Not only did generations of NA/AN from different tribes lose their sense of tribal identity, this particular historical trauma, as Garcia (2020) described was passed from generation to generation, resulting in the mistrust of the European-centered education system. One component of this mistrust is a lack of parental support and involvement in their children's education, from parents of NA/AN students due to, as described by Gentry & Fugate (2012) "feeling unwelcome in the school, not resolving their own personal experiences in school, lack of transportation to the school and the lack of computer-access", among other things (p. 635). Gentry & Fugate (2012) noted that NA/AN student's high school dropout rate of 13.2% was second only the dropout rates of Hispanics, nationally at 17.6% (p. 632) and no doubt, the mistrust of the education system by some NA/AN communities is a big contributing factor.

As a teacher I experienced the mistrust some parents had with sending their child to school, firsthand. I had a hard time convincing some parents that by simply taking a more active role in their child's education would only benefit their child, in the long run, and their academic achievement would increase. I have some students who receive no support from their parent/guardian and I have been told several times "you are the professional", from a parent/guardian who had no interest in discussing ways their child could improve their grades.

As a student, my parents were active in my education and supported me and my teachers, when at all possible. I am sure there were certain times when I did not appreciate the fact that my parents and teachers collaborated and communicated so well with each other, but as a counselor, I see how important it is for the students' development. Especially for those students living in high poverty areas, such as those I work with on the Navajo Reservation. That is why I chose the topic of developing different strategies to increase parental involvement in my school district. My main goal is to document different strategies aimed at getting more parents involved in their children's education in order to increase academic achievement.

Topic Summary

As explained in earlier sections, the historical trauma suffered by NA/AN individuals have resulted in a host of social-emotional issues, in many aspects of their communities. Even though the different tribes have their own unique cultures and customs, there are shared experiences of historical trauma that affect them equally. At the top of this list of traumas would be the boarding school experience. Beginning in the 1830's, NA/AN children were forcefully taken from their families and sent to boarding schools designed to "kill the Indian and save the man" (Garcia, 2020, p. 43). Many studies have documented the individual and community struggles of NA/AN communities, in the United States, across a wide variety of social categories. It is safe to say that the historical trauma from being forced to attend boarding schools was the most damaging due to its impact in many of those categories.

Evans-Campbell (2012) noted in their study of former boarding school residents, that the average age a child sent to an NA/AN boarding school was 10 years old (p. 6). Of these participants in their study, 34.2% reported to being physically abused and 29.3% of participants reported to experiencing some form of sexual abuse (Evans-Campbell et al, 2012, p. 6) Adding to Evans-Campbell's revelations, in her 2001 article *American Indian Boarding School Experiences: Recent Studies from Native Perspectives*, Julie Davis echoed David Wallace Adams' frank opinion in his 1995 work *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875 - 1928* that "boarding schools, reformers, educators and federal agents waged cultural, psychological, and intellectual warfare on Native students as part of a concerted effort to turn Indians into Americans." (Davis, 2001, p. 20). Given the fact that boarding schools were designed to strip away everything that resembled NA/AN culture, specifically religion, language and traditions, it should come as no surprise that NA/AN individuals have a deep mistrust of western institutions, specifically schools.

Of all the government policies directed toward NA/AN people that have had a lasting negative impact on the various NA/AN tribes, the act of being forced to attend boarding schools is at the top of the list. Beginning in the 1830's, NA/AN children were forcefully taken from their families and sent to boarding schools designed to "kill the Indian and save the man" (Garcia, 2020, p. 43). At the time, it was thought that the only way to assimilate NA/AN people into the dominant European-based culture, was by stripping them of their cultural identity; to include their language, religion, their attire and their appearance. This policy continued until the passing of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) in 1978 (Sue et al., 2019, p. 321).

Garcia (2020) described historical trauma as "the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from a massive group trauma experiences". As mentioned by one NA/AN female whose parents and grandparent were forced to attend boarding schools, "We're all damaged, and we'll pass it on to our children, so it will never end" (Garcia, 2020, p. 44). Thus, the historical trauma of NA/AN communities continues to be transferred from generation to generation and the inability to end this pattern has resulted in the majority of NA/AN students developing low self-esteem that leads to social-emotional and behavioral issues, hopelessness, poor mental health, and low academic achievement.

One component of this mistrust is a lack of support and involvement in their children's education, from parents of NA/AN students due to, as described by Gentry & Fugate (2012) "feeling unwelcome in the school, not resolving their own personal negative experiences in school, different personal communication styles, lack of transportation to the school and lack of computer-access", among other things (p. 635). This lack of involvement according to Warren & Locklear (2021) also contributed to NA/AN students, when compared to their white peers, being retained at higher rates, and less likely to graduate; in addition to their high drop-out rate. Gentry & Fugate (2012) noted that NA/AN student's high-school dropout rate of 13.2% was second only to the dropout rate of Hispanics, nationally at 17.6% (p. 632) and no doubt, the mistrust of the education system by some NA/AN communities and little to no parental involvement is a big contributing factor.

So, what is parental involvement supposed to look like and how can consistent parental involvement benefit NA/AN students and communities? Epstein (1992) defined six types of parental involvement as:

- (a) *parenting*; the role of parents in fostering the social, mental, emotional and physical needs of their children as well as supporting the cognitive development necessary for thinking and learning both in home and school environments;
- (b) *communicating*, communication from parents regarding the academic development of their children with school staff;
- (c) *volunteering*, the action of parents donating their time and participation in classroom and school-wide events;
- (d) *learning at home*, the role of parents in emotionally supporting and verbal and/or physically assisting students with homework and managing academic challenges that their children express experiencing in the school setting;
- (e) *decision-making*, the intentional attempt of parents to be advocates for the education interest of their children and
- (f) *collaborating with the community*, the knowledge and use of community resources displayed by parents regarding tools that better improve the learning of their children. (Epstein, 1992)

Applied in a general sense, the six parental involvement suggestions should arm parents with a guide to help their children succeed. Even if they only do half of the recommended practices, they are actively helping their children succeed. However, when it comes to the parents of NA/AN students, using the suggested parental involvement interventions may not be something they would adopt. This hesitation is results, in part, from curriculums that have historically portrayed NA/AN in a negative light. Robertson (2019) alluded to this fact by stating “due to the absence of the Native American perspective in school resources, Native American history and culture is only able to be viewed from a non-Native perspective that is not always accurate or adequately detailed (P. 16). Plainly speaking, the history and contributions of NA/AN tribes have historically been attributed to other cultures, downplayed or not mentioned at all. Factoring in the historical trauma suffered by NA/AN individuals in boarding schools, the mistrust of western-styled education systems, with the previously stated negative personal experiences for NA/AN parents; even those who did not attend boarding schools, and it is easy to understand why parents of NA/AN students are hesitant to get involved in their children’s education.

Student Engagement

I currently work as the guidance counselor for the Ganado Primary School, in Ganado, AZ. It is a predominately Native American school, located on the Navajo Reservation. When it comes to building a rapport with parents, the Ganado Unified School District (GUSD) Collaborative Practices for the Primary School are: a. School to School, b. School to Home and c. Home to School (GUSD Parent and Student Handbook, 2022). So parental involvement, beginning at the Primary School level, is one of the critical goals for the district and is stressed from K-12. In addition to the learning goals for each school, the Ganado Unified School District has adopted Six Guiding Principles (GUSD Parent Student Handbook, 2022), which are: 1. Quality and effective leadership, 2. A safe and positive learning environment, 3. Quality curriculum, instruction and assessment, 4. Ensuring quality student performance, 5. Professional growth for our school community, and 6. Quality school, parent, and community partnership (GUSD, Parent

and Student Handbook, 2022). I shall use Guiding Principle number six, to design a culturally-based lesson plan that includes a parental involvement piece.

The lesson that will be taught is designed with parental involvement and home to school collaboration, in mind. The Diné culture, has a unique origin story that describes four clans for its people: Mud People Clan, Towering House Clan, Bitter Water Clan and the One Who Walks Around Clan (Silversmith, AZcentral.com, 2019). Each individual represents one of the four clans. A Navajo individual also describes themselves with their clans. The mother's clan is always spoken first, followed by the father's clan, the maternal grandfather's clan and lastly the paternal grandfather's clan (Silversmith, AZcentral.com, 2019). Each clan also has a distinct meaning, or origin story. This lesson plan is intended to be a simple collaborative assignment where students will work with their parents/guardians to understand their family history by naming their clans, along with the meaning of each of their individual clan. The learning objectives of this assignment are: 1. Students will be able to name their four clans. 2. Students will be able to name the animal or "protector", if there is one, that represents their four clans. 3. Students will be able to briefly describe the distinct meanings of each of their clans.

It is hoped this lesson plan will generate parental interest and involvement by having them work closely with their child to not only talk about their personal family history, but also the unique Navajo clan system that is all their own. Home to school collaboration is also a big part of this lesson plan. It is designed so the student and their parent/guardian spend time to researching their clans and family history at home, and do the primary illustrations for the foldable book at school. Contact between the parents and counselor is highly encouraged.

The following page will list the lesson plan used for this assignment.

Navajo Four Clans Foldable Book Lesson Plan

Rationale:

Many Navajo elders express concern that the younger generations do not know their language, their creation story, nor their clan system, due to the lasting effects of forced assimilation aimed at destroying their culture. Therefore, critical parts of Navajo culture are not being taught in the home because not all parents are as culturally aware as their parents and grandparents were.

Cultural Relevance:

This lesson is designed to help Navajo students increase their awareness of their unique culture. They will learn aspects of their personal family history and the Navajo Clan System. As a culture that relies on oral history and storytelling, involving the parents/guardians will give the student an opportunity to hear about their culture and traditions from an elder in their family.

Objectives:

1. Students will be able to name their four clans.
2. Students will be able to name the animal protector, if needed, of their four clans.
3. Students will be able to briefly describe the distinct meanings of each of their clans.

Assignment Instructions:

Students will create an illustration, describing and listing characteristics of each of their clans. While at home, each student will work with a parent/guardian to research and learn what their four clans are, and what each clan represents in the Diné culture. Students will then take that information and during class time, create a presentation with the correct illustrations for each of their clans. Students, along with their parents, will then give a short demonstration to their classmates, indicating their understanding of their four clans.

Materials needed:

Construction paper, markers, colored pencils, crayons, internet, family photos

Reflection:

Time will be taken by the counselor to conduct a short review of the assignment, with the students and parents, to gauge what they learned from this lesson.

Student Assessment

This assignment will be for second grade students and is designed to have the parents help Navajo students learn and understand their four clans. This assignment will address the student's family history and cultural awareness. While doing this assignment, students should be able to gain knowledge and appreciation of their family history and how their family fits into the larger Navajo tribal clan system.

To encourage parental involvement, the students will work with their parents/guardians, at home, to gather information on their four clans, their protectors – animal representation - and a characteristic that describes the meaning for each clan. During class time, the student will work on designing an illustration that displays their four clans, using the information they acquired with the help of their parents/guardians. At the completion of this assignment, students should be able to recite their four clans in order, and along with their parent, do a short presentation giving a brief description of each of their clans and what they stand for.

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