

Sewing Your Story: Preparing American Indian Students for High School Transition

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Context

St. Paul, the city where I work, is the capital of Minnesota. As the second largest city in the state, it is home to 310,000 people. A large portion of Minnesotan Native Americans live in urban areas, but still only make up less than 1% of the total population in the city. This is similar to the recorded statewide demographics where American Indians and Alaskan Natives are about 2% of the population (<https://culturecareconnection.org/cultural-responsiveness/american-indian/>, 2024).

The St. Paul Public Schools district serves more than 32,000 students with about 1% being American Indian/Alaskan Native (Saint Paul Public Schools, 2024). It is crucial to note that this data is likely missing individuals who identify as “more than one race.” Many urban American Indian individuals are multi-racial and are thus listed under another racial subcategory and missing from the total count of students who have American Indian heritage.

My ethnicity is European American with German and Italian heritage. I grew up on Dakota land in Red Wing, a smaller city about 60 miles Southeast of St. Paul along the Mississippi River. The city gets its name from a former tribal leader of the Dakota in the early 19th century, and one of the four remaining Dakota communities resides nearby on the Prairie Island Indian Community reservation. I moved to Minneapolis, St. Paul’s neighbor and the largest city in the state, in 2008. In 2012, I earned my bachelor’s degree and have been working in public education since. I became a licensed school counselor in January of 2020. At the end of the 2023 school year, the middle school Indian Education counseling position was created and posted. As a white woman, I had hesitations about applying. I work to constantly be aware of my identity and understand when I might not be the best fit for a role. I also know the statistics about the lack of Indigenous school counselors in Minnesota and knew that perhaps with the small amount of knowledge I did have I could work to support

Native American students during some of their most formative years in a genuine and humble way.

This year I have 274 identified American Indian students across 16 middle schools. I actively visit 13 of the schools on a weekly, biweekly, or monthly basis.

Inniza Ska, meaning “White Rock” is the Dakota name for the city now known as St. Paul, and comes from the soft white sandstone bluffs seen along the river valley where Minnesota’s capital city sits. The Mississippi River has eroded the cliffs over thousands of years, making the pure white stone visible in the urban landscape. In the southwest corner of the city, the Minnesota River joins the Mississippi at a point known as Bdote. Bdote, as a place where waters converge and flow, is seen in the Dakota creation story as the place where human life began, and sometimes referred to as the womb (Minnesota Historical Society, 2024).

While the Dakota people are seen as the original stewards of the land that is now known as Minnesota, the Ojibwe, Ho-Chunk, Cheyenne, Oto, Iowa, and the Sac & Fox tribes also acknowledge Minnesota as important to their tribal histories (Minnesota Historical Society, 2024). The Ojibwe people, who make up the largest current population of Native American people in Minnesota, in particular came to this land after learning of a prophecy nearly 1500 years ago. This prophecy warned of the impending arrival of Europeans and urged their departure from their lands in the East. It provided guidance to move West to where ‘food grew on water,’ now seen as an obvious reference to wild rice. Their migration led them along the Great Lakes. As they traveled, several groups settled along the way as others continued pushing West into Minnesota and parts of Canada. The Ojibwe people were well established in Northern Minnesota by the time French fur traders arrived in the area in the 1600’s (Minnesota Historical Society, 2024).

With the arrival of Europeans and the eventual expansion of the United States of America, Native American people living in Minnesota were not spared from the horror and pain inflicted by white settlers through treaties, removal acts and the boarding schools. In the early 1800s Fort Snelling was constructed to control the territory and was situated on top of

the bluffs above Bdote. The Dakota were no longer able to utilize or even visit this sacred space.

In 1862, war broke out between the Dakota and US military forces. After their defeat, many Dakota fled. Those who stayed were rounded up and put on trial, some lasting no more than five minutes, and most resulting in a death sentence. Those who were found to have participated in the war were sent to Mankato. Non-combatants, mostly women, children, and the elderly, were removed from the Minnesota River Valley and held in a concentration camp along the banks of the River at Bdote, to be banished as soon as the river thawed the following spring. They were kept in horrendous conditions without the ability to hunt or forage and without access to proper sanitation. Disease quickly spread through the blockade and many died. When the camp was closed the following May, those who survived the harsh conditions were crammed onto ferries and exiled to South Dakota. The outcome for those who had been sent to Mankato, was the Largest federal execution in the United States, known as the Dakota 38. Through deception, war and violence, the land which the D/Lakota were allowed to occupy became less and less until they and the Ho-Chunk were removed from Minnesota entirely (Minnesota Historical Society, 2024).

More Recently, D/Lakota people have been finding their way back. Several sacred sites which exist within the limits of St. Paul have slowly been reclaimed and given appropriate distinction by the work and efforts of D/Lakota people returned home. Today, there are 11 federally recognized Reservations and Communities in Minnesota; seven of which, situated in the Northern part of the state, are Ojibwe and four are Dakota, located in the Southern and Western parts of the state. None are situated in the urban centers of Minneapolis and St. Paul, referred to as the Twin Cities, which are home to 44.2% of the Native American population in the state (Wilder Research, 2024).

Rationale

In 1953, the St. Paul Public Schools Indian Education Department was created in response to the Indian Education ACT of 1952. Since then, Indian Education in St. Paul has existed to support American Indian students in their educational journey (Saint Paul Public Schools, 2024). In recent years, the department has advocated for policy and law changes which enshrine traditional rights such as Smudging in schools and wearing beaded caps at graduation. In 2023, the largest shift in legislation in regards to supporting Native American Students took place, cementing data sharing with tribal nations, updating the state definition identifying American Indian students, dedicated American Indian education staff, culture and language class requirements, mandatory education on Indigenous Peoples day in all schools, Indigenous education for all, prohibiting American Indian Mascots, allowing regalia at graduation, permitting sacred tobacco in schools, embedded Indian Education in academic standards, American Indian teacher training and American Indian Parent Advisory Committees. Additionally, pathways for funding various programs and projects were also included in these legislative updates. (Minnesota Department of Education, 2023)

While the Minnesota Department of Education continues to make strides to create legislation which will support American Indian students, there continues to be a need. The data about American Indian students has shown grim truths about the achievement and opportunity gaps that exist for our Native students. The position for Indian Education Middle School Counselor was created as one response to our AIPAC's request to find ways to increase the graduation rates of American Indian students in Saint Paul Public Schools and support the success of our students.

"Sewing your Story" is one way to address the concerns of the AIPAC and bridge the gap from Middle to High school and support American Indian students to be more prepared and supported through a large transition in their academic careers. The overall hope is increasing engagement, graduation rates, and outcomes for Native students.

Currently, the Saint Paul Public Schools website states the 2023 4-year graduation rate for American Indian students was 49.4%, which is significantly lower than the overall

graduation rate of 68.5% (Saint Paul Public Schools, 2024). This aligns with the findings of the 2023 MDE State of American Indian Education report which indicated that American Indian students attend school at a lower rate than peers of all ethnicities, lag behind white peers in proficiency in math and reading, lag behind white peers in both 4 and 7 year graduation rates, have higher rates of school mobility than white peers, are labeled as special education at a higher rate than white peers, and homeless American Indian students have a lower graduation rate than other demographics of homeless students (Minnesota Department of Education, 2023).

American Indian students report more instances of bullying because of race/ethnicity than white peers, have lower feelings of engagement and feeling supported, and American Indian students less frequently report that their teachers are interested in them compared to white students. In addition, American Indian students have consistently reported a decrease in student engagement across all grades since 2013 (Minnesota Department of Education, 2023).

This may be due to the fact that historically, both legal and school policies have prohibited American Indian people from practicing/showing their cultural or traditional selves.

Throughout history strong punitive action was taken toward American Indian people who practiced or exhibited traditional or cultural practices, including speaking languages, teaching spiritual beliefs, participating in rituals, etc. (Smithsonian Magazine, 2018). Schools were used as a place to systemically (and brutally) assimilate American Indian people to white centric culture and beliefs. Many abuses and violations of human rights were committed against Native people labeled under the guise of education (The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, n.d.).

Misinformation, biases, and racist beliefs perpetuated by systems of oppression, coupled with the loss of cultural knowledge through forced assimilation and cultural genocide of Native American people and the trauma surrounding education, schools, and the relationship to white people, particularly in these settings, may impact the current data we are seeing about our American Indian students. In fact, Jillian Fish and Moin Syed argue in

their paper, *Native Americans in High Education: An Ecological Systems Perspective* (2018), that we must ground our understanding of the experience of Native American students within a historical and cultural context, and that to not do so continues to perpetuate the white-centric beliefs of individualism and the history of oppression has had no lasting impact upon Native communities.

Mainstream educational systems in the Americas are and have been based on Eurocentric values such as individualism, Christianity, paternalism, competitiveness, and nuclear family systems, which are often incompatible with Indigenous value systems of community, sharing, extended family systems/kinship, giving back to one's community, and a respect for all creation as a relation not as a resource (Waterman, S. J., Lowe, S. C., & Shotton, H. J., 2023). This clash of values often further marginalizes Indigenous and Native American people, and signals that one's personal and community values are in conflict with what is seen as "normal" or "right" as means of moving through the world. Ignoring these differences can have a detrimental impact on the success of Native American students in navigating educational systems resulting in feelings of not belonging or being seen within the institution that is supposed to be educating and preparing them for their future.

In an article written by Anne Porterfield (2023), a review of research suggests a clear theme, that, "Native American Students benefit from culturally relevant education." This provides clear support that the implementation of culturally specific learning can impact the success and well-being of American Indian youth in their educational journey, as well as teachers having some culturally relevant knowledge and understanding (Porterfield, A., 2023). The article goes on to state that "in general, designing learning experiences for Native American students that integrate and value their cultures lays a foundation for academic success (Porterfield, A., 2023)."

School counselors can support this work by providing programs which will increase students' psychological preparedness to transition into high school (Turner, S.L., 2007). Areas which were noted as impactful include: academic preparation, parents' instrumental assistance, and having positive, healthy peer, parent, and other adult support. Specifically, the article

highlighted interventions such as academic counseling, cohort models to increase peer support, providing training to parents and teachers around supporting their student's transitional competencies, and using work-based learning to build the connection between school and career development skills (Turner, S. L., 2007). While Turner's (2007) article suggests a cohort model as a successful intervention to support students moving through grades together, she does acknowledge that in larger cities this can sometimes provide challenges as students often transition to attend many different high schools, thus a cohort would be separated.

It would be worthwhile to continue to explore strategies to support Native American students in their pursuit of graduation. In 2021, American Indian students had a national graduation rate of 74% compared to the national average of all students at 87% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). In Saint Paul Public Schools (2024) we are seeing a similar trend. This curriculum is one way to address attrition of American Indian students prior to their transition to high school, in hopes of bolstering students' sense of belonging, self-perception, and psychological and academic preparedness for transition into high school and beyond.

Topic Summary

The Sewing you Story curriculum is one which will increase the psychological preparedness of eighth grade students transitioning to high school through a culturally specific cohort model. The curriculum integrates culturally responsive counseling, ASCA standards, cultural awareness, and cultural arts. It is written in a way that can be flexible and responsive to the needs of the students, such as being inclusive of many tribal affiliations and welcoming guest supporters and collaborators throughout, but not requiring them.

Professional school counselors are educated in many therapeutic and developmental theories which should serve as a guiding basis to their practice. One such model is the Bronfenbrenner's (1996) Ecological Systems Model. This model looks at the interactions between a developing individual and the various settings or environments in which they

interact. Bronfenbrenner focuses on the perspective of the individual as well as considers their constant evolution as a factor (Fish & Syed, 2018). As mentioned previously, Jillian Fish and Moin Syed reorganized Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to provide a framework that contextualizes the experiences for Native American college students through history and culture. By placing the macrosystems, or rather cultural factors, and the chronosystem, which is concerned with history and the passing of time, at the center of their model, their reconceptualization emphasizes Native ways of being, rather than hyperfocusing on an individual's responsibility for obtaining successful outcomes (Fish, J. & Syed, M., 2018). This lends itself to a developmental, cultural strengths-based approach. They go on to reiterate throughout, that it is the responsibility of the institution to create environments which are accepting of Native American ways of being. Placing this within the historical context, schools, as a systemic institution, caused great harm to American Indian people through working to assimilate children into Euro-centric values and beliefs systems, while eradicating Native American cultural systems and beliefs in the boarding school era, and it is now our responsibility to recognize, acknowledge, learn, and repair the damage done. One way this will be done is by inviting community (schools, families, community organizations, etc.) together to support the children in developing their sense of self through cultural identity development and exploration, while at the same time acknowledging and giving respect to the history that Native American ancestors have endured. The shift in something as basic as how one defines "self" can be impactful as we consider more Indigenous minded approaches through collectivist notions (Anthony-Stevens, V. & Mahfouz, J., 2020). The hope is to see improved outcomes for our Native American Students. This was further supported by Guillory (2009), who found that a large factor in American Indian students' success and persistence in their postsecondary education was related to the strength of their cultural identity. It was further stated that when studies adopted a cultural strengths-based approach, Native American students were the most successful when being able to integrate their culture and ways of being into their academic experiences (Guillory, 2009).

The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) provides the outline for school counselors to implement comprehensive school counseling programming to students in the areas of social-emotional learning, college and career readiness, and academic skills (American School Counselor Association, 2019). The ASCA Students Standards: Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success are research-based standards used to describe the outcomes that students should have as the result of such a counseling program. These can be used to write learning objectives for students to guide and assess goals and outcomes for the students. ASCA takes the position that cultural competence and humility of school counselors is of the utmost importance, and necessary for working with diverse student populations (American School Counselor Association, 2021).

Today, many educators, including school counselors, find social-emotional learning (SEL) to be a priority in the development of students' social skills and ability to recognize and manage emotions (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2024). Research has supported the continued development and use of SEL in schools, as it has shown to support the development of the whole child and have positive outcomes in achievement and long-term well-being (Anthony-Stevens, V. & Mahfouz, J., 2020). SEL skills are often taught through school-wide initiatives, and like most things in education, should be placed under the microscope of cultural responsiveness. SEL, when taught through an ethnocentric, Anglo mindset, which most American education is centered on, lacks the ability to effectively support students from diverse cultural backgrounds and see students through a strengths-based lens (Anthony-Stevens, V. & Mahfouz, J., 2020).

Thus, the importance of considering SEL through a lens which takes into account the cultural diversity of the students present, holds great weight. Layering the reconstructed social ecological model with practices which intentionally attend to multicultural considerations, we can place SEL within the historical and cultural contexts when examining the development and interactive impacts of self, identity, and environment.

One such framework is the RESPECTFUL model of counseling and development. The RESPECTFUL model intentionally asks about complex cultural factors to gain insight and

set the stage to discuss cultural factors (Jones, 2014). RESPECTFUL is an acronym of variables, which may affect peoples' psychological development. It is used to guide the building of a comprehensive view of a student with great respect to personhood and to ascertain influential factors of human development which may influence effective interventions through a culturally responsive lens (D'Andrea, M. & Daniels, J., 2001). Using this model helps build an awareness of assumptions or biases that may exist particularly when working with students from diverse backgrounds and creates a space in which facilitators can earnestly listen with curiosity and understand more based on what the students share in the present moment. In a group, this may also create understanding, respect, and commonality between students.

The curriculum further aims to ask students to consider themselves and each other by use of a SWOT analysis. This process allows students to create meaning and reframe difficulties (Anthony, 2016) and intentionally think about their strengths and the tools that already exist within themselves. In this process, students are also asked to position themselves within their community, with all of their strengths and difficulties. This is done through the reading of the story of The Three Sisters: corn, beans, and squash. Versions of this tale are shared across many tribal nations as a guide for planting, but also share about balance, harmony, and reciprocity as each of the sisters shares their gifts which balance the weaknesses of the others (Kimmerer, R. W., & Gray Smith, M., 2022). By completing a SWOT analysis in conjunction with hearing The Three Sisters story, students can gain insight into the strengths of being part of a larger community. They will understand that they are a vital part of the larger collective, with gifts to offer to themselves and others, and that the things that may be difficult for them can be tackled with the support of their community.

In culmination, the output of this group will be the construction of a Ribbon skirt or shirt which students will design and sew. We have discussed the importance of bolstering psychological preparation of American Indian students for their transition into high school through constructing community and supporting cultural identity development through culturally relevant counseling, cohort models, and strengths-based learning. We also must

also give consideration to the historical and cultural implications for Native American students within the educational system. The Ribbon garment project allows students to pull these aspects together in a culturally relevant and meaningful way. Ribbon skirts and shirts are seen as a symbol of cultural pride and can represent strength, resilience, and connection (Friday, 2023). These garments are often worn to ceremonies, but may be worn daily. While the selection of colors and ribbons can have many meanings for the individual wearer, often the skirt or shirt includes a personal and traditional expression (Friday, 2023). In this way, each eighth grader will be able to sew into their garment parts of themselves and their identity, the things they have learned, the strength they hold, and the story they want to share. They will learn to be proud of their Indigenous heritage and find each other as they make their way to ninth grade.

Student Engagement

Bringing all of the pieces together to consider what the intended outcomes for this group should be, it was important to pull in knowledge from a multitude of places. The first being the understanding that students are human beings worthy of a space in their education that fully recognizes and sees them for all that they are, rather than all that they are not. Students both individually and collectively are deserving of autonomy and control of aspects in their lives which will impact them.

In the first lesson of Sewing your Story, students will enter into a space where they get to create their understanding and expectations together. Students will be presented with a values system from regional tribal communities for their consideration during this exercise. In Minnesota, this likely will be The Grandfather Teachings (Ojibwe) or The Seven Values (D/Lakota). Once traditional values are shared, the floor will be opened up for norm development and students will be asked to develop guiding words for how we in community should exist and work through things together. Prompts for consideration will be offered to students to ascertain the 'what' and 'how' such rules will be created: what are their expectations of each other, of adults who enter into the space and of our collective

community, and how, if these expectations are broken, will we come together to rectify and repair? How can we honor and practice our tribal values in this space?

Once group norms have been established, students will be presented with the opportunity to get to know one another and consider their own world through an activity guided by the RESPECTFUL model. The activity asks students to be in a circle standing or sitting and facing one another. One student will start holding one end of a ball of string. The ball of string will be passed across the circle to all of the students as they answer a series of questions developed from the RESPECTFUL Model which take into consideration various aspects which may have impacted their development. This allows a whole student view to be developed by both the adults and by the other students.

Students will be challenged to share things about themselves and their world that they typically would not be asked to share in school settings. They will be able to hear about one another and build connections with the stories and experiences that others share, while also being given space and respect to show up wholly and with the understanding that all parts of you are welcome and okay here.

Students will pass the ball of string around many times as they share responses. Once all of the questions have been asked. Students will have built a web between them. The facilitator will point out the visual representation of connection within the group. The students will be asked to pull taught the string and feel this connection, and feel the strength of the community holding firm to one another. Then, one student will be asked to release their hold on the web. The string will become loose, if students pull back now, they may feel a sense of off-balance. Students will see here that in community we are stronger, and that each member of the community is vital. We will discuss what happens when someone leaves the community or is falling away, and how will we as a group respond, looping back to our previous conversation and what are the expectations of each other and responsibilities of the group to support one another as part of the community.

In this way and with this level of respect for students, the remaining weeks of the group will continue. Students will further explore their own strengths and weaknesses and be able to

position themselves within the community as a strength. They will map out their systems of support and who they can go to in a time of need. They will explore their identity and be asked directly to consider, “What does it mean to be Native?” Students can explore this within the context of school and community, as well as in a historical and contemporary sense. They will also be prompted to consider the many additional facets of their own identity and create a visual representation to inspire their final project.

Finally, students will use the conversations around community, identity, and their visual creation of self to design a Ribbon Skirt or Shirt to represent themselves as they transition into high school. As students begin to sew, they will hear lessons around working in a good way, and sewing in the energy they hope to carry forward. They will see examples of learning new skills, being able to ask for help, and in turn provide support to one another as they all embark on something that is likely new, as they all prepare to experience something that is definitely new, high school.

At the end of the year, students across the district will be invited to wear their garments to a celebration. Each student, having explored their identity and community, having built an understanding of their strengths both individually and together in a cultural and historical context, will be able to see just how expansive and brilliant their community is within the larger school district. Not only will other students they may have not met before be there, but those student’s support networks will be there too. Everyone there represents someone who is cheering on and supporting their students as they transition to their next chapter.

By the end of this curriculum students will have an understanding of their individual strengths and weaknesses and those of the collective community, explored their role within a community and the responsibility they have to themselves and others, and have made a Ribbon skirt or shirt which reflects their culture and personal identity. Through these things students will have strengthened their psychological preparedness to transition into ninth grade as an American Indian student.

Student Assessment

This curriculum uses several methods to continually assess students for cultural awareness, the implementation of cultural practices, and personal feedback and growth.

- a. Students are given a pre- and post- assessment. Students should respond to the following questions using a Likert scale: How connected do you feel to your school community? Do you feel your identity is seen or represented at school? How prepared for high school do you feel?
- b. In addition students will produce documents throughout the curriculum including their SWOT Analysis and Social Ecological Map.
- c. Students will have successfully sewn a Ribbon garment.
- d. Students will be invited to our Youth Honoring celebration near the end of the school year and be able to present or name someone that supports them in their journey.
- e. Grade and attendance data will be monitored.

Achievement and attendance data should also be collected to track longitudinal impacts of such a program. Being able to compare student data of cohorts who have and have not participated in a culturally responsive cohort model to prepare American Indian students to enter into high school will provide actual outcome data on the success of this curriculum.

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