

Cultural Connection

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Indian Country School Counselors Institute Professional Development Program

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Author Note:

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Context

My name is Selina Wong, and this is my ninth year as a school counselor. I currently work and reside in Flagstaff, AZ. I am a Flagstaff transplant and have called this amazing town my home for the past nine years. I am originally from the Phoenix metro area, specifically Mesa, AZ. I was born and raised in Mesa, but felt like the desert heat had finally worn me down which is why my husband, and I decided to try Northern Arizona out for a bit. I had spent two years serving the students of the metro Phoenix area but have been serving Northern Arizona students for the past eight years, in various roles within the Flagstaff Unified School District. While I had no personal connection to Flagstaff other than enjoying its beauty, I have been fortunate enough to raise my family amongst the pines. Throughout my time in Flagstaff, I have had the privilege of working with many students from various backgrounds. This has allowed me the honor to work with students from various tribes of the region.

This past school year, I made the move from high school counselor to middle school counselor for Sinagua Middle School in Flagstaff, AZ. Flagstaff is a small college mountain town with about 76,586 residents according to the US 2020 census and home of Northern Arizona University. At Sinagua I currently serve the 6th grade and part of 7th grade students at Sinagua. Sinagua has been one of the largest schools I have worked at. We are a huge middle school, originally built as a high school in 1989, but transitioned to a middle school after 2010. Sinagua is 300,000 square feet of space which includes various classroom setups and specialty programs to help students explore their interests. Our two specialty programs include an IB language immersion program as well as a science and engineering program. We have music programs that include orchestra, band, and choir. As well as various art classes where students can explore their interest in woods, ceramics, drawing, painting, and digital media. If there is an interest that a class subject might not meet, Sinagua has many extra curriculums to try to meet that need. Our clubs range and vary from year to year depending on student interest. We currently have clubs for robotics, drama, chess, disc golf, weightlifting, student council, and National Junior Honor Society. In addition to clubs our students could participate in various sports including basketball, cross country, volleyball, wrestling, and soccer.

Sinagua is the largest middle school in Flagstaff Unified School District and the third largest school in the school district. We have over 100 staff members and around 1,050 students on average (AZ School Report Cards, 2024). Our teacher to student ratio is 1 to 18 and our school counselor to student ratio is 1 to 525. We have one school nurse, one school social worker, one Native American Advisor, and one special education therapist that splits their time between Sinagua and another school. There are two assistant principals, one main principal, and a teacher on assignment who has been acting as a third assistant principal. Our school demographics consist of 36.45% white, 31.13% Hispanic, 27.78 Native American, and 3.55% multiple race (AZ School Report Cards, 2024). Many of our teachers are certified in their specific field at 86.54% while 13.46% of staff are teaching outside of their specific field (AZ School Report Cards, 2024). About 40% of our students are on the free/reduced lunch program and our school letter grade was a "C," (AZ School Report Cards, 2024). Twice a year our students complete a social/emotional survey through Panorama Education which gives us additional data to utilize when planning various social/emotional lessons for our students (Panorama Education Flagstaff Unified School District, 2024).

Rationale

Our middle school has a wide range of students who come from various backgrounds. Middle school can be a difficult time, when most young students are trying to fit in and find themselves. This experience can lead to students not accepting or not sharing their own personal cultures. Growing up in Mesa, AZ and not belonging to the dominate population, I had a hard time sharing my own personal culture with my teachers and peers. I felt like my personal life and culture was so different from my peers, that I often would shield parts of my life to fit with the vision and understanding I had of what family lives should be like. Even though I thoroughly enjoyed school, it had its challenges due to the game I felt I had to play to fit in with the rest of my peers. Learning and understanding about everyone's different cultures could have helped the disconnectedness I felt while growing up. That is why I firmly believe that when we do not share our personal stories and culture, then there is a disservice to the people around us who could learn and grow from hearing about other's stories and cultures.

Like many school counselors, I thrive when it comes to building relationships with my students. A big part of relationship building is hearing about people's stories, life, and culture. Some of the best moments I have shared with my students would be when they share their personal life, family, and culture with me. I love learning from my students, especially when it comes to themselves. To see students light up when they begin to share their culture, is the most exciting part of my day. This is why I was so interested in the Why Trouble SEL: The Need for Cultural Relevance in SEL, article we started off our Indian Country School Counselor institute with NAU seminar with (Mahfouz, Anthony-Stevens 2020, p. 2). This article really worked hard to identify the challenges that counselors and educators might face when they are working with their Native American students in a social/emotional setting (Mahfouz, Anthony-Stevens 2020, p. 3). I believe our Panorama survey results also support what the article is describing, a disconnect between well-meaning educators, school systems and the Native American students that they serve.

Our Panorama survey is typically given twice a school year, once in the fall semester and again in the spring semester. This survey is a nationwide survey that schools and districts can use to help improve educational outcomes. The data we get from the survey includes various points. Questions that students respond to range from self-management, social awareness, growth mindset, emotion regulation, self-efficacy, diversity and inclusion, cultural awareness and action, teacher-student relationships, sense of belonging, and school climate. The students respond to statements using a Likert scale to respond. The responses students can select include almost never, once in a while, sometimes, frequently, and almost all the time. According to our Panorama survey results from the spring semester of 2024, our teacher-student relationships data dropped. A few responses that were a bit surprising to me was that many students feel that their teachers would not be concerned if they came to class upset (Panorama Education Flagstaff Unified School District, 2024). Only 32% of students felt that their teachers would be concerned (Panorama Education Flagstaff Unified School District, 2024). When 68% of the student population do not feel cared for by teachers when they are upset, but 78% of students feel respected by teachers, there is a disconnect between respect and care (Panorama Education Flagstaff Unified School District, 2024). It appears the teachers are doing something to have students feel respected but may need to work on showing students that they care for them as

individuals. Regarding students' sense of belonging, only 19% of students feel connected to adults at the school (Panorama Education Flagstaff Unified School District, 2024). Further evidence shows we need to make some positive changes between educators and student relationships. I am hopeful that a shift to culturally relevant pedagogy can help to bridge the gaps that our educators and students are facing when it comes to relationship building. One major piece of having a culturally relevant pedagogy that could greatly impact student and educator relationships would be to share and celebrate cultures of origin. This would allow students and teachers to learn and grow from each other.

Passion is what caused me to get into the field of school counseling. This passion and love for connecting with my students has been a huge asset that I would love to share with my colleagues. Passion and excitement are two major pieces of the puzzle needed to be a successful educator. I believe many teachers get into education because of passion, their passion for education, for learning, for students, and their passion to encourage and mold the next generation, and their passion to build relationships and connections with their students. When the article Why Trouble SEL, described how teachers may have the best intentions, but have a disconnect with building relationships, particularly due to a cultural miscommunication (Mahfouz, Anthony-Stevens 2020, p.2). Students are often misunderstood, leaving teachers to have a specific idea of who the student is, when often, the student is interested, engaged, and working to the best of their abilities. This misunderstanding can lead to students not being challenged enough or even being held to the same standard as some of their peers.

Topic Summary

For this guidance lesson, we will be presenting to all our students during their pathways time. Pathways is a 30-minute time block that is built into our students' schedules. They begin four out of the five days of school with pathways, Monday through Thursday. As counselors, we typically must bid for a pathways time slot due to all the additional interventions and initiatives we must implement. This past year the counseling department was able to secure a pathways time slot once a month, I am hopeful that we will be able to continue throughout the 2024-2025 school. Pathways lessons are taught by the classroom teachers during our 30-minute time slot since we have close to 1,050 students. This has been the most efficient way we can implement social/emotional and counseling lessons to all students. Given this time constraint and lesson implementation set up, I am working to create a quick, 30-minute guidance lesson that all our teachers can implement. I also feel that this is the best way to improve teacher and student relationships. This lesson is meant to build connections amongst students as well as between teachers and students and help ignite the passion that teachers have for their students to build relationships on.

This guidance lesson should start to breakdown some of the cultural walls that students and teachers may have up, increasing cultural competency among students and staff. Cultural competency is defined as, "the ability of a person to effectively interact, work, and develop meaningful relationships with people of various cultural backgrounds," (de Guzman, 2016). As our global society continues to grow, becoming more interconnected, understanding and communicating with people across various cultures will become paramount to collective success. "Children and youth today need to be prepared to enter a workforce and adult society that spans

across borders and involves interacting with people of diverse backgrounds in myriad settings,” (de Guzman, 2016). The goal of this lesson would be to increase understanding and communication between students and staff leading to improved interpersonal relationships and cultural competency. This guidance lesson is meant to be the start of the cultural conversation and help aide teachers and students in building relationships based on clear communication and understanding of where everyone is coming from. If we can help facilitate conversations and understanding, teachers and students should be able to have a more positive and impactful relationship based on cultural understanding improving academic excellence.

My background as a school counselor is in trauma informed care within the school setting. My personal educational philosophy would be that all students can succeed regardless of where they come from or their history if we can meet students where they are at. People, particularly the youth, can be extremely resilient, especially when it comes to generational trauma. I believe a large part of meeting students where they are at, particularly our Native American students would be to acknowledge the generational trauma that they might have experienced and understand how this can impact their educational goals.

At Flagstaff Unified School District, we are blessed with a robust Native American Education Support Program. This department of our district works closely with our Native American families to ensure their students have what they need to be successful within the school setting. The department’s mission statement is, “providing culturally responsive educational support that promotes awareness and sensitivity of Indigenous students through programs that serve students, families, educators, and the community,” (Native American Education Support Program, 2024). The department’s student goals are as follows, “To provide educational college and career readiness skills. To promote life-long learning while retaining cultural identity. To nurture their potential to become successful and productive citizens” (Native American Education Support Program, 2024). One of the ways the department works hard to achieve this goal is by providing valuable and informative professional development for our educators at FUSD. Relevant professional development on Native American culture has been extremely beneficial for many of our educators. I believe that this professional development is a great starting point to inform our educators of some of the history and culture that relates to many of our Native American students and their families. Unfortunately, the professional development is just that, a starting point. It is extremely important for educators to continue to understand and learn more about our native students to ensure academic excellence for this specific population of students. Our students can be some of our greatest teachers, if we give them the opportunity, provide them with a listening ear, and place an interest in their personal and family lives. As a school counselor I have learned so much from all my students by asking them questions about their lives and giving them the time and space to share those stories with me. Teachers may struggle with providing the time to hear these stories, which is why I am hopeful this guidance lesson will be a continuation of learning about our students, particularly our Native American students, their families, and their culture.

It often seems that Native American families and educators are at odds with one another. A quick look back at the residential boarding schools of North America and the generational trauma that was inflicted on so many, might help to explain why there seems to be a constant struggle between educators and the Native American families they serve. After Native American families

were torn apart at the hands of the federal government, taking children away from families, homeland, and culture during the 1800's and 1900's, many who were impacted with a distrust in the federal government, educational agencies, and the educators who were a part of this movement. Now, generations later, educational institutions and educators alike are still trying to work through the distrust that many families still feel. Unfortunately, many Native American serving educators do not know of, understand, or know how to address the generational trauma that impacts many of their students. This generational trauma can look like educational apathy. When children were removed from their families and forced to attend boarding schools, there might still be that lack of trust within the educational system. When multiple generations were forced to move away from their culture or punished for participating in their culture, speaking their language, and telling their stories, it can be hard to get the current generations to buy into the educational systems. According to the article, *Why Don't More Indians Do Better in School? The Battle between U.S. Schooling and American Indian/Alaska Native Education*, Native American culture was criminalized (Brayboy, Lomawaima, 2018, p. 86). Hopi men were sent to prison for refusing to send their children to boarding schools, Native Americans were sent to prison for refusing to cut their hair, which has cultural significance (Brayboy, Lomawaima, 2018, p. 86). Native American students are still being singled out and punished for participating in cultural beliefs and practices (Brayboy, Lomawaima, 2018, p. 86). In 2017, a four-year-old Native American boy was sent home from his school in Texas for not abiding by the school dress code with his long hair (Brayboy, Lomawaima, 2018, p. 86). The school's statement was less than understanding by stating that they would not "lessen its expectations for standards of appearance," (Brayboy, Lomawaima, 2018, p. 86). It is unfortunate that Native students are still being targeted and persecuted for participating in their culture. As educators, it should be our job to build up and support all our students, no matter their background, not tear them down based off of their cultural beliefs.

If educators can take the time to connect with their students on a cultural level, learn from, be challenged by, and grow with our students, we can work towards making deeper connections with our students, eventually leading to better educational outcomes. It is well known amongst educators that students can't succeed unless their basic needs are met in addition to meeting their social emotional needs as well. Relationships can be a major supportive factor when dealing with social emotional needs, which is why it is so important for educators to build relationships with their students to help support their social emotional needs. According to the article *Improving Primary to Secondary School Transitions: A Systematic Review of School Based Interventions to Prepare and Support Student Social Emotional and Educational Outcomes*, connectedness, engagement, and belonging are all key factors in determining student success (Beatson, et al, 2023, p. 2). This article speaks on how important it is for students to feel connected at school with relationships being a major part of feeling connected (Beatson, et al, 2023, p. 2). If we, as educators, leave out a portion of our population because they do not feel connected, we are struggling to help them reach their full educational potential. Building connectedness within our schools between educators and students through relationships is extremely important when it comes to supporting our students. Building relationships with our students through culture can be extremely valuable to ensure all our students are successful. While this review is aimed at supporting our Native American students, I do believe that building relationships with all our students is extremely important and can help to ensure student success.

Social emotional health, connectedness, and relationships are all extremely important to student success. For educators serving Native American students, we have a unique set of challenges to tackle to address social emotional health, connectedness, and relationships. Most importantly, the gap that is felt between students and educators when it comes to care and respect. There are many educators who do not understand or even realize the generational trauma that many of our Native American students' experience, some of which has to do with forced education. We have a great professional development through our school district led by Native American educators that did a great job at explaining why some of our Native American students and Native American families struggle with educational apathy. When boarding schools and education has caused so much harm for many of our Native American families, it starts to make sense that some students and families disinterested in traditional education. I believe it takes a little bit of education for our educators for understanding to begin. Our students can be some of our greatest educators if we give them the opportunity. That is what this guidance lesson is all about, allowing our students to educate us on their own personal lives and cultures. That way we can start to build connectedness and cultural competence amongst our students and educators, improving relationships, social emotional health, and student success.

Student Engagement

The guidance lesson is titled Cultural Connection and will consist of one lesson with a target audience of 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. We will deliver this lesson to all our students across 6th through 8th grades. The purpose of this lesson is to allow and facilitate students exploring their own personal culture. The lesson will introduce students to the term culture, understand we all belong to different and various cultures, and begin to identify specifics of their own culture as well as find cultural connections with peers and staff. The student objective for this lesson is to define culture, provide an example, and begin to understand how culture connects people. The objective of the lesson connects with the ASCA Student Standards: Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K12 College, Career, and Life Readiness Standards for Every Student, (American School Counselor Association, 2024). ASCA stands for the American School Counselor Association. It is the major school counselor association in America, with various branches in each state. ASCA is the guiding force behind many school counselors and school counseling programs. They have a set of standards for counselors as well as standards for students to strive towards. The student standards, “describe the knowledge, skills and attitudes students need to achieve academic success, college and career readiness and social/emotional development. The standards are based on a survey of research and best practices in student achievement from a wide array of educational standards and efforts,” (American School Counselor Association, 2024). The ASCA student standards that the Cultural Connection lesson will correlate with include, develop positive attitudes toward self as a unique and worthy person, identify values, attitudes, and beliefs, identify personal strengths and assets, respect alternative points of view, recognize, accept, respect and appreciate individual differences, recognize, accept and appreciate ethnic and cultural diversity, and recognize and respect differences in various family configurations (American School Counselor Association, 2024).

The time frame for this lesson is 30 minutes. This will allow us to deliver the lesson during our Pathways class at Sinagua Middle School. The materials required for this lesson are internet access to access slideshow and student worksheets, teacher computer, projector, screen for

projecting onto, slideshow (see link provided), student brainstorming worksheet (to be completed online or paper pencil), student exit ticket, pencils, circle guidelines, and a talking piece. The talking piece can be anything inspiring or of meaning, please be sure to share why you chose that talking piece with the students. Teachers need to prepare the circle guidelines prior to the lesson, teachers can use an anchor chart, write the guidelines on the board, or project them after the slideshow is complete. The circle guidelines should include speak and listen with respect, respect the talking piece, speak from the heart, share timely, respect the circle.

The various parts of this lesson will meet the ASCA student standards. While working through the lesson, students will begin to develop positive attitudes about themselves on an individual level by exploring their own personal culture (American School Counselor Association, 2024). Utilizing the student worksheet, students should be able to identify their values and strengths (American School Counselor Association, 2024). Throughout the sharing part of the lesson, students should begin to recognize cultural differences, respect individual differences, and respect differences in family dynamics (American School Counselor Association, 2024). Students should be able to recognize the differences within cultures and families as well as identify what connects them with their peers and teachers through their cultures (American School Counselor Association, 2024).

Student Assessment

The student assessment for this lesson is an anonymous exit ticket survey every student will need to complete at the conclusion of the lesson. The rationale behind an anonymous exit ticket is to have students share their honest feelings about the classroom they are in. This also mimics the style of survey our Panorama survey is, anonymous. Our teachers have observed that the students take more time on the survey when it is anonymous. While students work on the survey, that is the main question they have, whether the survey is anonymous or not. It seems like the students feel a bit more comfortable sharing their honest thoughts and opinions when they know their name will not be attached to it.

The statements on the exit survey directly correlate to the sense of belonging and student teacher relationship sections of our Panorama school survey. The survey also has a couple questions about culture specifically to tie back into the cultural connections lesson and to check for understanding. The student assessment consists of four questions with multiple-choice answers. Three of the four questions are statements that come directly from our Panorama survey, but adjusted to have students think about their Pathways class specifically, which is where the lesson will be completed. The final multiple-choice question as well as the short answer question will relate directly to culture, checking for understanding from the guidance lesson to see if students are beginning to grasp the concept of culture or if reteaching is needed.

I am looking forward to reviewing the results from the student assessment. Using the Panorama school survey as a basis for the exit ticket will allow us to use the data from our Fall Semester 2024 Panorama survey as the pre-test to the Cultural Connection lesson. We plan to compare data points with the most recent Panorama survey and the exit ticket with the goal of seeing a positive correlation between students' survey results improving regarding how they feel with a sense of belonging within the classroom and student teacher relationships after the cultural

connections lesson. After the lesson, students should be able to demonstrate positive attitudes toward themselves as a unique individual, identify their own values and strengths, respect alternative viewpoints, appreciate individual differences, appreciate cultural diversity, and respect various family configurations, all which tie back to the ASCA Student Standards: Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K12 College, Career, and Life Readiness Standards for Every Student, (American School Counselor Association, 2024).

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Appendix

Lesson Plan: Cultural Connection

Middle School Guidance Lesson on Exploring Personal Culture

Grade level: 6th-8th grade

Objective: Define culture and be able to provide an example. Understand how culture can connect different people and begin to explore and share their own personal culture.

ASCA National Standards for Students: ASCA is the American School Counselor Association. It is the major school counselor association in America, with various branches in each state. ASCA is the guiding force behind many school counselors and school counseling programs. They have a set of standards for counselors as well as standards for students to strive towards. The student standards, “describe the knowledge, skills and attitudes students need to achieve academic success, college and career readiness and social/emotional development. The standards are based on a survey of research and best practices in student achievement from a wide array of educational standards and efforts,” (American School Counselor Association, 2024).

PS:A1.1 Develop positive attitudes toward self as a unique and worthy person

PS:A1.2 Identify values, attitudes, and beliefs

PS:A1.10 Identify personal strengths and assets

PS:A2.2 Respect alternative points of view

PS:A2.3 Recognize, accept, respect and appreciate individual differences

PS:A2.4 Recognize, accept and appreciate ethnic and cultural diversity

PS:A2.5 Recognize and respect differences in various family configurations

Time: 30 Minutes

Materials:

Internet access for slideshow and worksheet

Teacher computer

Projector

Screen to share presentation

Student worksheet (can be completed online or printed out)

Student exit ticket (can be completed online or printed out)

Pencils, if necessary

Talking piece (can be anything inspiring or of meaning, make sure to share why you chose that talking piece with the class, coin, crystal, feather, rock, ball, etc.)

Circle guidelines easily accessible for student reference (ex. Speak and listen with respect, respect the talking piece, speak from the heart, share timely, respect the circle)

Terminology: *Culture*

Presentation:

https://www.canva.com/design/DAGOC3C_BE4/_XMUSEdBNuADsZ13mOHoqw/edit?utm_content=DAGOC3C_BE4&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link2&utm_source=sharebutton

Worksheet: https://www.canva.com/design/DAGODSOHD-o/6J46y7DnDCO1wEvL_vkHxA/edit?utm_content=DAGODSOHD-o&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link2&utm_source=sharebutton

Assessment:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScSkhjPhxXqWfkwzGLq5t3GxXLQiLYftpkaEqcMAEsuK_j1dQ/viewform?usp=sf_link

Activities

Discussion: This 30-minute classroom lesson is meant to be used for 6th through 8th grade as a brief introduction to the idea of culture and start to get the students to understand and identify their own personal culture. Begin with the “Cultural Connections” slideshow to introduce middle school students to culture. Take a moment to review the objectives of the lesson with students. Get student involvement and ask if anyone has an idea of what culture might be, provide examples of own personal culture. Share the definition of culture, share broad examples of culture. Encourage classroom discussion about where you might see different cultures and provide students with examples of micro cultures within their own lives, ie bedrooms, homes, neighborhoods. Have students share what their own personal cultures look like. Introduce students to the “Cultural Connections Brainstorming” worksheet to help prompt their thinking for what their own personal culture might look like.

Practice: Provide students five minutes to complete the worksheet. Then gather students around in a circle. It is important for teachers to be included and a participating member of the circle. This allows the teacher to be an active member of community building and to check for understanding. Review circle guidelines and have students share **one** thing from their brainstorming worksheet. Conclude the circle by asking students to share any connections they may have to others. The teacher can also share connections they have to others. Thank students for their participation as this is the end of the lesson. Rationale, connection circles can help build classroom community. This lesson and circle are meant to build classroom community by encouraging students to recognize what makes them unique, connect with other students, and begin to see the connections they have with each other and their specific cultures.

Alternate Activity: Teachers know their classrooms, students, and dynamics best. If you feel like a circle will not work for your class to share their ideas, please have students stay at their desks and use a soft ball (i.e. stress ball) to throw to students and have them share. Be sure to start with a student who is a leader in the classroom, toss the ball to them to indicate to them it is their time to share after the teacher has led by example and shared their cultural connection.

Empower students to pick a different classmate to share after them.

Student Assessment: Complete the exit survey and share what you have learned with your family.

**Teachers should be aware and observant during the lesson. Students who may not have a “traditional” family composition might experience difficult emotions that could detract from the school day. Please check in with any students who seem to be having a difficult time during the lesson. Send any students down to the counseling office who may need additional support.