

Engaging Culturally Responsive Schools through Navajo Philosophy

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Context

My name is Roberta Gorman. I am of the Haashk'aan Shoshoni (Yucca Fruit) clan people, I am born for the Thizí laní (Manygoats) clan, my maternal clan is Tsinajinnie (Blackstreak clan) and my paternal clan is Tse'nijikinii (Towering Rock clan). I am married and I have three wonderful sons who gave me nine beautiful grandchildren. I live in Canyon Diable, Arizona, located Southwest of Leupp Arizona. Both my parents are deceased. My parents are non-English speakers and fluent speakers of the Navajo Language. I grew up in Canyon Diablo Arizona as a sheepherder.

My background in education began during my school-age years. I attended the Leupp Boarding School and Leupp Public School then attended Flagstaff Unified School District for high school. In 1982, I graduated from Flagstaff High School and later pursued higher education. I attended Diné College in 1985 and earned my A.A. in Liberal Arts. Diné College is located in Tsaile Arizona on Navajo Reservation. After earning my liberal arts degree, I earned my bachelor's associate in Education at Prescott Yavapai College. Then I went on to Northern Arizona University where I completed two Master's Degrees in Special Education and Multicultural Education.

I have taught for thirty years in various school systems on and off the Navajo reservation. I work at Puente de Hozho Elementary School as a 3rd-grade é Teacher in Flagstaff, Arizona. In my classroom, I serve 20 students, all Navajo; as well as, some other tribe-affiliated students. Puente de Hózhó Elementary School is a trilingual language school located in Flagstaff, Arizona, and is part of the Flagstaff Unified School District. PdH has two dual-language programs consisting of a Navajo Immersion Language Program and a Spanish-English Bilingual Program. The school serves students from kindergarten through 5th grade. In addition, a 6-12 International Baccalaureate Continuum is being established to complement PdH's programming. This program has been featured in the Harvard Education Review for "best practices" for culturally sustaining and revitalizing teaching! I love teaching the children at Puente de Hozho.

The Puente de Hozho school serves the communities of Leupp, Cameron, Birdsprings, and Tolani Lake. All of which reside in the Navajo Nation. Students are transported from these communities while students stay in the Flagstaff dormitories which are tribal run dormitories. These students go to Flagstaff Schools such as Puente De Hozho, Mt. Elden Middle School, Flagstaff High School, and Coconino High School which are from the communities of Leupp, Grandfalls, and Canyon Diablo.

I am proud to say I am a former School Board President of Leupp School Incorporated. I am also a former Leupp Chapter President within the hundred and ten (110) Navajo Nation Chapters. In addition, I have served as the former Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) President of Leupp Public School and advocated for a new school in Leupp which is currently in operation under Flagstaff Unified School District. At Puente de Hozho Elementary, I have been appointed Diné Language Team co-chairperson and liaison chairperson to the Puente de Hozho Parent Committee. I am also currently affiliated with Azee Bee Nahagha of Diné Nation as a President of Leupp Organization. I am very strong in using my Diné language and advocate for youth and elders. I proudly represent my community of Leupp as a woman leader. My mission is to

understand, cultivate, and deepen the cultural competence among leaders and the adults and students they lead by using Navajo Philosophy.

It feels as if we are making a breakthrough with school administrators who are gradually developing culturally responsive leadership skills to support their community and ensure that all students and staff receive an equal education. As a result, my vision is to prioritize and model culturally responsive practices as a foundational element of professional practice for culturally responsive leaders within Indigenous communities.

Rationale

Today, I represent myself as a strong woman leader as a mother, grandmother, teacher, school board official, and Chapter President. My upbringing is centered upon being taught the traditional Diné/Navajo way of life. My entire life I have lived in a hogan with twelve siblings and used only the Navajo language every day. I was always taught to endure life, the land, nature, and overall harmony with others, to understand the supernatural elements. In the Navajo Philosophy, all living things such as people, plants, animals, mountains, the Mother Earth/ Father Sky are considered relatives of one another, and we must have respect for them at all times.

I have learned that through education, one will receive the foundation of life skills and tools to become a respectful individual in a global society. In the research reading, Jack D. Forbes Indigenous Americans: Spirituality and Ecos 285 is that of gratitude, a feeling of overwhelming love and thankfulness for the gifts of the Creator and the earth/universe. As a young child, I was always reminded to pray in the morning dawn to the Holy People and that I would be protected and guided by the Holy Beings. Furthermore, I have to stay in balance with the natural cosmic order of the universe. I have sat in Blessingway Ceremonies to rejuvenate myself with the Creator's blessings. At age eight, my grandmother used to say to me, "Granddaughter it is up to you to learn and become an independent individual in life if you only understand your traditional teachings". In Navajo, the term is called, T'aa hwi'a'ji't'eego, or translated "it is up to you to become prosperous in life". I chose this topic because I am a prime example of being raised in the Navajo Philosophy teachings from birth to today. Both of my parents only spoke to me in the Navajo language and back then our whole village spoke only in Navajo.

This topic is important to leadership in Indigenous communities and essential to culturally responsive schooling because culturally responsive leadership positively impacts student unity by promoting inclusive environments, addressing unique cultural needs, and fostering community connections. Furthermore, effective school leaders in culturally diverse settings focus on cultural safety, community building, and quality education, enhancing student unity and improving achievements. In the article, "Culturally Responsive Leadership for Latinx Immigrant Students: Advocacy in a U.S.–Mexico Border Alternative School, Emily R. Crawford, David Aguayo, and Fernando Cano Valle, the authors explore how educators in an alternative school in Texas on the U.S.-Mexico border enacted advocacy for students and found that the principal and her staff experienced challenges but worked within the realities of the border, utilized critical discretion and courage in response to policy, and strengthened family and community relationships to reduce social and educational barriers for transnational students and families. Overall, culturally

responsive leadership plays a crucial role in fostering student unity through inclusive practices, cultural understanding, and community engagement.

This topic is essential to culturally responsive schooling because culturally responsive instruction empowers students. Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, in the book *Dreamkeepers* (1994), defined culturally responsive instruction as "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes". Research suggests that culturally responsive instruction allows educators to address social barriers that cause disparities in student achievement by tailoring instruction to be mindful of these barriers, educators can help students overcome obstacles and succeed (Rodriguez, Jones, Pang, & Park, 2004). Responsive classrooms also mitigate the effects of negative cultural stereotypes on student performance (Cohen & Garcia, 2008). As school administrators, leaders need to foster unity among students from diverse backgrounds by addressing linguistic, cultural, religious, and ethnic differences, enhancing inclusivity and understanding. In the 1970's, I experienced cultural shock while attending Flagstaff Unified School District from 8th grade to 12th grade. There was no support for cultural responsiveness schooling and no support for English language learners from teachers. However, through time the increase in diverse students within the Flagstaff Unified School District has changed the educational setting to support all students. Today, Flagstaff Unified School District Bilingual teachers, ESL Teachers, ELL Teachers, Diné Language and Culture Teachers, Native American Counselors, and a Native American parent support committee.

This topic resonated with me because I've gone through the 1970s education system not meeting my needs and other diverse students. Today, I try my best to educate my students and continue to encourage them to become a leader one day. We need young minds to lead my grandchildren, and it can only be done with culturally responsive leaders promoting inclusive environments, addressing unique cultural needs, and fostering community connections.

Topic Summary

This Leadership Practice Guide is about implementing the Navajo Philosophy in Leadership and incorporating culturally responsive leadership. As a local school board leader my leadership role is to ensure the employment of effective leadership teams and school leaders who value and practice closely with the community's cultural expectations. Examples of community cultural events such as Powwow, cultural nights, and cultural community meetings are part of what my leadership role involves ensuring cultural responsiveness in our school systems.

Nevertheless, the cultural responsiveness of school leaders is complex in aligning the values and practices with traditional cultural norms. Some principals do not adhere to cultural norms but instead deploy culturally dissonant practices. For example, an incident occurred in Farmington, New Mexico on May 16, 2024. Outrage surfaced on social media after a Farmington High School graduate was told to remove her cap adorned with Native American beading and a feather. A video surfaced online showing a school staffer telling the teen to remove her cap, remove the tassel, and put on a plain cap. It happened at the school's commencement ceremony on Monday. As Brenda White Bull, the mother of the student who had the cap taken away stated, "They don't have that right to tell me or my daughter how to dress, how to adorn ourselves". All that was put into that

beadwork. Everything that symbolizes, which was done with prayer by my family to give to her.” This is an example of how Navajo Philosophy is lacking in some Indigenous schools.

Community culture is important and school leaders who make use of Navajo Philosophy practices cultivate trust and gain community support. In addition, the incorporation of Navajo Philosophy provides the scope for the community to use more innovative leadership practices than these traditional communities might otherwise accept. The study’s findings suggest that local planners and educational schools begin to bring their background knowledge of culture.

Implementation Plan

There are ways to incorporate the Navajo Philosophy into culturally responsive schools, build culturally responsive leadership, and incorporate culturally responsive schooling practices within Indigenous communities. The framework is grounded in four principles:

1. Welcoming and Affirming Environments
2. High Expectations and Rigorous Instruction
3. Inclusive Curriculum and Assessment
4. Ongoing Professional Learning.

To ensure culturally responsive leadership and integration of the Navajo Philosophy in tribal communities in the Navajo Nation leaders must incorporate the Navajo Philosophy and culturally responsive perspectives and experiences into decision-making, curriculum development, and interactions while fostering an inclusive environment where everyone feels valued and respected, actively challenging biases and promoting equitable access to opportunities for all. For example, efforts by District Superintendent Goodsell and the Window Rock Unified School District Governing Board, have strategically integrated the Navajo Philosophy into their overall school district operations. The WRHS bathroom renovations, the site’s roofing projects, waterline upgrades, and revamping of the fieldhouse, activity buses, and football and track stadium are measuring that Window Rock Unified School District has taken to respond to the cultural needs of the Navajo students and parents Window Rock Unified School District serve. In an interview with the Indian Community School Leadership Institute, District Superintendent Goodsell stated, “It is their commitment to our students and the community voting on the Impact Aid bond that made these opportunities happen. One parent responded, “I love how WRUSD prioritizes funds being spent directly on students”. Collaborating with community leaders and tribal organizations to incorporate culturally relevant events and activities into the school calendar shows positive evidence of how culturally responsive practices can be integrated into tribal communities, schools, and school systems.

The information below outlines samples of key actions to achieve Culturally Responsive School/Navajo Way practices in school systems.:

1. Modeling cultural sensitivity when interacting with students, staff, and families.
2. Holding oneself and others accountable for upholding culturally responsive practices.
3. Providing ongoing support and professional development opportunities for staff to enhance their cultural competence.

4. Intentionally seeking out diverse perspectives from staff, students, and families through focus groups, surveys, and individual conversations.
5. Encouraging teachers to incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy, including using examples and stories that resonate with students' backgrounds.

In addition to the items listed above, additional professional development opportunities to learn additional knowledge, tools, and strategies about culturally responsive schooling can be attained by attending,

The Culturally Responsive Schooling (CRS) with/in Indigenous Communities Professional Development Program and The Indian Country School Leadership Institute (ICSLI), both provided by the Institute of Native Serving Educators by Northern Arizona University which is designed to help build capacity amongst school and district leaders serving Indigenous communities. The ICSLI program helps school and district leaders develop and enhance leadership skill sets to effectively work with Indigenous students, staff, leaders, and community members. The program focuses on increasing educators' knowledge of key ideas/issues, and also educators' ability to use and apply that knowledge to their everyday work with students.

Assessment

Assessing the implementation of the Navajo Philosophy can be accomplished in many ways. One such way to assess is to determine the integration of the Navajo Philosophy by using methods such as:

1. Conduct focus groups with community members such as parent committee members, local chapter house officials, and school board members to determine what Navajo Philosophy means within your community and schools. Utilizing the elders' teachings and considering their inputs makes them important in decision making.
2. Utilize participatory observation, incorporating culturally relevant surveys and actively seek feedback from diverse stakeholders to gain insights specific to the cultural context, ensuring representation and understanding of different perspectives.
3. Participate in the Indian Education Conference, voicing your concerns and advocating for policies to create programs that support self-determination.
4. Create and develop comprehensive culturally grounded learning opportunities for Native students. Such as Indigenous Literacy books, Indigenous learning apps and learning software.

Conclusion

In addition to the four assessment criteria above, school systems should also assess whether the Navajo (Diné) Philosophy is being implemented in the school. Additionally, Navajo Nation schools, school districts, and Diné Colleges are recommended to hire culturally responsive personnel who are qualified and possess the skills. Schools can provide training on implementing Diné Education Guidelines on School Philosophy, Diné Way of Life and Language, and Community Relations. For example, in 1968, Diné College courses were based on a Western

curriculum format and nine hours of Navajo language, history, and culture were required as part of the core curriculum. In addition, there were strong Diné leaders who advocated for our children and planted a seed to grow. Dr. Dean C. Jackson became president in 1979 and was a strong advocate for Indian education, he believed the college needed to develop a model Navajo philosophy of education that reflected Navajo cultural values.

Indigenous educational leaders should always keep in mind that the growth in learning and the changes in Navajo children are said to be analogous to the corn stalk. Corn is an important symbol in Navajo life. Corn is revered because it embodies all the natural processes of nature. It is related to the mother earth, father sky, and the cosmic order or Sa'ah Naaghai Bik'eh Hozhoon. Instilling traditional values in young Navajo children's minds can lead to success in the dominant society.

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Goals that I want to achieve:

1. Complete my Curriculum Guide and Publish it.
2. Cultivate strong leadership within the school building and district to build and sustain the necessary cultural and instructional changes.
3. Foster relationships between district leadership and staff to discuss issues such as school climate, culturally responsive pedagogy and practice, authentic family and community engagement, and equitable opportunities for students.
4. Build trust and establish relationships and provide professional development regarding Culturally Responsive Schooling (CRS) and cultivating strong leaders within my community and Indian Country.

