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Full circle: Native educational approaches show the way

McClellan Hall

When Europeans encountered the indigenous people of Turtle Island, as North America is known to many Native American tribes, they discovered diverse cultures, ranging from large political confederacies, to densely populated farming communities, to small hunting and gathering groups. The population at contact has been re-estimated upwards from several million people to at least 20 million, speaking over 300 different languages. Their cultures incorporated a sophisticated understanding of the Creation and, in their role as caretakers of Turtle Island, the indigenous people enjoyed an intimate relationship with the Creator.

Native communities had an organized system for educating young people, based on generations of accumulated knowledge about the natural world. A complex experiential process was well developed, which included learning by doing, watching, listening, and experimenting under the caring mentorship of elders and extended family members. Customs, skills, spiritual practices, and languages were effectively transmitted according to locally-determined priorities. The extended family, clan, and the larger community provided a safety net for all children.

The understanding that it "takes a village" to raise a child, commonly attributed to African tradition, was the norm in Native communities, too. However, there was no concept of "other people's" kids. Children were regarded as a gift from the Creator and members of the community shared responsibility for their upbringing. While Europeans brought in a hierarchical system of educating young people, which reflected their male dominated society, the traditional indigenous ways were much more egalitarian and respectful of both sexes.

McCellan Hall, M.A. has been active in Native education for over 20 years, first as a volunteer tutor and later as a teacher, administrator, and director of two tribal schools, and as the founder of the National Indian Youth Leadership Project (P.O. Box 2140, Gallup, New Mexico 87304).

Learning was understood to be a life-long experience, which began before birth. Through songs and ceremonies for the unborn child, infants were prepared for a place in the community. Children commonly spent the first months of life in a cradleboard. Generally, the cradleboard was taken everywhere and was propped up, allowing the child to observe the activity of the family, community, and the environment.

Clearly, it was commonly understood that responsibility for teaching was not confined to the biological parents. Elders were held in the highest esteem in this system, and grandparents played important roles as teachers of traditional knowledge and carriers of the family genealogy. Aunts, uncles, and others who may not be blood relatives all played roles.

As children grew older, a variety of approaches to teaching were incorporated. Oral tradition was most common, although different tribes utilized symbolic writing, as in the case of the Cherokee syllabary, a system which uses a symbol for each distinctive sound in the Cherokee language. Among the Delawares and other northeastern tribes, picture writing on birch bark was used and significant events and valued teachings were recorded on scrolls. In the southern plains, picture writing on animal skins was common. These are just a few examples of mnemonic devices used across Turtle Island. Skills in observation and memorization were vitally important in these teaching approaches.

Learning of appropriate roles was accomplished through emulating examples seen in the community. There was great respect given to individuals and individual differences. There was a lot of flexibility shown in the adoption of sex roles as children grew older. Mentoring occurred, both on the individual level, as well as with groups of youth. Games were also an important vehicle for teaching and learning. Young people were generally free to develop at their own pace.

Puberty ceremonies and other rites of passage were critical times in the lives of indigenous young people. These occasions offered opportunities for instruction

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National Indian Youth Camp; 1995.

in culturally specific knowledge as well as role expectations. Passages from one stage of life to another were commonly celebrated by the entire community. Ceremonies varied from tribe to tribe, some were individualized, such as the Navajo puberty ceremony for girls, called *Kinaalda.* Others recognized groups of young people together, as in the Sunrise ceremony, the Apache version of the girl's puberty celebration.

One of the most important concepts of traditional thought and worldview is the emphasis on positive thought. As Cherokees, we are taught that balance, harmony, and beauty are essential and that these are achieved through prayer. Our prayers are offered for all of the Creation-humans, animals, insects, plants, minerals, and the elements. Humans create a positive environment through a process of thinking or conceptualizing, speaking, and/or singing about the desired results.

A major conflict between value systems occurred when the government assumed control of "education" for native people. Education became a foreign process, controlled by outsiders, conducted in a foreign language, and enforced by a system of punishment. Vine Deloria, Jr., a Lakota educator and author, provides important insight into the fundamental difference between the Euro-American model imposed on Native Americans and the traditional approach. "The old ways of educating affirmed the basic principle that the human personality was derived from accepting the responsibility to be a contributing member of a society," he states in *Indian Education in America.* Furthermore, he reminds us that "Kinship and clan were built upon the idea that individuals owed each other certain kinds of behaviors and that if each person performed his or her task properly, society would function." Deloria continues, "Education in the traditional setting occurs by example and is not a process of indoctrination." He adds, "The final ingredient of traditional tribal education is that accomplishments are regarded as the accomplishments of the group or family, not the individual."

The concept of punishment was not part of the traditional learning process. The Dakota of the northern plains believed that physical punishment would "enslave the child's spirit." When discipline was necessary, moral lectures, stories, ridicule and teasing, and the threat of supernatural repercussions were generally all that was needed. The concept of natural, logical consequences for behavior was well understood as the result of intimate involvement in nature and provided further parameters for behavior. Elders and spiritual leaders were called upon to interpret events. Dreams, visions, and other messages provided direction and guided the lives of Native people.

Many of the values and approaches to teaching and learning common to indigenous cultures are experiencing a revival. As Ponca educator, Roger BuffaloHead commented at the National Service Learning Conference in 1991, "One of the things that has interested me over the years in terms of Native education is that what you now call Service Learning is how Native people transmitted knowledge and culture in their own communities. Yet this was never accepted as a legitimate way of transmission of knowledge in this country. So Native people's views about how knowledge should be transmitted from one generation to the next often conflicted with those of higher education or public school people. It's good to see that you are beginning to come around to our point of view about how young people should learn." Experiential education programs and the service learning movement include many of the key elements of the tribal approaches described above.

Insights gained from discussions with elders and Native educators have led to the realization that indigenous approaches and values can form the foundation

for educational strategies that can bring the best of both worlds to Native youth and schools. Programs developed by the National Indian Youth Leadership Project over the last 10 years reflect a commitment to this process. One critical element of our work has focused on an exploration of the roots of the service ethic in Native cultures. In NIYLP programs, service is presented in its organic context, as a living part of the culture, rather than as just another educational fad. Terms in the Native languages are identified and examples of traditional practices are presented to young people. *Sii-yuu-dze*, a term in the Keres language, spoken at Acoma pueblo, translates as "everybody's work," and is expressed through several annual events that take place in the pueblo. During these projects, one of which is the cleaning of the tribal irrigation system for the spring planting, each person, young and old, male and female, has a clear role. In the Cherokee culture, the concept of *Gadugi* brings people together for mutual help projects, based on relationships among people in the community. The term comes from what is known as the ancient Cherokee language, which is only spoken in the old songs and ceremonies. This is clear evidence that the practice is as old as the continent.

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The National Indian Youth Leadership Camp provides opportunities to introduce many of the key concepts to young people at the 6-8th grade level. This program has been conducted by NIYLP since 1983. In the 14 year period since the inception of the camps, over 50 sessions have been held, in several states. Young people are introduced to key concepts, including group problem solving, group decision making, cooperative games and challenges that serve as metaphors for what will be encountered as they grow into adulthood. Students implement service projects during the camp, in addition to planning projects that will be implemented back in the home communities during the following school year.

In 1992, the National Indian Youth Leadership Project began working with seven Native schools in New Mexico, as part of a larger project called the National Service Learning Initiative, which included 36 schools nationwide. The goal was to incorporate service learning into the curriculum of the schools, based on traditional models that could be identified in the communities. We selected schools that were representative of the type of schools that serve Native students. The schools were asked to commit to fully incorporating service learning into the curriculum and to be part of a national network of schools working toward educational reform. Training for teachers was provided and materials were developed. Participating schools, such as Sky City Community School on the Acoma reservation, designed projects unique to their cultural context. A cross-age tutoring effort called Buddy Works that matched 8th graders with kindergarten students for tutoring, reading, and language preservation was a highlight. Buddy Works evolved into another activity called Parent Works, where master teacher and Acoma native Donna Boynton, and participating 8th graders, worked with the parents of the kindergarten students to build reading and other relevant supportive skills to ensure academic success for the 4- and 5-year olds. An environmental unit, called *Amu haatsi* (To Love Mother Earth), was developed, to blend the science curriculum with traditional Acoma thought on the subject.

The success of the six schools served in the N.S.L.I. led to the Turtle Island Project, a 4-year collaboration between NIYLP, the Kellogg Foundation, the Corporation for National/Community Service, and 14 schools in five states serving Native students. Further, several colleges that are training significant numbers of Native teachers are now incorporating service learning into the core curriculum of teacher training programs. Eventually, the colleges will connect with the schools through student-teacher placements. The schools receive on-site trainings and representatives from all sites are convened at two national conferences each year.

The Turtle Island Project (TIP) advances a two-part theory about Native education: (1) Native youth will learn best within the context of culture and community; and (2) learning rooted in the organic, indigenous cultural context will rejuvenate Native communities and establish badly needed linkages between the community, the school, and the young people. Service learning methodology supports the inclusion of indigenous languages, ecology and history and will result in increased levels of involvement and interdependence among students and communities. TIP sites are located in Michigan, Minnesota, South Dakota, Arizona and New Mexico.

Many TIP projects center around cultural preservation, with traditional agricultural practices serving as a link to larger cultural issues in pueblo communities. Taos pueblo has initiated a project with indigenous youth in Chihuahua, Mexico, involving the syn-

thesis of contemporary agricultural practices and ancient seeds. Hopi is building a project centered around corn, as a cornerstone of the culture. In South Dakota, a mural depicting Lakota culture has replaced gang graffiti on a public building and students are working to identify and place markers on old, unmarked Indian graves. In the upper peninsula of Michigan, students are collecting oral histories, with a larger goal of developing a cultural curriculum built around the many different groups in the area. In Minnesota, Native students are establishing an Internet marketing program for locally produced crafts.

The overarching vision of NIYLP programs is the empowerment of young people and community, to eventually regain some degree of self determination in educational programs for Native youth. Respect for indigenous approaches will be restored when the traditional Native values form the foundation of a new approach, where youth are valued and are allowed to perform meaningful roles and where the values and traditions of the tribal community are viewed as viable on their own terms. As Roger BuffaloHead reminds us, what is now called service-learning can help build the bridges between the school, the community, and the young people.

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