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Service Learning in Native Communities: The Generator School Project

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By involving students in a variety of service efforts described here by McCellan Hall, the Generator School Project has replaced deficit, community rip-off models of teaching and learning with service learning models that are consonant with values and beliefs in American Indian communities. Service learning has been fully incorporated in participating schools, service-based curriculum units have been developed, interdisciplinary lesson plans are commonplace and, most importantly, highly skilled native teachers, capable of training their peers, have emerged at project sites. The approach has facilitated the development of community control, organic learning, students' tribal identities, cooperation, selflessness, and spirituality.

Toward Service Learning

When Europeans came ashore some 500 years ago, the area now called North America included diverse native cultures that ranged from small hunting and gathering groups to large political confederacies, as well as densely populated, permanent farming communities. The total population at contact was probably several million, speaking over 300 languages, which incorporated sophisticated interpretations of the Creation. The indigenous people enjoyed an intimate relationship with the Creator in their role as caretakers of the continent. Native communities had an organized system for educating young people. A learning-by-doing process, usually under the mentorship of relatives and elders, was well developed. Customs, skills, spiritual practices and languages were effectively transmitted according to locally determined priorities. The extended family, clan and larger community provided a safety net for children.

As native people came increasingly under the control of the federal government, however, education became a formal, foreign process, controlled by outsiders. Where once the natural world served as the learning environment, an abrupt shift to a regimented, classroom atmosphere took place. Where traditionally, the worst form of punishment imaginable was banishment, education became a form of banishment, tearing young people away from their homes and families and thrusting them into an alien "learning" environment. Federal policy toward native education, until fairly recently, has for the most part reflected the values of the immigrant culture, with its heavy emphasis on Christianity and conformity. The primary goal of the missionaries and later the Bureau of Indian Affairs (which was organizationally and philosophically located within the War Department until the late nineteenth century), was forced assimilation, with the eradication of native languages and cultures the desired outcome.

Vine Deloria, Jr., the Lakota educator and author, provides several important insights into the conflict between the Euro-American model that has been imposed on Native Americans and the traditional approach. "The old ways of educating affirmed the basic principal that the human personality was derived from accepting the responsibility to be a contributing member of a society," he states. "Kinship and clan were built upon the idea that individuals owed each other certain kinds of behaviors and that if each individual performed his or her task properly, society would function." Deloria continues, "Education in the traditional setting occurs by example and not as 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" (1991).

The Quality Education for Minorities Report (1990) echoed Vine Deloria, Jr. in citing the following factors as key to the failure of educational programs aimed at native people in America:

- The process and goals of education were defined by the dominant group.
- The language and culture of the people were not valued.
- The needs and goals of the native communities were not taken into account.
- Educational programs failed to acknowledge tribal sovereignty and the importance of self determination to native people.

- Educational systems assumed a non-existent homogeneity among tribal groups.
- Programs aimed at relocation from reservations to urban areas failed to address basic economic realities.

It is against this historical and cultural backdrop that the essential issues facing native people in the education arena come into focus:

- Outside control vs. community control.
- Indoctrination vs. "organic" learning.
- Individuality vs. group identity.
- Competition vs. cooperation.
- Acquisition (of material things) vs. value placed on giving away (the most valuable things).
- Secular, "scientific" orientation to the natural world vs. spiritual orientation.

A shift in official policy occurred when the Indian Self-Determination Act (Public Law 93-638) was passed in 1975. This legislation offered native people some measure of control over educational programs serving native children. Although difficult to quantify, progress has been made on several fronts: foremost among these include increased numbers of native teachers and administrators in "638 contract schools" in which communities contract with the Bureau of Indian Affairs to run their own schools; the creation of tribal colleges; and the inclusion of native culture and languages in the curriculum.

Potentially the most important trend is one that did not require specific legislation. It recognizes that traditional strengths and values still exist within native cultures and that these form the basis for significant educational change. The National Indian Youth Leadership Project, a native controlled non-profit organization, has over the last twelve years identified several strategies that can play a role in the revitalization of native education. Of singular importance is the recognition that traditional native values, such as service to the community and the belief that a leader in a native context must above all be a servant to the people, have great potential in reforming native education.

NIYLP and the Generator School Project

Ironically, much of our work in native communities over a period of years points to the potential effectiveness of what is now being called service-learning. With respect to service-learning, Roger Buffalo Head, a Ponca educator, was quoted as saying 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 what you now call service-learning--which 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 often conflicted with those of higher education or public school people about how knowledge should be transmitted from one generation to the next. It's good to see that you are beginning to come around to our point of view about how young people should learn."

In 1990 the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) received a grant from the Kellogg Foundation to develop the National Service Learning Initiative. A key element of the project was the designation of schools across the country as "Generator Schools." Additional funding for the schools was secured from the DeWitt-Wallace Readers Digest Fund. Generator Schools were to be developed in the Northwest, through Project Service Leadership, in the Midwest through the NYLC and in the Southwest through the National Indian Youth Leadership Project (NIYLP). In addition, the NIYLP was to serve as the national resource center for Native American schools, agencies and communities.

Under the Generator School Project (GSP), two to three schools are selected each year for the first three years of the project. Each school receives a small budget, which decreases each year for the life of the project. In so doing, the goals are to choose schools that: (1) are representative of the types of schools serving native students across the country; (2) are progressive and willing to fully incorporate service learning into the curriculum; and (3) are willing to be a full partner in a national network of schools committed to school reform.

In year one of the project in the southwest region, Sky City Community School on the Acoma Reservation was selected; it is a K-8 Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) school. Zuni Mid School (6-8) was also chosen; it is a tribally controlled, independent school district, that operates under the New Mexico State Department of Education. In year two, Laguna Elementary, (BIA) on the Laguna reservation, (then K-8) was selected, along with David Skeets Elementary, a K-5 school that serves mostly Navajo students in the "checkerboard area" (Navajo lands intermingled with private lands) south of Gallup. Skeets is part of the Gallup-McKinley school system. In year three, Taos Day School (BIA) became a project site, as did Gallup Catholic, a private K-9 school in Gallup, New Mexico, one-third of whose student population is Navajo. In 1992, the Laguna Mid

School was opened, under the control of the Pueblo of Laguna. The sixth through eighth grade students that had been at Laguna Elementary were moved to the new Mid School. This institution became our seventh Generator School in 1993.

The symbolism of the term "Generator" in the Generator School Project requires some explanation. The wind generator has been the symbol of the National Youth Leadership Council since its beginning in the early 1980's. NYLC founder, Jim Kielsmeier explains that the wind generator takes a natural resource, the wind, which is potentially helpful, while also potentially quite dangerous, and turns it into a source of useful energy for human use. In the Generator School Project example, young people are a form of tremendous potential energy, while service to others is the process that converts their energy into a positive resource for our communities. We could stretch this analogy a bit further to say that the schools then serve as the "transformer," distributing this new found energy to the community.

The National Indian Youth Leadership Project, as a native controlled non-profit organization dedicated to service in Native communities since its inception, has gained some important insights into this topic. As we have talked with native elders and parents over the years, we realized that to effectively facilitate the spread of service learning in native schools, it was critical to establish the roots of service in traditional native cultures. Rather than just another educational fad coming into New Mexican native communities, service was presented in its organic context, as a living part of the culture. Terms in the native languages were identified, and examples of traditional service were presented to young people. In the words of Harold Chino, a member of the Sky City Community School staff, young people need to understand the "whys," not just the "what." *Si-Yuu-Dze*, is a term in the Keres language, spoken at Acoma, which Harold has translated as "everybody's work." At key times of the year, the *Si-Yuu-Dze* concept comes into sharper focus. Young and old come together to perform the functions necessary to ensure the continuity of the Acoma culture. With this foundation, the next step was fairly easy.

To reinforce the traditional concept of service, the Generator School Project has provided a five-day teacher training institute to teachers and administrators each summer. The institute provides an opportunity for native teachers and those working with native youth to examine the key elements of quality service learning projects, look at best practices, and become part of a national network to share with colleagues who face similar challenges in engaging young people in a variety of cultural contexts.

Examples of Generator School Projects

In Acoma at Sky City Community School, several innovative projects have been developed, including "Buddy Works," which pairs eighth graders with kindergarten and first grader children in tutoring settings. As part of the program, the eighth graders must develop their own lesson plans for the proposed activities. These are reviewed by a teacher, Donna Boynton, a tribal member, who then provides advice as needed. The next step in the service progression is "Parent Works," which brings the parents into the process and prepares them to read to their children and begin to build a home library of interesting children's reading matter. Another project developed by a group of Acoma teachers is called *Aamu Hatsu* (For the Love of Mother Earth). This is an environmental studies unit, which incorporates the best of both worlds, attempting to blend the deep spiritual reverence that the Acoma people hold for the earth with the best of what western, environmental science has to offer.

In Zuni, middle school students have developed and implemented a plan to clean up a small lake. This involves cleaning up trash accumulated over years of neglect, building trails, refurbishing picnic and recreation areas and eventually restocking fish in the lake. Interdisciplinary lesson plans include science, math and communications. Zuni is also the site of a state-sanctioned Search and Rescue program that is made up entirely of Native American high school students from Zuni High and Twin Buttes. At Twin Buttes High School, the entire staff and student body are also involved in the community as part of a school-wide service learning effort. Laguna Elementary has implemented an effort called SOS (Save One Student), where each staff member has taken on several students, with whom they spend one-on-one time each day, above and beyond the call of duty for teachers. Laguna Elementary students regularly visit the Senior Citizens Center, where they have adopted grandparents. Peer-tutoring is school-wide. The school also brings in elders to share with students. Recently, the school held a special birthday party for a tribal elder who celebrated her 116th birthday. David Skeet Elementary has started a conflict resolution team to handle student conflicts. The fourth grade class there visited a recycling program in Zuni and started a school-wide recycling program. Tree planting, a book drive and food drive for Thanksgiving are among other highlights of the first year of the project. An environmental unit called *Re-Leaf* is also in progress, as well as an Adopt-A-Grandparent program. At Taos Day School, a Children Helping Children carnival was held, raising over \$700, which will go to a Street Kids Program. Students will begin a dance class with disabled pre-schoolers. Gallup Catholic, in its first year of the program, has already conducted several successful service days, bringing eighth graders to the local soup kitchen to pre-

pare and serve food to homeless people and spending a day at a local center for children who have been abandoned or removed from their homes by the courts. All of the Gallup Catholic projects have been on Saturdays and Sundays and on the students free time.

The Future of the Project

By involving students in a wide range of service efforts, the Generator School Project has exceeded expectations. Service Learning is fully incorporated in some schools, service-based curriculum units are being created, interdisciplinary lesson plans are becoming commonplace and, most importantly, highly skilled native teachers, capable of training their peers, are emerging. Students are spending time with elders, as well as serving as big brothers and big sisters to younger students. On a recent visit to the Buddy Works class on a Friday morning at Sky City School, an observer from a Washington, DC agency could, in his words, hardly believe what he saw. A teenage boy in a black jacket with "LA Kings" in large letters across the back, sat reading and coloring with a five year old girl. The classroom contained fourteen eighth graders and an equal number of kindergartners, quietly learning and enjoying each other's company. The visitor commented that he could not imagine this scene taking place in the inner city, or even in his suburban Virginia neighborhood. The principal, Charlotte Garcia, an Acoma tribal member, later told us that the attendance for both the eighth grade and kindergarten classes had increased dramatically since the Buddy Works program began. Through the Generator School Project we look forward to this scene becoming so commonplace that it becomes an integral, conscious part of the culture, once again.

The essential educational issues discussed earlier can each be addressed through thoughtful service learning projects, ones that bring culture and traditional values into the classroom and extend the academic subjects into the community. Service learning allows for organic learning to become possible, once again, while the group identity is strengthened, rather than diluted. Cooperation can become the operative approach in the native classroom. The spiritual explanation of natural events can once again be valued and compared and contrasted with the scientific version held by western science. Most importantly, service learning offers young native people important opportunities to truly give away that which is most valuable.

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