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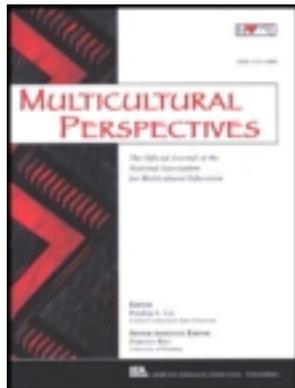
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Multicultural Perspectives

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hmcp20>

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Available online: 08 Dec 2010

To cite this article: Tiffany S. Lee & Patricia D. Quijada Cerecer (2010): (Re) Claiming Native Youth Knowledge: Engaging in Socio-culturally Responsive Teaching and Relationships, *Multicultural Perspectives*, 12:4, 199-205

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2010.527586>

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(Re) Claiming Native Youth Knowledge: Engaging in Socio-culturally Responsive Teaching and Relationships

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This article reveals Native youth perspectives on socio-culturally responsive education. The authors draw on two studies conducted in the Southwest among Navajo and Pueblo students. Youth convey the importance of meaningful, reciprocal, and transformative learning experiences and relationships at school. The article ends with suggestions for creating a socio-culturally responsive school environment.

A teacher should be someone I trust that I believe what they tell me. You know someone, who is someone who I don't doubt what they are saying or why they are saying it. Here it is hard because sometimes I wonder why they are teaching us some of the stuff they do, like some of the information they teach us in History. It just isn't true so how can I trust my teacher. (Warren, Pueblo)

Introduction

This article centers on how Navajo and Pueblo¹ youth inform educators about what it means to create socio-culturally responsive education. For these youth, socio-culturally responsive (SCR) education encompasses more than simply incorporating language, cultural knowledge, and cultural perspectives into course curriculum; rather, it also implicates pedagogy, cultural values, educational and personal vision, teacher preparation, school climate,

and assessment. The youth identify opportunities to learn and assert or reclaim their Native² identity despite school, teacher, and peer-based influences that challenge them. In this article, youth demonstrate how they are active agents in their own education by first locating SCR education in their Native language courses; second, through their relationships with teachers; and finally, in critiquing the intolerance of their heritage in school culture. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how youth perspectives inform ways in which teachers and schools can engage in socio-culturally responsive practices. Although the experiences of these youth are situated in the southwestern part of the United States, their educational experiences occur in public schools and in that respect are relatable to populations outside the Southwest.

To this end, this article is organized in the following manner. We begin with a brief overview of socio-culturally responsive education as it applies to Native youth. Then we draw upon two studies that illuminate how youth discuss socio-culturally responsive education in their language courses and through their relationships with teachers. We conclude by providing policy implications and recommendations on how to enact the findings in classrooms and schools.

Conceptualization of Socio-culturally Responsive Education

SCR education embraces pedagogy that incorporates students' lived experiences, home-based knowledge,

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¹All of the student participants in the study are Navajo or Pueblo. There are 19 Pueblo communities in New Mexico, some with very small populations. To protect the identity of our Pueblo participants, their heritage will generically be referred to as *Pueblo*.

²We use the term *Native* when discussing Native people generally and/or outside of our participants. We also capitalize the term *Native* as a proper noun, in line with the United Nations use of the term, and out of respect for the unique cultural and political relationship Native people have with their homelands.

and local environment to inform curriculum design and content as well as how relationships are formed with students (Belgarde, Mitchell, & Moquino-Arquero, 2002; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Demmert & Towner, 2003; Quijada Cerecer, Alvarez Gutiérrez, & Rios, 2010). We use the term “socio-culturally responsive education” to recognize how Native youth’s lives are not solely defined by their Native culture, but are also inclusive of social influences such as the mainstream media, family income and occupations, tribal economic development, off-reservation residence, and peer influences. Socio-culturally responsive education is comprehensive in recognizing the breadth of Native students’ lived experiences today.

To date scholars have advocated that SCR teaching is more than being sensitive and aware of a students’ cultural backgrounds, rather it also recognizes how cultures are contextually based and necessitates that educators become culturally competent in order to meaningfully and appropriately incorporate students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds into their teaching (see Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Lee, in press; Pewewardy, 1998; Quijada Cerecer, in press). Pewewardy (1998) argues that teachers need to learn to not only respect students’ cultural differences, but they also need to have the strategies and skills for utilizing students’ socio-cultural knowledge and resources in the classroom.

While we have highlighted research among Native populations, scholars of multicultural education have informed conceptualizations of what it means to be an SCR teacher for all populations. They argue SCR education is necessary in order to respond to educational inequities that negatively affect poor and/or minority youth (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Valdes, 2001). Additionally, SCR teaching is about centralizing students’ ethnic and cultural heritages so that pedagogy, curriculum, and relationships in the classroom privilege a multicultural framework³ (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 1999). In embracing this ideology, educators are validating students’ home-based knowledge and experiences and allowing students to actively participate in constructing what counts as knowledge in their classrooms and schools.

The SCR approach lends itself to promoting transformative academic knowledge (Ball, 2004; Banks, 2008; Smith, 2003). Transformative academic knowledge enables all students to have a sense of belonging at community, state, national, and international levels.

³For an extended review of research in multicultural education, teaching, and implications of race, see Hollins, E. R. (2008) *Culture in school learning: Revealing the deep meaning*. NY: Routledge; King, J. E. (1991) Dysconscious racism: Ideology, identity, and the miseducation of teachers. *Journal of Negro Education*, 60(2), 133–146; Grant, C. and Sleeter, C. (2007) *Doing multicultural education for achievement and equity*. NY: Taylor and Francis Group.

Such classrooms provide a way to create unity among a diverse student body by challenging students to be critically conscious and inclusive of diversity, especially among less recognized populations like Native peoples. SCR education and transformative academic knowledge necessitate students to recognize the importance of all communities in the world, thereby validating the cultural identities of individual students in their classrooms.

Native youths’ voices are particularly important for learning about their interpretations of their educational experiences. They are at the heart of education, and they can best frame our understanding of what works in education. Researchers of youth experiences and perspectives argue that youth recognize and understand the social inequities of their local contexts (Deyhle, 1998; Martinez, 2010; McCarty & Wyman, 2009) and more importantly, understand that youth are active agents in responding to and shaping those experiences (Bucholtz, 2002; McCarty, Romero-Little, Warhol, & Zepeda, 2009). This article highlights Native youth perspectives to inform what it means to be a socio-culturally responsive educator.

Methodology

Using qualitative data drawn from two distinct studies, we reflect on Native youth engagement with teachers and their respective schools. The first project draws upon a recent study on the state of Native education in New Mexico. In 2007, six investigators (identified as the Indigenous Education Study Group or IESG) embarked on a statewide research study to determine a long-range plan for Native education in New Mexico and among its tribal communities. IESG sought to identify and study best educational practices for Native children attending various schools based on the experiences and perspectives of Native students, community members, and teachers.

From January 2008 through March 2009, IESG conducted focus groups and/or interviews in 13 schools with separate groups of students, teachers, and community members. Participants volunteered to take part at the request of IESG, a school or community liaison, or the principal of each school. IESG asked participants for their perspectives based on questions from seven critical topic areas (pedagogy, curriculum, language, accountability, school climate, successful student, and vision). The data was coded according to topic areas to identify patterns of ideas expressed by the participants. Two investigators coded each transcript and compared their codes with one another. A third investigator reviewed the codes and discussions between all three investigators followed to gain a consensus in coding and categorizing the data. After patterns and categories were identified from the codes, the results were shared back with each community of study to gain their feedback.

This study included 79 Native students ages 12 to 19. The majority of the students were Navajo and Pueblo. The communities and schools in the study were diverse demographically and geographically; seven schools were located on a reservation, four schools were located in towns bordering reservation communities, and one school was located in a city.

The second project draws from a corpus of data of Native students who self identified as Pueblo youth who attended a public high school in New Mexico. All of the Pueblo youth who participated in the project lived on one of the reservations near the public high school. The ethnographic data incorporated from this project consisted of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observations, field notes, and memos that were conducted over the course of six months. Relationships with some of the families of participants had been established five years earlier through another project.

To analyze the data, a counter-storytelling methodology and grounded theory approach was used to identify themes that challenge the majoritarian story that is told of youth of color and Native youth, in particular (Delgado, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Through storytelling, Native youth in this study were able to reflect on their schooling experiences. Narrating the youths' experiences in school or storytelling can be instrumental when the individuals understand that they are being heard (Brayboy, 2005). Adults at this school entered the classroom with axiologies that disrupted how the adults viewed (and understood) youths' experiences in schools. These counter-storytelling narratives provide an alternative perspective to how adult-youth relationships have been theorized and constructed, and hence "normalized." The narratives reinforce the importance of fostering relationships that are reciprocal and engender in youth and adults a mutual responsibility of alliance to each other.

Examining both of these projects for this article strengthens the findings of each study by revealing how Native youth discuss **socio-culturally responsive education in their language courses and through their relationships with teachers.** Equally important, both projects reveal that despite the five-year time difference between projects, the concerns of Native youth and their relationships to schools and teachers remain constant, underlining the urgency to listen to the youth and their educational experiences. Finally, both studies demonstrate how Native youth, when asked to share their educational experiences, offer sophisticated critiques that if taken into account would strengthen their educational experiences in the classroom, at the school, and with teachers and other adults in school settings.

Youth Speak Out: Socio-culturally Responsive Schooling

Youth's narratives illustrate their active search to locate socio-culturally responsive courses, teachers, curriculum, and school climate. While the schools varied in how students described the schools' respect for their heritage and inclusion of language and culture into courses and school culture, many of the students **believed their schools were intolerant of their heritage. From misperceptions to outright hostility, the students shared their perspectives of a school climate that held little to no value for their cultural traditions, customs, knowledge, and language.** Students expressed how teachers and students disrespected them by belittling them, being rude to them, and treating them unfairly in grading and discipline. Mark⁴ (Navajo) discussed the stereotypes that are perpetuated in his school when he said,

Like some people think Native Americans just get free money and they're stupid and stuff, and you hear other kids down the hall making fun of us and stuff. And that's not right. And the teachers don't do anything about it. (IESG, 2009, K2 p. 2)

These experiences negatively affected the students' motivation to persist and succeed in school as well as in their relationships with teachers and other adults in school. Another student, Anna (Pueblo), discussed the lack of SCR courses when asked what the school does to acknowledge the Native students' history, culture, and language. She described the limited time given to Native people's history and contributions in the courses she had taken when she said,

There's one teacher Mr. Smith, but he has—like for one semester he'll have a group of people pick a tribe and then tell us something about the tribe. That's the only thing I've ever dealt with Native American culture. (IESG, 2009, K2 p. 3)

For Desi (Navajo), she was annoyed that important events in her peoples' history are often marginalized against U.S. history. She offered an example of a significant event for Navajo people called the Long Walk, when Navajo people were forced to walk from their homelands to Bosque Redondo, hundreds of miles away during the winter. She said,

Like most of the time, when you study the war, the Civil War, they'll mostly put the main focus on that. However, not very many people know that at the exact same time, during those years, towards the end of the war, was when the Long Walk was happening on this side and people

⁴All names are pseudonyms.

freak out when they find that out. They'll be, "Oh, that was at the same time? That was the same year?" Stuff like that. They don't find that out until like years and years *later*. . . Everyone knows about the Unions and the Confederates and stuff, but they don't know nothing about the treaties or anything like that. (IESG, 2009, G2 p. 4)

For these students, it was one or two teachers who incorporated minimal history or perspectives about Native peoples out of all their courses in high school. This limited focus was alarming given that these particular high schools have a 30% and 90% Native student population respectively, and the schools are located in a state where 10% of the entire population are Native people (NMPED, 2008). Unfortunately, the lack of SCR courses was common across many schools in the study with similar demographics.

Despite the minimal curricular attention to Native people's history and contributions, and despite a hostile school climate, the students desired and advocated that schools place more emphasis on learning their Native language and history. Some opponents have argued that Native languages should be learned at home. However, students often stated that one reason they did not learn much Native language at home was that their parents were busy with work and other financial obligations, which reduced time with their children. While cultural knowledge may be passed on at home to varying extents, the students were calling for more formal and personal connections in school to their families' and communities' histories and experiences. For example, Martha (Navajo) asserted,

I'm more of like a Native pride person a little. I think my whole family and I are like that. I like the idea of coming into the school and seeing a lot of things that have to do with who I am. (IESG, 2009, F2 p. 13)

Similarly, Brandon (Navajo) said, "I'd like to walk in here and I'd like to see more Natives teachings Natives. I'd like to see information about our past and just things like that" (IESG, 2009, F2 p. 13).

For Martha, having teachers and role models who embodied her Navajo culture and history and reflected it in the curriculum was important. In fact, when asked what courses included curriculum relevant to Navajo history or perspectives, she said, "I think the only place that they discuss or talk about stuff like that is in the Navajo Language [course]" (IESG, 2009, F2 p. 4). While the purpose of Native language courses at these particular schools was to teach the mechanics for speaking, reading, writing⁵ and comprehending Native languages, teaching

⁵Reading and writing the Native language is common in language courses, with the exception of most Pueblo languages in New Mexico. These languages are taught through completely oral based methods.

of language simultaneously tied into cultural knowledge, history, worldview, and contemporary experiences where language is used in their community settings. In this respect, the students were able to connect to the content of the course in more ways than simply through the linguistic aspects of learning languages. The courses were socio-culturally responsive to their lives and their families; they acknowledged their cultural identity and positively reinforced this identity. To demonstrate how these courses offered more to students than simply teaching the mastery of language, Ms. Lucero, a Pueblo language teacher in the study, shared this description of her course:

What I do in the Keres language class is I have them learn their Indian names and then I normally talk about the history of our people from the community, so the kids will have better understanding why we're doing this and why I'm teaching some of the things that are very important for them to learn. One of the things that I did as a panel exhibit, they design a family tree. I was pretty amazed with the students, how much they took an interest in developing that, and they also interviewed their parents, their own education experience. So with that, they need to learn their family relationship and how to respect the members, as well as the community members. (IESG, 2009, D1 pp. 2-3)

Students in her course learned the significance of relationships and customs in their community and how they were expressed through language. These courses hold high value for the students' heritage and offer the students a safe space for being themselves and for learning more about their communities. Their cultures, traditions, customs, and languages count as knowledge and in this sense, are validated in school through these language courses.

Many students flock to these courses. Students informed us that the courses were always full to capacity. They discussed their desire to speak their language, such as one student who said if she could speak Navajo, she would speak it "24/7" (IESG, 2009, F2 p. 5). Students recognize the importance of their languages to their heritage, but more directly to their families. Many spoke of their desire to communicate with their grandparents or other elderly community members. The impact of these courses was described well by Kerry (Navajo), "We have two courses: Navajo and Lakota. Both are teaching us to take back our culture, which is like really excellent" (IESG, 2009, N2 p. 1). They also wanted to prevent language loss, as expressed by Dylan (Navajo), "We have our own language classes, and I want to continue that because not as much people talk fluently anymore" (IESG, 2009, N2 p. 1).

For these students, these courses held significance for being one place in school to formally learn their language and associated cultural knowledge. Embedded within this, the students simultaneously had very high expectations of their teachers. They desired effective pedagogical practices and multiple ways for teachers to engage them as students in the learning process. Many Navajo students discussed how for their particular language courses, there was not enough encouragement and not enough focus on oral skills.

Damien: She teaches good stuff, it's just like she doesn't entertain us. She just gets mad and like—'cause we really don't understand and she doesn't go in more depth like how to pronounce things and stuff.

Sharon: I have Navajo I this year, and I know some Navajo but she talks Navajo all the time, to make us, I guess, understand it, and whenever you don't understand and you ask her, "What does that mean?" she just like kinda—gets frustrated.

Carl: I took Navajo 1 my eighth grade year. It was boring 'cause all the teacher did was just give out worksheets. That's it. (IESG, 2009, G2 p. 3)

However, a few students felt their teachers effectively combined methods for developing reading, writing, and oral skills. The combination aided them with precision and accuracy in terminology. They also enjoyed the challenge, like Tia (Navajo), "It's pretty interesting, too, because I like reading it and it's pretty hard to read it. Not many people know how to read Navajo, so that's what I like" (IESG, 2009, G2 p. 3).

The students' narratives on the teachers' pedagogical practices for teaching Native language are important for a number of reasons. For one, the students show us the importance of heritage language courses in schools. They are important for not only teaching language, but also for teaching cultural knowledge and strengthening cultural identity and self-confidence. A second importance is the implications for language revitalization. Many Native languages are experiencing language shift and loss, even in the Southwest where many Native languages are still widely spoken (Lee & McLaughlin, 2001; Sims, 2006). The variety of students' comments show us that youth have diverse perspectives about language and have varied ideas about what works and does not work in language education. Their ideas can inform and contextualize teachers' techniques and objectives. Additionally, the students' comments are important for understanding youth identity as it is constantly changing and influenced by peers. Yet, a commonality shared among the youth was their desire to learn and speak their language. This signifies the importance of knowing one's students well in order to link their learning

preferences to teaching methods in these courses. Finally, the students' comments inform teachers in any content area to recognize the importance of social and cultural responsiveness and relevance in their curriculum in order to meaningfully engage their students.

While youth advocated for SCR curriculum, they also argued for building better teacher-student relationships in school settings as a part of embodying a SCR pedagogy. In the next section youth described how improving teacher-student relationships would enhance their learning experience and motivation in school contexts.

Youth Speak Out: (Re) Claiming Student-Teacher Relationships

Central to youths' concerns in the second research project was how relationships with teachers were formed and maintained in school settings. Students voiced an interest in forming stronger and closer relationships with the teachers and other adults. Students wished adults would talk to them and get to know them as a method of building community. William (Pueblo) shared,

I don't know, it just seems like there are all these boundaries between students and teachers, teachers and administration . . . I think if we all worked together it would be better because we would know more about each other and learn more.

William and other Pueblo youth continuously faced adults in school settings who established strict boundaries that restricted conversations to the daily lesson or unit. For these youth, embedded in the learning opportunities was the process of how teacher-student relationships were formed and maintained.

Youth sought out adults who freely shared their personal experiences as they negotiated their successes and challenges. William elaborated by saying, "Unless you ask a teacher, you never hear about a teachers' life, where they live, or how they grew up—I mean, come on, it would be cool to know a little more about their college life . . .". Students were interested in learning more about how their teachers lived life, illuminating how students were interested in establishing relationships that were reciprocal rather than one-sided. This was further noted by Kevin (Pueblo) who shared, "Teachers know all about us, our families, our lives and yet we don't know much about them." These narratives highlight how central relationships are in youth's lives and to their learning experience in school settings. In fact students were interested in teachers who shared personal and professional stories that demonstrated some of the challenges and experiences each of them had endured,

giving the students a sense of commitment to their educational goals.

Although participants engaged in familial cultural practices that were invested in holistic and communal learning, they sought reciprocal relationships from teachers that also provided them with “direction” or guidance in the classroom. For example Justice (Pueblo), an 11th grader, shared the following:

I wish teachers had more discussions or debates centering on current events. . . Sometimes we work in groups, but I feel like we are working alone. Our teacher sometimes tells us to work on our projects and leaves the class or is on his computer. It would be great to know that our teacher was working with us.

For Justice and other youth, the teacher was an important leader in their learning experience. While group activities and projects were important, salient for the youth was the role that the teacher played in the project. Youth advocated for teachers to remain active in the group projects.

Youth also described teachers as committed yet lacking qualities that were important in building a trusting or a “real” relationship. An element of building a relationship for these youth was the development and formation of a “trusting relationship” between teachers and youth. Jason (Pueblo) shared it this way:

If you are a teacher you are a person of authority and you need to know that, especially if you’re looking down on someone which that shouldn’t happen anyway but like, you should treat them with a certain amount of respect, not just like, you know, looking down on you. . . sometimes I feel that from my teachers, they don’t respect me or they just don’t listen to me because they’re trying to come up with a solution right off the bat. . . I think a lot of it, that comes down to, and you’ve probably heard this a few times is, you know, communication and respect. . . It’s so simple yet there are a lot of things in the way. . . so many boundaries between teachers and students.

Jason conveyed how students were conscious that teachers had power and incorporated it in how they formed and censored relationships with youth. For him and other youth having a teacher listen and process what they are saying was an important element of building healthy strong relationships between teachers and youth. In fact, he discussed how often he did not seek an answer to his challenge but rather sought someone to listen to him.

Another student talked about the tension between trusting a teacher who taught a misinformed history. Warren (Pueblo) shared it this way:

A teacher should be someone I trust that I believe what they tell me. You know someone, who is someone who I don’t doubt what they are saying or why they are saying

it. Here it is hard because sometimes I wonder why they are teaching us some of the stuff they do, like some of the information they teach us in History. It just isn’t true so how can I trust my teacher. Then when I ask too many questions about it they get mad, not angry or yell at me, but I can tell that they don’t want to hear it.

Central to this narrative is how students are critical of the curriculum being taught to them. For Warren, the (mis)informed historical accounts taught to him caused him to not trust his teacher, illuminating the connection between pedagogy and establishing relationships between teachers and students. This once again reinforces the importance for teachers to engage in socio-culturally responsive education.

These youth’s narratives reveal the importance of strengthening student-teacher relationships, which is central to teachers and teacher preparation programs for the following reasons. First, youth elucidate how they seek to form reciprocal relationships with teachers. Understanding how youth discuss and embody relationships is important for all teachers; this understanding is foundational to establishing a pedagogical relationship with students. Second, building reciprocal relationships with youth is part of refining one’s pedagogical practices. For these youth pedagogical practices are multidimensional and involve more than teaching content areas—pedagogical practices involve engaging in each other’s lives and developing relationships with youth. Finally, building reciprocal relationships is also a form of mentoring. These student-teacher relationships serve as a springboard to developing mentoring relationships with youth, which is an extremely important component of increasing the academic persistence of students.

Implications

The youth in these studies offered a sophisticated critique of schooling and recommended how teachers in school settings can form meaningful relationships with them. They sought teachers who would engage in reciprocal transformative learning relationships with them. They also sought a school climate that appreciates, respects, and honors their Native heritage and language. Similarly, participants took notice of the pedagogical practices of adults at their school setting.

The dialectical conversation between school administrators, teachers, and Native youth must be (re) examined in terms of how administrators and teachers enact policies and pedagogical practices, particularly for inclusion of socio-culturally responsive education. Socio-culturally responsive education can foster supportive relationships between adults and youth. Supportive and reciprocal relationships will then transform the school into a healthy,

supportive school climate that affirms the identity and heritage of Native youth.

In closing, the narratives these youth provide clarify how to strengthen relationships between youth and teachers, as well as enhance both youths' and educators' educational experiences. We advocate, therefore, that the findings from these studies be placed into practice for multicultural educators. We offer the following suggestions as to how this can be take place:

- School administrations and teachers can work to build coalitions and community with local tribal education leaders and parents. Doing so will enhance campus climate and affirm identities of Native youth.
- School administrations and teachers can become proactive to ensure that Native cultures are integrated into the curriculum.
- School administrations can provide professional development workshops for teachers to learn how curriculum can be made relevant to students' lives in multiple ways.
- School administrations can provide professional development workshops for teachers to learn how to utilize a variety of pedagogical methods, such as group work, active learning, and experiential learning.
- School administrations can provide multiple opportunities for successful students and teachers to share their educational experiences with everyone in the district.
- School administrations can promote and advocate small class sizes, which creates the opportunity for meaningful and reciprocal relationships between students and teachers, and which enhances student learning.

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