

GIFTED NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS: UNDERPERFORMING, UNDER-IDENTIFIED, AND OVERLOOKED

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There has been limited focus among researchers on the nature and needs of gifted Native American students in the past 30 years, and the work that has been done frequently generalizes findings across Native American cultures. This article reviews recent literature on Native American youth and on gifted Native American students; examines the current condition of education in the Diné (Navajo) Nation through a sociocultural motivation lens and based on work with one tribal community on this reservation; calls researchers and educators to action and to recognize that, as with all ethnic groups, many individual cultures exist within Native American populations; and offers suggestions for education personnel. © 2012 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

In 1993, the federal definition of gifted youth was broadened to recognize potential, suggest similar group comparisons, and acknowledge that talent exists among children and youth from all backgrounds. Specifically, the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE; 1993) defined gifted children as:

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or *show the potential for performing* [italics added] at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when *compared with others of their age, experience, or environment* [italics added]. These children and youth exhibit high performance capability in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth *from all cultural groups, across all economic strata* [italics added], and in all areas of human endeavor. (p. 3)

Yet, more than 25 years later, children from low-income families and from certain cultural groups remain largely unidentified and underserved in programs for gifted and talented youth across the country. Gifted Native American¹ children are among those most underserved in gifted education programs (Yoon & Gentry, 2009) nationally. Further, and perhaps due to their small numbers and remote schools, few researchers have focused attention on identifying and serving these students. Our recent review of the literature revealed only a limited number of empirical articles about gifted Native Americans published within the field during the last 30 years² (Wu, 2011). Most of this literature is dated and overgeneralized, meaning that children from different Native cultural groups are classified together, homogenized, and viewed as one culture. These generalizations prevent true understanding of differing cultural contexts, which are key to unlocking issues that affect achievement and motivation among Native American children and youth. Changing this omission

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¹ Another generally accepted term is American Indian/Alaskan Native; however, this article focuses on Diné (Navajo) people, and they prefer the term Native American.

² We searched ERIC and PsycINFO for publications (search terms: gifted/talented, Native American/American Indian), which revealed a limited number of empirical studies, scholarly articles, chapters, and government reports in the past 30 years (e.g., Bradley, 1989; Christensen, 1991; Grigg, Moran, & Kuang, 2010; Hartley, 1991; Mead, Grigg, Moran, & Kuang, 2010; Montgomery, 2001; Omdal, Rude, Betts, & Toy, 2010; Peterson, 1999; Tonemah, 1991).

requires someone within the school who will champion the cause and bring recognition to the needs of talented children within their cultural context.

ENVIRONMENT, CONTEXT, AND CULTURE

Researchers have shown that students who are not properly prepared for increasing academic demands will experience a decrease in their academic motivation as they move through their school years (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles, & Wigfield, 2002; Powers, 2005; Schunk & Pajares, 2009). Competition among students to perform, an increased focus on norm-referenced grading systems, decreased one-on-one teacher attention to student progress, and the stress associated with school transitions can all contribute to this decrease in motivation and subsequent performance (Schunk & Meece, 2006). When discussing student motivation, one must take sociocultural influences into account. These influences include familial relationships, cultural considerations, and the effects of relationships with teachers and peers within the school environment (Aragon, 2002; Patrick, Anderman, & Ryan, 2002; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). These sociocultural considerations can play a significant role in the motivation and achievement of Native American students (Mackety, 2011), particularly among those living on reservations (Willett, 1999), who are more likely to be underidentified as gifted (Yoon & Gentry, 2009); more likely to live in poverty (DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008), and less likely to graduate from high school and to attend or graduate from college than their more affluent, non-Native peers (Aud et al., 2011; Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2010). Specifically, according to Aud et al. (2011), the high-school dropout rate for White students in 2009 was 5.2%, whereas for Native American students, it was 13.2%. Black students had a dropout rate of 9.3%, and Hispanic students had the highest dropout rate of 17.6%. For those who entered 4-year institutions, Native American enrollees had the lowest completion rate, at 38.3% among all Native ethnic groups.

A recent review of the extant literature showed that much of the limited information concerning gifted Native American students was without cultural nuances, generally treating all Native children as one population rather than many different cultural groups (Gentry, Fugate, & Wu, 2012). Additionally, much of the literature is written from a deficit viewpoint, focused on poverty, learning deficiencies, violence, and substance abuse (Brandt, 1992; Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2010; Mead, Grigg, Moran, & Kuang, 2010; National Caucus of Native American State Legislators, 2008). This pervasive focus on deficits undermines needed attention to motivation, student self-efficacy, and achievement. This literature has led to stereotyping and overgeneralization, providing little real knowledge of the current needs and talent pathways of these diverse groups of people (Gentry et al., 2012). Such mindsets and overgeneralizations can contribute to the Pygmalion effect in the classroom and to self-fulfilling prophecy as students act as expected (Rosenthal, 2002). As students develop this fixed mindset resulting from these deficit messages, they begin to believe that there is no way for them to achieve success (Dweck, 2007).

In this article, we focus on motivational influences that affect Native American students with high potential, particularly those students from the Diné (Navajo) Nation, discuss the implications of these influences for practice, and make suggestions for future directions.

With 565 recognized tribes in the United States, clearly, Native Americans are diverse populations that warrant nuanced understanding of their cultural contexts. We have worked with the Diné, giving us firsthand experience from which to draw. Additionally, the Diné are a large population with readily available educational data. Thus, we can provide a focused discussion of one Native American cultural group, which is how we believe more of the literature concerning Native Americans should be written.

THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

In their examination of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data, Plucker, Burroughs, and Song (2010) found that economically disadvantaged minorities represented the smallest proportion of students scoring at the highest levels of achievement. Unfortunately, like so much research on students from low-income families or marginalized cultures, this report did not include data on Native American students. This is partly because they represent about 1% of school children within major federal databases, and when samples are drawn, the number of Native Americans represented is too small to allow meaningful analyses (Grigg, Moran, & Kuang, 2010; National Caucus of Native American State Legislators, 2008). Thus, the pattern of marginalization of these people continues in the research.

In their analysis of NAEP data, Grigg et al. (2010) reported that Native American students continue to trail their White peers in reading (23% vs. 45%, respectively) and math (21% vs. 55%, respectively) proficiency in Grade 8 based on 2009 scores. Additionally, scores in Grades 4 and 8 remain essentially unchanged since 2005 for both subjects. These authors reported scores based on five geographic regions, with the Diné included in the Mountain region. The Diné comprise the largest Native American population in this region in which the Navajo Nation exists. Among the five regions, fourth- and eighth-grade students in the Mountain region consistently scored the lowest in reading and math in 2005, 2007, and 2009. Similarly, a 2008 study commissioned by the National Caucus of Native American State Legislators found that Native American students achieved at two to three grade levels below their non-Native peers in reading and mathematics in Grades 4 and 8. Further, the study showed that only seven of every 100 Native American kindergarteners would earn a bachelor's degree, compared with 34 of every 100 White students.

Reflective of low academic performance in grade school, graduation rates for Native American youth are low. Faircloth and Tippeconnic (2010) examined high-school graduation rates in the 12 states with the largest populations of Native American students, reporting lower graduation rates for Native Americans (46.6%) than for other ethnic groups (e.g., from 50.5% for Hispanics to 77.9% for Asians). Specifically, in Arizona, there was a 21% gap between the Native American and the overall graduation rate.

Barriers associated with poverty (Callahan, 2007; Ford, 2007; Miller, 2004; Wyner, Bridgeland, & DiIulio, 2009), in addition to being a member of a marginalized culture (Bernal, 2007; Ford, 1998) and living in remote, rural areas (Bauch, 2001; Bryant, 2007), can deeply affect the academic potential of children living on reservations. Students with exceptional academic potential who live in poverty are frequently not identified, underidentified, or misidentified for gifted and talented programs. When identified, they often elect to drop out of programs, if programs exist at all (Bernal, 2007; Ford, 2007; Olszewski-Kubilius, Lee, Ngoi, & Ngoi, 2004; Worrell, 2007). Reasons attributed for students leaving gifted programs included a lack of belonging related to a lack of cultural peers and culturally competent teachers and to a lack of appropriate academic preparation and support. African American, Latino/a, Native American, and children from poverty are 5 to 10 times less likely than their White middle-class or affluent counterparts to be served in talent enrichment or gifted education programs (Ford, 1998; Miller, 2004; U.S. Office for Civil Rights, 2002; Yoon & Gentry, 2009).

Rural students also face challenges in pursuit of a sound education (Bauch, 2001; Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010). Poverty rates are higher; residents have lower levels of formal education; fewer youth aspire to college; smaller tax bases often leave rural schools underfunded and with fewer developmental opportunities; infrastructure and resources are lacking, resulting in less technology; and high-quality teachers are less likely to choose to teach in rural areas (Bauch, 2001; Beeson & Strange, 2003). Currently, U.S. citizens are concerned about a high unemployment

Table 1
Comparative Percentages From 2009 NAEP Eighth-Grade Mathematics Achievement Data

	Below Basic (%)	Basic (%)	Proficient (%)	Advanced (%)
Nation	44	37	15	3
Arizona	58	31	10	1
New Mexico	59	32	8	1
Utah	49	32	17	1

rate that exceeds 9%, while the unemployment rate on the Navajo nation is 42%, with 40% of families living in poverty (Navajo Nation Division of Economic Development, n.d.). In short, many Diné children face a “triple threat” to their academic achievement because they deal with poverty, marginalization of their culture, and the challenges of living in a remote, rural area without the technology and basic resources taken for granted in many schools and communities.

According to a report by the Navajo Nation Department of Diné Education (DoDE) made to the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE; 2011a), only 17% of tribally controlled schools made Annual Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind during the 2007-2008 school year. Although the report shows slight gains in reading achievement, from 27% proficient in 2004-2005 to 35% proficient in 2009-2010, “the performance record in mathematics is more erratic, and leaves one doubting that the educational system has improved in any substantial way since 2004-2005” (pp. 2-3). Table 1 contains the Native American mathematics achievement statistics for eighth-grade students in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, the three states in which the majority of Diné students attend school, compared with national averages according to the NAEP data (Mead et al., 2010). The DoDE Office of Educational Research and Statistics reported 2000 Census data showing that of the 167,528 Diné in the Navajo Nation, only 55.9% held a high-school diploma, and only 7.3% held a bachelor’s degree or higher. Further, statistics reveal that, despite a growth in population between 2000 and 2009 of approximately 45,000 people (Navajo Nation Division of Economic Development, n.d.), enrollment in Grades 1 through 12 has steadily declined from 55,648 in 2000 to 38,990 in 2009 (Navajo Nation DoDE, 2011b). Reasons for this decline were not given but can be partially attributed to children who do not attend school or who drop out of school.

Students from low socioeconomic families face unique academic challenges, as their families may lack access to the resources and socialization experiences necessary to adequately prepare and support student achievement in school (National Caucus of Native American State Legislators, 2008; Schunk et al., 2008). Wyner et al. (2009) underscored the disparity between high-achieving students from low-income families and their peers from higher-income families in *The Achievement Trap*. Specifically, they stated that students from low-income families are less likely to achieve in the top quartile, and among those who do, they are less likely to persist as high achievers. Additionally, these students are twice as likely to drop out of or not graduate from high school on time, less likely to attend selective colleges, and less likely to graduate from college than their more affluent peers. In addition, the lack of academically successful role models and the need to provide additional financial support to the family contributed to the high number of dropouts among Native American students who live in poverty (Brandt, 1992).

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL

Parental involvement in school can directly affect student motivation and support. Students whose families were involved in school showed improvement in behavior, motivation, and academic achievement, regardless of cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds (Brandt, 1992; Kratochwill,

McDonald, Levin, Bear-Tibbetts, & Demaray, 2004; Radda, Iwamoto, & Patrick, 1998; Schunk & Pajares, 2009; Willetto, 1999). Epstein (2001) suggested a framework for successful parent involvement that included parenting (assisting parents in creating supporting home environments that foster student success); communicating (keeping open lines of communication between school and home); volunteering (recruiting parents to become involved in school and classroom programs); learning at home (informing parents of effective practices in helping students with homework and other curricular activities); decision-making (engaging parents as advocates for both student and school success); and collaborating with community (providing parents with access to community resources).

Mackety and Linder-VanBerschot (2008) conducted a qualitative study using focus groups with 47 Native American parents from two states. The sample of parents was diverse in socioeconomic status, education level, employment, and family makeup, with some representing two-parent or single-parent households or foster families, and three families in which a grandparent served as the primary caregiver. The parents in the focus groups identified two types of school involvement: school-oriented involvement (i.e., communication with the school, attending student events, volunteering, and advocating for their child) and home-oriented involvement (i.e., showing interest in their child's education, helping with student work, encouraging and rewarding children to do their best, reading with their child, meeting their child's basic educational needs, and involving extended family and community members in the educational process).

However, these parents also identified barriers to their involvement, including feelings of being unwelcome in the school environment, their own previous negative personal experiences in school, perceptions of a lack of cultural sensitivity, and different styles of personal communication. Even more pressing for many of these families were the day-to-day concerns of financial limitations, lack of childcare for younger siblings, lack of computer access, and lack of transportation to the school (Mackety & Linder-VanBerschot, 2008). This research, like much research on Native Americans, aggregated the cultures and included parents from seven different native cultural groups; therefore, generalizations should be made with care. However, these findings mirror results from other studies with Native and non-Native parents, which adds to their credibility (e.g., Epstein, 2001; Kratochwill et al., 2004; Montgomery, 2001; Radda et al., 1998; Schunk & Pajares, 2009; Schunk et al., 2008; Willetto, 1999).

To be most effective, parent involvement should encourage collaboration between home, school, and community (Epstein, 2001). The Indian Nations at Risk Task Force (1991) report to the USDOE emphasized the importance of this partnership, saying, "the responsibility for improvement is shared by all of those involved in the education of Native students—public, tribal, and federal school and government officials; parents and students; and community members" (p. 32). The report distinguishes between parent support (e.g., making sure students get to school, assisting with homework, and attending parent-teacher conferences) and parent involvement (e.g., serving on tribal culture committees, volunteering at school and in the classroom, and participating in parent-teacher organizations). Increased parental support and involvement strengthens student motivation by providing a consistent message of the importance of school and by building student self-efficacy and self-esteem (Epstein, 2001).

The Indian Nations at Risk Task Force (1991) report called for a fundamental change in schools, communities, states, and Native American and U.S. government educational organizations to promote increased parent involvement, helping them set high expectations for their children's achievement, monitor their progress, and influence the curriculum used by the schools. Parent workshop programs that promote trust and collaboration between school and home and that help families learn the importance of goal setting for student achievement are needed (Mackety & Linder-VanBerschot, 2008; Radda et al., 1998). To accomplish these goals, school administrators and staff

must first commit to professional development that will increase their knowledge not only of the cultural background of the families that they serve, but also the relevant strategies for increasing motivation and achievement of Native American students (Thornton & Sanchez, 2010).

Kratochwill et al. (2004) adapted the research-based Families and Schools Together (FAST) program (McDonald, Coe Bradish, Billingham, Dibble, & Rice, 1991), working with 50 Native American families with children aged 4 to 9 from three nations in Wisconsin. Also included in the sample were kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade teachers who worked with these children and their families. As with many studies concerning Native American populations, the researchers failed to identify the three nations of which the participants were members. Rather, the authors presented the outcomes in a fashion that homogenized the results across Native American cultures. The goal of the study was to determine whether increased family involvement would lead to increased academic achievement and decreased negative classroom behaviors. Whereas 40% of the core FAST curricula were maintained, 60% were adapted to reflect the culture and traditions of the local communities. Seven multi-family cycles were set up over a 3-year period, with each cycle lasting for 8 weeks, during which families met with educators. At these meetings, the families and teachers learned from each other through a series of activities and discussions that were designed to raise cultural, familial, and educational awareness. The parent and teacher participants reported that the children of families that attended FAST meetings showed fewer behavior issues, were less withdrawn, and had increased achievement compared with students who did not participate in the program. When educators develop a deep understanding of their students' families and cultures, they can then effectively encourage and support parental involvement—a key component for student success (Demmert, Grissmer, & Towner, 2006).

Despite challenges faced by students who live on the Navajo Reservation, when school was associated with a sense of purpose, Diné students often expressed high achievement motivation (Willeto, 1999) and placed high value on education (Radda et al., 1998), even if it took considerably longer than average for them to graduate (Brandt, 1992). This sense of purpose came from supportive family relationships and was found to be instrumental for some students in improving achievement, resiliency, and persistence (Mackety, 2011; National Caucus of Native American State Legislators, 2008; Thornton & Sanchez, 2010). Consistent with the matriarchal nature of the Diné culture, Willeto (1999) found that those Diné students who maintained higher educational outcomes and demonstrated a greater commitment to school tended to be girls, who generally outperformed their male peers and who identified more with their mothers.

CULTURE AND MOTIVATION

All too often in motivation research, culture is treated as a control variable, and generalized results with a bias toward dominant cultural values are reported (Schunk et al., 2008). Yet, for Native American youth who attend schools with non-Indian, dominant-culture students, “they gain social awareness and their cultural identity becomes stronger; thus, they become more cognizant of the cultural disconnect between their non-Indian school and their Indian culture” (Powers, 2005, p. 338). This identity development aligns with Ford's (2002) assertion that people are inclined to define themselves in terms of membership with a particular cultural group, affecting their social, emotional, and psychological well-being.

Demmert, Grissmer et al. (2006) referred to the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory report, which identified six foundational elements for culturally relevant education with Native American cultures, including:

1. The recognition and use of Native American languages for bilingual instruction or as a first or second language;

2. Contextually based pedagogy stressing the current cultural characteristics and values of the community;
3. Pedagogical strategies that combine the traditional culture with contemporary techniques, allowing for opportunities to observe, practice, and demonstrate skills;
4. A culturally developed curriculum recognizing the spirituality of the traditional culture of visual arts, legends, and oral histories in a contemporary context;
5. Strong Native community participation and collaboration with parents, elders, and other community resources; and
6. The understanding and use of the social and political mores of the community.

Reservation schools frequently integrate these recommendations into their practices, curriculum, and educational communities, as they educate students within their culture (Mackety, 2011; Navajo Nation DoDE, 2011a); however, Native American students attending dominant-culture schools are less likely to find strong cultural contexts in their classes. According to Mead et al. (2010), Native American students attending Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools are more likely than their peers in dominant-culture public schools to experience opportunities for cultural integration into their school day. For example, the Navajo Sovereignty in Education Act of 2005 requires that Navajo language, culture, history, government, and *Ké* (Character) be taught in school, in addition to the core curriculum areas required by the federal government. This Navajo law was enacted to help ensure the identity and survival of the Navajo language and culture for future generations (Navajo Nation DoDE, 2011a). As a result of this law, students educated on the Navajo reservation in public and BIE schools have Navajo language instruction and Native culture classes, and they experience curricula rich with cultural content and tradition. Parents, tribal elders, and community members take active roles in the schools as teachers, administrators, board members, and cultural resources. In many respects, the kindergarten through 12th-grade (K-12) education received by students on the Navajo nation exemplifies recommendations made by Demmert, Grissmer et al. (2006).

Ogbu (2004) stressed the value of recognizing collective identity, what he refers to as their “we-feeling” or “belonging,” which is expressed through cultural symbols reflecting their beliefs, feelings, behaviors, and language or dialect (p. 3). It is important that researchers examine cultural attitudes and beliefs of specific Native American groups to inform practice and increase understanding of how to incorporate culture, knowledge, and expertise into the curriculum, thereby making schools more culturally relevant (National Caucus of Native American State Legislators, 2008). By developing cultural understandings, positive school environments that promote student resiliency and achievement can be fostered (Gentry et al., 2012; Ogbu, 1981; Powers, 2005; Schunk et al., 2008; Thornton & Sanchez, 2010). This can be accomplished by providing students with opportunities to participate in programs that encourage immersion into their native language, cultures, and traditions (Demmert, McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, & Leos, 2006; Holm & Holm, 1995; Powers, Potthoff, Bearinger, & Resnick, 2003; Whitbeck, Hoyt, Stubben, & LaFromboise, 2001).

In our work with a focus group of Navajo teachers and parents at the *Second Annual Leadership Summit: Identifying and Serving Gifted Native American Students* in Ganado, Arizona, we reviewed cultural generalizations from the gifted education literature for validity within Navajo culture, identified misconceptions among these generalizations, and discussed new, culturally relevant understandings (Gentry et al., 2011). Focus group members agreed that the society was in fact, matriarchal (Gentry, 2010; Hartley, 1991; Willetto, 1999), with important traditions and cultural knowledge handed down through ceremonies and storytelling (Christensen, 1991; Peterson, 1999). They confirmed the value within the culture of spirituality, religion, living in harmony with nature (Sisk, 1989), patience, and self-control (Bradley, 1989). Misconceptions present in the dated, generalized literature, according to this group, included the notion of a collective society that eschews

the individual. Rather, they pointed out that the current generation of youth is more individualistic and materialistic than previous generations, noting that this generation is much the same as their non-Native peers in their desire for success and access to cell phones, computers, and other tools of youth. They went on to explain that currently, Diné culture values self-determination for success—a concept missing from the limited literature concerning talent development among Native Americans. The value of self-determination demonstrates the desire of this new generation of Diné students to become autonomous learners, intrinsically motivated to engage and achieve within the school environment. Many of these students are driven by their own curiosities and personal interests and a desire to learn for learning's sake (Reeve, 2002; Vansteenkiste, Sierens, Soenens, Luyckx, & Lens, 2009).

RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Renzulli and Park (2000) found that many gifted students who dropped out of school shared the same circumstances, which included coming from low-income families, being members of minority groups, having parents with limited educational backgrounds, and participating in fewer extracurricular activities. Further, these authors found that talented Hispanic and Native American students were more likely to drop out of school than any other racial/ethnic groups. Unfortunately, studies of gifted, high-school dropouts are rare, and none were located that were published more recently or that used national data. As discussed previously, among the 12 states with the highest percentage of Native American students, these students were more likely not to finish school than students from all other ethnic groups (Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2010). Navajo students at risk for dropping out of school tend to have poor relationships with teachers and stressful interactions within the school environment (Dehyle, 1992). They find school boring, have excessive absenteeism (Brandt, 1992; Thornton & Sanchez, 2010), may have experienced grade-level retention or school suspensions, and may have previously dropped out of school. Many are from low-income families, lack reliable transportation to and from school, lack family support, and deal with issues of substance abuse within the home environment (Brandt, 1992). Although none of these authors discussed gifted Navajo dropouts, with half of the youth dropping out of school, some of them are likely gifted. The common theme among the dropouts is related to life stressors due to poverty, which affect students of all ability levels.

Educators can communicate high expectations for students and offer opportunities for a meaningful exchange of ideas by creating an environment built on trust, respect, and support through consistent guidelines for academic and social success (Thornton, Collins, & Daugherty, 2006). For example, rather than expelling a student with excessive absenteeism, showing concern with a home visit, setting an expectation of attendance, and providing transportation, together with consistent monitoring, can provide a lifeline to a student who otherwise might slip through the cracks (Gentry, Rizza, Peters, & Hu, 2005). In her study of motivation and retention of 240 Hispanic and 206 Native American college students, Sanchez (2000) found that Native American students preferred opportunities for feedback, participation, collaboration, and concrete experiences. Gentry et al. (2005) found similar preferences for learning among high-school students attending a career and technical education (CTE) center, and Plank (2002) found that involvement in CTE courses protects students from dropping out of school.

Student–Teacher Relationships

The student–teacher relationship is an important factor for increasing achievement motivation, increasing self-regulated learning, and decreasing the incidence of disruptive behaviors (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Davis, 2003; Patrick et al., 2002; Powers, 2005). Students look

to their teachers to help them feel academically successful through structure and support in the classroom, influencing their motivation, learning, and cognitive development—something that cannot be achieved by simply being “nice” (Davis, 2003, p. 212). A strong interpersonal relationship between teachers and students increases students’ sense of school belonging and achievement motivation, helping them to take on more challenging academic endeavors (Aragon, 2002; Brandt, 1992; Davis, 2003; Gentry et al., 2012; Gentry, Hu, Peters, & Rizza, 2008; Patrick et al., 2002; Powers, 2005; Sanchez, 2000).

In his study of 206 Native American community college students representing 49 tribes, Aragon (2002) found that these students preferred an environment in which the teacher, rather than fellow students, was the primary provider of structure and support for learning activities. Like so much of the literature, this study aggregated many different cultures into one group, thus suggesting that the findings apply to all Native Americans in general. Teacher feedback is an important component of the teacher-structured environment (Aragon, 2002; Deyhle, 1992; Sanchez, 2000). Unfortunately, all too often, Native American students who have dropped out of school report that teacher apathy—the lack of feedback and support that they reported receiving from their teachers—contributed to their decision to leave (Deyhle, 1992; Powers, 2005).

Active involvement in the curriculum was also found to be important in the motivation of Native American students (Aragon, 2002; Sanchez, 2000). Tied to this involvement is the perception students have of their teachers’ expectations for their performance. Teachers must hold the same high expectations for their Native American students as they do for other students (Powers, 2005). This requires moving from a deficit framework focused on remediation to one that provides opportunities for challenging, inquiry-based instruction linked to the strengths that Native American students bring to the classroom (Brandt, 1992; Gentry et al., 2012; Powers, 2005; Sanchez, 2000; Thornton & Sanchez, 2010, Valencia, 2010).

Peer Relationships

Within the school environment, the peer network with which the students surround themselves is another important factor in motivation and achievement. These groups can be highly influential because members of the peer network tend to have similar values, levels of achievement, and academic goals (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Bandura, 1986, 1988; Patrick et al., 2002; Schunk & Pajares, 2009). Benefits of these peer interactions may include decreased anxieties related to particular tasks, as well as decreased self-consciousness regarding academic performance (Boekarts, 1993; Patrick et al., 2002).

Peer interactions affect both individual members’ and the group’s academic efficacy (Schunk & Pajares, 2002) and are good predictors of motivational changes as a result of school adjustment over the course of the school year (Kinderman, McCollum, & Gibson, 1996). Patrick et al. (2002) noted, “The intimate disclosures and honest feedback exchanged with peers can affect self-perceptions, values, and aspirations, including interest in academics” (p. 88). When students engage with highly motivated peer groups, their own motivation tends to increase. Conversely, if the peer group motivation is low, motivation of the individual will also be low (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Kinderman et al., 1996; Patrick, 1997; Patrick et al., 2002; Schunk & Pajares, 2009; Schunk et al., 2008). Thus, cultivating a learning environment in which achievement is valued and expected among the students is paramount for encouraging achievement motivation.

Competition in the classroom is controversial, but has been advocated as one method for use with general, dominant-culture students (Aragon, 2002). Because the literature suggests that Native American students comprise “a non-competitive culture” (Aragon, 2002, p. 12), cooperative group work is frequently suggested to meet their learning needs (e.g., Bradley, 1989; Tonemah, 1991).

However, Native Americans come from a variety of cultures with a variety of values, which are lost when the research aggregates them into one culture. In our own work with the Navajo focus group, we learned that they valued individualism and collectivism, they enjoyed competition and cooperation, and students' learning varied. Focus group members noted that just like other students, different preferences exist among Navajo students; some prefer to work individually (Gentry et al., 2012). Based on these findings, a variety of approaches to learning should be used to strengthen peer support for academic success.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DISCOVERING AND DEVELOPING TALENTS

The sad truth is that very little energy, resources, and focus have been given to discovering and developing giftedness, creativity, and talent among Native American populations. *A first step in reversing this trend of omission is for education personnel to embrace the idea that talent exists within the Native American populations*; many Native Americans meet the federal definition of gifted that is provided at the beginning of this article. This may seem an obvious step, but few Native American children are identified as gifted, and fewer still receive related services.

When Jaime Castellano became principal of the Ganado Intermediate School in Arizona in 2009—a state with a mandate to identify and serve gifted children—not a single child in this school that serves Navajo students was identified as gifted (J. Castellano, personal communication, May 5, 2011). Dr. Castellano changed that by seeking talent using multiple criteria, and in 1 year, he identified and began to serve more than 200 gifted children within this school district of just more than 1,600 Navajo students. Recognizing potential talent is a first step toward its development, and a single person, whether this person is a principal, counselor, psychologist, or teacher, can have far-reaching and important effects.

In a focus group of Navajo educators and parents at the 2011 summit, we (Gentry et al., 2012) examined considerations for talent development identified in the literature and by participants at the inaugural summit in 2010 (Gentry, 2010). Specifically, participants affirmed, for the Navajo students with whom they work, that talented youth exist and that recognition, development, services, and programs are needed to nurture these youth (USDOE, 1993). They also confirmed their belief that more Navajo youth can achieve at higher levels than current expectations indicate (USDOE, 1993). They agreed that for Native youth, specific considerations should be given to develop spiritualistic, naturalistic, leadership, visual/spatial, artistic, musical, creative problem solving, and communication (*naat' aanii*) strengths (Tonemah & Brittan, 1985; Gentry, 2010), with programs and curriculum tied to culture and delivered according to learning preferences and cognitive styles of the students (Omdal et al., 2010). Finally, they confirmed the importance of early identification, enrichment programming, and ongoing identification in a variety of areas (Gentry, 2009) to ensure recognition and development of potential talents. These Navajo teachers and parents also provided new insights concerning developing talent among youth that were not found in the gifted education literature. Among their insights were that Navajo boys see the female figure as dominant in the family structure. Thus, they emphasized a need for more positive Native American male role models. They took exception to the stereotype of Native Americans being nonverbal or artistic and suggested that educators begin to recognize strengths that Navajo students have in verbal and mathematical areas.

Identification, however, is not enough. Counselors, psychologists, and educators need to foster opportunities for development, growth, and motivation. These efforts can include identification of potential talents among Native students, as well as ensuring their inclusion in services and programs for gifted and talented youth. These efforts must be undertaken in a manner that recognizes and respects the students as individuals, followed by the contexts of family, community, and culture in which these individuals live.

Therefore, a third, essential step needed to optimize the recognition and development of talent among students from marginalized populations is to make an effort to understand their culture. Integrating the culture into the learning environment can serve to connect to and inspire learners of all ages. As educators on the Navajo Nation have responded to the Navajo Sovereignty in Education Act, a language facing extinction has been reestablished, with value placed on preserving the Navajo way of life (Navajo Nation DoDE, 2011a). Youth and their educators have become partners in knowing and understanding the ways of the elders. It is through understanding and acceptance that relationships can be forged and culture integrated into the fabric of the school psychological and academic services (Demmert, Grismer, et al., 2006; Navajo Nation DoDE, 2011a). By integrating appreciation of diverse cultural mores and traditions, educators and helping professionals can begin to cultivate and develop true partnerships with families and communities. Partnerships among educators, families, and communities can help to create time, spaces, and places to foster children's academic success. For example, in Dr. Castellano's school, there is a parent education center that has resources and technology, and serves as a place for community meetings and a place for parents to belong within the school. Places to look for exemplary practices of integrating culture include public schools on reservations and BIE schools that serve large populations of Native children and in which language and culture are integral to their academic programs (Mead et al., 2010; Navajo Nation DoDE, 2011a).

It is essential to find and put into place role models and inspiring teachers and counselors who connect with students. For many students, a caring adult to whom they relate can be a lifeline that keeps them in school and puts them on a path to success. Mead et al. (2010) reported that about 40% of Native American students in Grades 4 and 8 attended BIE schools in which at least three quarters of the teachers identified themselves as Native American, whereas one third of all Native American students in these same grades attended dominant-culture public schools in which the teachers were predominately White. Further, Mead et al. found that "the presence of [Native American] teachers and other staff in the school may help create an atmosphere of acceptance and provide role models for AI/AN [American Indian/Alaska Native] students" (p. 41). Regardless of their race, teachers, counselors, and administrators should provide students with open and honest feedback, thereby helping them to develop a sense of the intrinsic rewards of achievement (Castellano, 2011; Radda et al., 1998).

Another action that is crucial to the success of any efforts designed to discover and develop talents and motivation among Native American students is to approach these efforts from a strength-based perspective and with a willingness to take action. In identifying and developing programs for the gifted, creative, and talented Navajo students in Ganado, Dr. Castellano exemplified applying a strength-perspective to swift action. In an environment rife with poverty and surrounded by challenges and deficits, and with a literature that takes a deficit approach, this principal looked for the promises among his students. Dr. Castellano offered them belief in their capabilities and assurance that their educational needs would be the focus by developing gifted services for high-potential students who had previously gone unrecognized. This outlook alone is motivational, and students who face the triple threat of poverty, marginalization, and living in a remote area need a champion to believe in them so that they can believe in themselves.

Future directions must include guidance counselors who are willing to help Native students identify quality, post-secondary options, not simply attend the closest college. Wyner et al. (2009) described how unlikely it is for youth from low-income families to attend top-tier colleges and universities, as well as how they are less likely to graduate from any college than their higher income peers are. Guidance counselors should be cognizant that gifted students from diverse backgrounds may not be readily identified through traditional standardized testing or teacher nomination, and therefore, it is important that counselors identify these students and provide them with support and

advocacy to meet their needs (Peterson, 2006), building positive, caring relationships built on trust (Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005). A highly skilled advocate is a key for the future success of many of these high-potential students. They need at least one adult to believe in them and advocate for them, and having such an adult can help them achieve their potential. High-school counselors and college admissions officers must work together to develop opportunities for talented Native American youth; then, the colleges must work toward developing learning environments in which these new college attendees can succeed and flourish (Aragon, 2002; Sanchez, 2000).

Gifted Native students share many of the same obstacles as other underrepresented children, but they have received far less attention by researchers within the field of gifted education and talent development than have other underrepresented groups. Access to a quality education, which includes education personnel willing to serve as advocates, is key to helping underserved students realize their potentials. Future directions within Purdue University's Gifted Education Resource Institute (GERI) include partnerships with the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and schools on the Navajo, Standing Rock, and Red Lake reservations to bring gifted, creative, and talented Native American youth to campus to participate in Summer Residential Enrichment camps. One of the major benefits of out-of-school, residential gifted programs involves the opportunity for gifted, creative, and talented students to interact with others who share their interests, abilities, and enthusiasm for learning. Outcomes for students who participate in programs like this one include positive peer relationships, increased self-confidence, and increased self-expectations—correlates of achievement motivation (Neber & Heller, 2002; Olszewski-Kubilius, 1998). The project, Having Opportunities Promotes Excellence (HOPE+), offers recognition and opportunities to Native American young people, and we will study the long-term effects on participants concerning their educational pathways and career trajectories (Gentry, 2011). We are humbled by the opportunity to add to the literature in the area of talent development for Native American youth as we learn from the educators and their students through Project HOPE+ and other initiatives in which we are engaged. We are taking action to focus on strengths and to provide opportunities that address those strengths. We hope many others will take similar actions.

As educators strive to recognize and develop the motivation and achievement of Native American students and as researchers seek to understand the nuances associated with effective talent development for these students, both groups must view the students as individuals first and resist the urge to generalize research findings, cultural traditions, or general perceptions of all Native Americans to each individual or group. Simply stated, they must first regard the individual and then consider the particular cultural group to which the individual belongs. In doing so, better understanding and a richer literature can be developed from which students from a variety of Native American cultures will benefit.

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