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For effective learning and teaching to take place in today's classrooms, pupils must possess the "psychological readiness" necessary to experience academic, social, and personal success. As Humphreys (1994, viii) stated, "The self-esteem of children is central to their educational development." Yet, Native-American youth frequently lack self-esteem (Gilliland 1992), perhaps in part because underlying cultural values are overlooked or ignored by many nonnative educators (Hornett 1990; Rhodes 1994). Native-American pupils possess lower self-esteem than young people from other racial/ethnic groups, and "they have more difficulty in establishing ethnic and tribal self-identity and pride in their Indianness" (Clarke 1994, 26). Consequently, low self-esteem contributes to a variety of school-related problems and is a critical factor in the lives of Native-American dropouts.

Cultural knowledge plays an important role in the education of Native-American pupils. Washinawatok (1993) called for educators to incorporate cultural values and native language into their classroom teaching to raise pupils' sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Blake (1992, 120) suggested that "nurturing our students' self-esteem is perhaps the greatest gift we can give them." Gilliland (1992, 12) asserted, "It is of critical importance that we, as teachers, recognize that if we are to be successful in teaching Native American students, we must, first and foremost, find ways to raise the self-esteem of the students."

#### **THE AMERICAN INDIAN RESERVATION PROJECT**

For the past 23 years, Indiana University in Bloomington has offered the American Indian Reservation Project. An optional supplement to conventional student teaching, this popular project has prepared and placed over 800 student teachers for assignments at Bureau of Indian Affairs, contract/grant, and public schools across the Navajo Nation. In addition, cultural/community involvement has been an integral component of the project throughout the 18-week experience.

During the academic year prior to student teaching, project participants undergo extensive preparation--including seminars, readings, abstracts, papers, workshops, and sessions with Navajo consultants--for the cultural values, beliefs, lifestyles, and education practices in the placement sites for which they have applied. These requirements familiarize student teachers with the schools and culture in which they will be expected to operate and serve as an effective self-screening device--applicants whose primary motivation may be to play "tourist" are discouraged by the intensive preparatory work.

While at their assigned reservation sites, project participants engage fully in all teacher-related functions of the school. They form friendships with Navajo people in the school, dormitory, cafeteria, and community and become involved in their activities. They live in the school's dormitory and provide academic tutoring, companionship, role modeling, and "life enhancement" activities for the young residents. They complete at least one service-learning project in the local community. They also submit reflective reports identifying local attitudes, cultural values, and personal and professional learnings and insights.

## **THE CURRENT STUDY AND ITS FINDINGS**

Recent participants in the project documented ways in which they attempted to promote, increase, and enhance the self-esteem of the Navajo youth in their elementary and secondary reservation classrooms. Included in the 43 descriptions from nonnative student teachers were strategies and techniques, projects and activities they implemented, and specific books and teaching materials. In all, they reported 304 efforts to promote the self-esteem of their pupils. These data were organized into themes from which a number of interesting trends emerged, as indicated in figure 1 on page 343.

## **CULTURAL RELEVANCE**

Gilliland (1995, 94) asked, "How can Indian children believe that you really respect them, that you respect their culture, their ideas, and their people, unless you include the culture throughout their activities?" The student teachers put forth a concerted effort, identifying 78 different approaches to using culturally relevant teaching units, materials, and resources. They presented these lessons and activities in several curriculum areas, including literature, science, math, art, music, and social studies.

For example, one student teacher reported on the following activity in his classroom: "My students gave presentations on stories by a Navajo woman named Luci Tapahonso. By using the stories in class, they are legitimized in the eyes of the students as material worthy of study. Navajo stories are not big in the mainstream literature, so it is important for students to know that good work from their culture exists."

Another student teacher supported the use of Native-American literature in a unit on myths and legends so that her children "can see that their own traditions are held in high regard and not just the famous stories of the Greeks or Romans." These efforts counter problems noted by the New York State Special Task Force on Equity and Excellence in Education (1989, iii-iv), which reported that minority cultures have been "systematically distorted, marginalized, or omitted" from mainstream curricula, fostering in pupils from the majority culture an "arrogant perspective of being part of the group that 'has done it all.'"

An especially creative student teacher developed a rousing game of "Navajo Jeopardy" for her class: "The questions ranged from clan representation, value systems, community leaders, and mythology, to [slang] words in Navajo. This was a FABULOUS period because kids were speaking their first language, reeling off their clans with PRIDE, and are now devising their own questions for use in Navajo Jeopardy II!" Her commitment to a culturally relevant education was evident in her comments: "Students realize that my classroom is structured with an environment that rewards their cultural and filial knowledge, therefore raising both self and class esteem."

Other activities included interviewing elders; bringing in local Navajo artists, historians, and others to talk about their work; researching contemporary issues affecting the Navajo people; presenting historical information from a Native-American perspective; and researching the Anasazi's complex knowledge and use of constellations. Overall, student teachers heeded Gilliland's (1995, 11) recommendation that "the Indian culture should become an integral part of basic instruction"--including cultural concepts, values, and historical and contemporary contributions (Vadas 1995; Van Hamme 1996). In doing so, the student teachers also became learners in the process, with their pupils often leading the way.

In all, 36 participants reported efforts providing experiences that ensure pupil success. Student teachers tried to enhance their pupils' self-esteem by creating classroom situations in which pupils could succeed and consequently develop greater confidence for taking risks and attempting new things. They used guided essay writing, question cuing, songs, rhymes, and

finger plays designed to increase language skills. Some student teachers restructured the classroom environment or the daily schedule to serve pupils' needs better and thus contribute to their success. One student teacher periodically read aloud to pupils from their current class novel, assisting those who were lagging in comprehension: "They love being read to, and I believe it really helps their understanding and pronunciation to hear a native English-speaker read. The students who always have a hard time keeping up--the ones whose self-esteem has been shattered by constant failure--finally get an opportunity to catch up and participate."

### **POSITIVE REINFORCEMENTS**

Perhaps one of the easiest and most natural ways to promote self-esteem is through positive reinforcement and other incentives, also reported 36 times. Student teachers gave positive notes to pupils at the end of the week, provided verbal praise for work done well and for good behavior, instituted "pupil of the week" programs, wrote individualized comments in pupils' journals, created "certificates" for special accomplishments, and used stickers, tokens, and other small rewards. Many student teachers found that, with their Navajo pupils, effusive verbal praise can sometimes backfire. Gilliland's (1995, 90) recommendation to "speak to the students individually, unobtrusively, and let them know your approval, but don't hold them up before the class in a way that will separate them from their classmates" led to more subtle but equally effective efforts, as did Mitchum's (1989) advice to place emphasis on a pupil's positive contributions to the group.

### **EMPOWERING PUPILS**

Several student teachers emphasized empowerment in promoting Navajo students' self-esteem; indeed, 33 reported such efforts. Pupils were given a voice in the classroom through decision-making, leadership, and ownership. One ambitious student teacher conducted a week-long environmental stewardship seminar utilizing the Native-American texts. She challenged her science class to design a hands-on community-service project incorporating one of the topics covered throughout the seminar. Students eventually agreed upon a community trash pick-up project. They were then given the responsibility to draw up plans of action and how the project would be executed. Committees were formed to organize sections of the project.

The results were phenomenal: students collected 26 bags of trash. More important, the writing that pupils generated after the project and the sense of accomplishment they felt planning and successfully completing such a major undertaking indicated great success. The student teacher concluded: "When a teacher actively engages students in educational responsibility and decision-making skills, this action instills scholastic empowerment in the classroom. Also, when tangible results are evident, students discover the importance of their actions and are more inclined to practice the desired behavior."

### **PUPILS' LIVES AND PERSONAL IDENTITIES**

Nearly as many student teacher efforts dealt with encouraging exploration of pupils' lives and personal identities. Student teachers reported 31 activities implemented to promote a sense of identity, both personally and as a people. Pupils were encouraged to reflect upon their goals and dreams; positive aspects of themselves, their families, and their surroundings; and what it means to be a Native American. One elementary student teacher's pupils wrote letters to the school principal telling him what they dream for their future. A secondary student teacher's pupils created individual posters of what it means to be Navajo and why they hold pride in their culture. In another secondary classroom, the student teacher engaged his pupils in a discussion of the

roles Native Americans have played in Hollywood movies, focusing on stereotypical characters like Tonto. He challenged them to try to create and write a role for a Native American that defied the usual stereotypes and presented the character in a realistic light. As Gravelle (1995, 119-20) noted, "Native American teens throughout the country struggle to be themselves and to have others understand and appreciate who they are. Native American adolescents are more than willing and able to express their thoughts, feelings, and concerns. It's up to the rest of us to listen."

### **TEACHING, LEARNING, AND EVALUATING**

Several student teachers recognized a difference in pupils' learning styles from those of their mainstream contemporaries, as has been discussed in literature on Native-American education (Gilliland 1992; 1995; Rhodes 1994; Van Hamme 1996). Consequently, 27 reported efforts involved using hands-on approaches, visuals, group work, drawing, community-based activities, and self-evaluation measures.

### **SENSE OF COMMUNITY**

Similarly, student teachers reported 24 efforts to enhance self-esteem through promoting a sense of community in the classroom. Student teachers tried to learn everyone's names quickly, ensured that classmates knew one another, involved pupils in creating bulletin boards depicting aspects of Navajo culture and reservation life, and posted pupils' pictures and names in the room where everyone could see them. Student teachers also reported 17 efforts that included meeting the needs of specific pupils in the classroom and 15 efforts to involve Navajo students in presentations of their work. They reported seven miscellaneous efforts, as well.

### **OTHER GOALS**

It would be misleading to suggest that all student teacher efforts could be attributed to the promotion of pupil self-esteem. Some activities focused on teaching performance, with pupils' self-esteem secondary. Some student teachers used questionable resource materials or held lower standards for pupils' performance. Others seemed unclear on how to define self-esteem and nurture it on a regular basis. However, examples of misguided or ill-conceived efforts were few compared to a majority of sensible, creative, and effective approaches student teachers used to reach the Navajo youth in their classrooms.

### **SUCCESSFUL EFFORTS**

Overall, the data suggest that student teachers can impact Native-American pupils greatly by promoting self-esteem. However, such efforts cannot be approached in a sporadic, hit-or-miss manner. These efforts must permeate the entire elementary and secondary curriculum in a variety of ways, both direct and subtle. Teacher education programs must provide preservice teachers with specific instruction so their efforts and the consequent outcomes are meaningful and relevant to their Native-American pupils.

Davis (1994, 17) called for an awakening of "legislators, administrators, and teachers to the task of facilitating a healthy change in the classroom and in society in the future." The strategies these student teachers used will benefit students in any class when adapted to their interests and needs; but promoting Native-American culture, values, and language in classroom instruction is essential to a restoration of Native-American students. Only then can democracy in education be achieved, as Native-American youth are prepared to participate actively and confidently in local, national, and global societies.

**ADDED MATERIAL**

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**FIGURE 1 Non-Indian Student Teachers'(FN\*) Efforts(FN\*\*) to Promote Self-Esteem in Their Navajo Pupils**

Effort	Number of Times Reported	% of Efforts
Total Number Reported		
Using culturally relevant teaching Units, materials, and resources	78	25.7
Providing experiences that ensure pupil success	36	11.8
Using positive reinforcement and other incentives	36	11.8
Empowering the pupils	33	10.9
Encouraging the exploration of pupils' lives and identity	31	10.2
Using alternative modes of teaching/learning/evaluating	27	8.9
Promoting a sense of community in the classroom	24	7.9
Individualizing efforts to meet the needs of specific pupils in the classroom	17	5.6
Presenting to other classrooms and displaying own work	15	4.9
Miscellaneous	7	2.3
Effort	Examples of Trends	
literature or poetry	* Teaching American Indian	
Using culturally relevant teaching and crafts	* Making American Indian arts	
units, materials, and resources in science	* Studying Indian contributions	
speakers into class	* Bring American Indian guest	
and contemporary issues	* Researching Navajo history	
Providing experiences that ensure assist in the learning process	* Creating study guides to	
pupil success	* Using music and games	
	* Peer tutoring	

Using positive reinforcement and positive written feedback  
 other incentives  
 stickers

reward

class discussions  
 Empowering the pupils  
 responsibilities in and around the classroom

learning  
 Encouraging the exploration of own life  
 pupils' lives and identity  
 Indians in society

of self  
 Using alternative modes of express self  
 teaching/learning/evaluating accomplish tasks  
 Promoting a sense of each other better  
 community in the classroom  
 an American Indian focus  
 Individualizing efforts to meet the needs  
 instruction and attention  
 of specific pupils in the classroom  
 Presenting to other classrooms and classrooms; inviting other classes  
 displaying own work  
 displays  
 Miscellaneous

- \* Giving verbal praise and
- \* Distributing tokens and
- \* Spending time with child as
- \* Giving pupils a voice in
- \* Giving them specific
- \* Promoting cooperative group
- \* Using poetry to reflect on
- \* Discussing roles of American
- \* Identifying positive features
- \* Using different mediums to
- \* Allowing more time to
- \* Spending time getting to know
- \* Creating bulletin boards with
- \* Providing one-to-one
- \* Taking class plays to other  
 in to see their special

#### FOOTNOTES

\* N=43 student teachers

\*\* 304 different efforts to promote self-esteem were described by student teachers

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