

Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children Regional Hearing

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It is my pleasure to be able to present my testimony on working with urban Native American children and youth. By leading with change, it is my goal to assist to increase knowledge of cultural and language preservation to our Native American students. Our culture and unique bond have provided a foundation on which to build strength, pride and motivation to better themselves in academics and self-acceptance as Native Americans.

When working with different grades of students, there are levels of acceptance to learning about one's own tribe and others. At the elementary level, students are willing to accept what an educator is stating as fact. It is imperative that the indigenous text, lessons or videos, etc. have been vetted for accuracy and are culturally sound. When introducing a piece of work, it is best to connect the story to a student's personal experience for them to relate to the piece. It keeps the attention of the student and they are willing to engage further. It can also be seen that a student will have an interest if they can use a comparison to their own tribe's culture such as: regalia, ceremonies, housing styles and more.

Students look for acceptance and positive reinforcement from cultural educators. More than likely, they are willing to please the educator and are looking for confirmation, whether it be a verbal cue, positive nod or a smile. Once they make that connection, they go a step further to solidify that the lesson was comprehended by repeating an indigenous word or phrase. I often visit schools for various reasons and wear a piece of Native American jewelry or regalia every day. I visit schools often and have experienced students who run down the hall to greet me because we have had a prior conversation. There are new students or ones that I have not had in contact with before who change their direction to see or speak with me to find something that we have in common. They may pass by me and give a smile or even pass by to say "Hello" in their indigenous language. The brave ones stop and ask if I am from a certain tribe or if I am Native American. It is then up to me or the educator to take it a step further to engage the student. This can be done by asking if they know their native language or if they would like to share about their background knowledge on their tribe or culture. Once there is an interest, invite them to a cultural activity that may be happening in or around the community, like a Native American craft night or club.

It is in that fleeting moment; they have given their security to engage in a cultural discussion. We must take these moments of trust as educators to interest them in them and make a connection. It is often stated that students' brains are sponges and absorb anything being taught. This cannot be stated enough when connecting with our Native American students. They truly are passionate and willing to learn about their history, the language and create projects that increase their self-identity as Native Americans.

Cultural stories along-side language development can create a bond between their peers and mentors. It creates a kinship between the participants who are learning an indigenous language. They have found a commonality between them that comes from their ancestors. It provides students with pride that they

know their ancestors are smiling at them and now have a connection. Interviews were conducted asking students why they feel that learning their indigenous language and culture was important. One student stated, "I am happy knowing that I can connect to my family" meaning their grandparents, mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. An indigenous family is viewed in a different manner than Western civilization. Indigenous families have a closer relationship by name such as cousins are called their sisters and brothers. Another student shared that he felt it was important to speak his language because, "he can speak with the elders" in his community and "not feel left out of the conversation." He continues to study his culture and language because he feels "lost without it." His traditional language has given him self-identity and is a positive outcome mentally, spiritually, emotionally and intellectually. Students have shared that by attending cultural classes they are learning to become advocates for their own history. They now have the confidence to express their origins of where tribes originated and migrating patterns. One stated it was "exciting to be able to teach the teacher about the ancestral lands that which our district resides." The group then smiled at each other and agreed that they have experienced the same conversation with their teachers and peers.

On an advanced level of discussion with high schoolers, they have expressed that with additional cultural classes in Native American teacher led group discussions, cultural classes and peer to peer conversations that they are in the process of understanding governmental agreements. They are attentive to what is going on around them from land issues, water rights and destroyed burial grounds. The most recent discussion was about the Wall. It was expressed that United States borders are not in alignment to the indigenous way of life. To keep our students anonymous, I will name this student Jay. Jay shared that his tribe is one of the sister tribes in the Southwest whose ancestors are crossed by the United States-Mexico border and realizes that he has relatives are in Mexico. It was shared that it is the government that has created a border in the middle of their tribe, and they know that the indigenous way of life is to "respect human beings and treat them as such". This type of information is not expressed in the normal classroom and it not shared in our history books. These are discussions that students are concerned about and would like answers.

Not only does learning the language and culture provide students connection between their peers, ancestors and family, it also creates a pathway beyond the normal printed text to contemplate geography, science, math, engineering, arts, physical education and more.

These subjects have been taught by indigenous people for many years and I have been developing these teachings to meet Arizona education standards. It would be a blessing to have a team of teachers and curriculum developers for all the lessons that we could create that align to the Arizona standards. We must use our indigenous lesson of our ancestor to increase our knowledge in the Western world. One example is using our ancestral stories that are embedded with elements of Geography. This is accomplished by using the mountains and the rivers as geographical landmarks. By knowing these landmarks, we can navigate across this continent without a map. This skill has been lost over the years due to development and the loss of our elders' guidance such as sailors who once navigated the oceans by using the stars. These stories can be brought to the forefront of a geography lesson which embeds history as well.

Knowledge that have been passed down in stories and in indigenous language are become less with the passing of our elders. The stories that I have been blessed to hear have given me the knowledge and

confidence to be able to understand that the Arizona Standards we base our Western education has been taught by our ancestors all along. We need to take effort to make a connection and act upon the development of indigenous curriculum. For instance, the Ojibwa story about the Jingle dress contains math elements. The cones that hang from the dress are created by a twisted circle to become the shape of a cone. The larger the circumference of the circle, will affect the vibration and pitch of the jingle. This can also include the material in which the jingle is created. Different materials used in the creation of the jingle will alter the sound vibrated by hitting other jingles. This lesson can be taught in a regular classroom to assist in real world application of circles and their relationship to cones and include natural resources in the area in which the cone was created.

Another lesson that is taught to students is beading. There are a variety of standards that can be discussed with beading elements. My favorite to teach is symmetry and mirrored images. It takes strategic planning to create a pattern that is symmetrically pleasing to the eye. This planning is a skill that can be used every day in our urban setting. These lessons can be taught from pre-kindergarten to doctoral students. At the elementary level, the use of counting, sorting, organizing are all part of the Arizona Standards. The use of eye-hand coordination is a skill that needs to be taught with practice. This is to include finding shapes of similar sizes or colors and placing them in a pattern sequence. This can be expanded to higher grades to include using graphing paper to create a colored piece for organizing patterns and mirrored images. To further enhance the lesson, is the application of using beads on a loom or by methods of intertwining the threads and beads with each other for a beautiful creation. Traditional stories are shared during this process which encourages students to make a connection with their identity. Some tribes are represented by water or families are represented by a certain mountain or animals. By no means are these the only examples, there are numerous visual representations that Native Americans use in their creations.

Creations like this are not only used for academics, they are also used to for healing. It has been reported by students that beading has helped memorization by the repetitiveness of patterns. It can also be used for healing, because a student is forced to slow down their urban life to concentrate and focus on hand movements, breathing and color integration. The process is rewarding for students and can be seen in their smiles and in their enthusiasm to share what they have accomplished in a few beaded lines.

Providing students an introduction to their culture and language is an opportunity to build confidence and clear the way of any barriers to be successful. I hope to instill the strength of their ancestors to move forward with any daily challenges that may arise. Indigenous language and culture are the connection pieces that increase positive self-identity. The partnerships students are making with each other and supporters of indigenous learning are helping to create a foundation on which Native American students to succeed in their academics, in their community and within themselves. We have the opportunity and the duty to encourage our ni ha' at chinih (children) and share in each other's creativity and knowledge.