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ABSTRACT

The goal theory of achievement motivation maintains that the goals stressed by schools influence children's self-efficacy and willingness to try hard. This paper examines the applicability of goal theory to a Navajo school and community and widens the focus to encompass a range of potential culturally relevant goals. Interviews were conducted at Window Rock High School on the Navajo Reservation (Arizona) with 20 students in grades 8-12, 10 Navajo community members, and 9 Navajo teachers. In general, interviewees believed that school-based education is important in that it assists students to develop self-sufficiency and competitive skills that will ultimately benefit the community. However, competitiveness is not regarded as merely a desire to win at all costs; it is tempered by a strong sense of affiliation to the Navajo group in that individual achievement is not sought at the expense of the community. Student motivation to do well at school was strongly linked with social concern and affiliation. Overwhelmingly, parents and extended family were the prime referent groups in influencing student progress at school. A generally supportive home environment was seen as essential for educational success. The most frequently cited inhibitors of school motivation were family substance abuse, gang behavior, student substance abuse, and pregnancy. Respondents scrutinized the Inventory of School Motivation, agreed that all items and scales were relevant to the Navajo educational context, but offered differing Navajo perspectives on the items measuring competitiveness and group leadership. The results suggest that Navajo and Western cultures share many similar values related to education. Contains 25 references and interview excerpts. (SV)

School success in cultural context: Conversations at Window Rock.

Preliminary Report

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Abstract

Indigenous minority children within many multiracial communities appear to suffer educational disadvantage which is reflected in poor school retention and school achievement. Utilizing qualitative data gathering techniques, the researchers investigated the relevance and importance of personal, social, and educational goals to achieving school success for Navajo Indian children. The present research emerged from a series of earlier quantitative studies which sought to establish the nature of effective schooling in cultural context for Navajo students (McInerney, 1992, 1995ab, 1996; McInerney & McInerney, 1996ab; McInerney & Sinclair, 1991, 1992; McInerney, McInerney, & Roche, 1995; McInerney & Sinclair, 1992; McInerney & Swisher, 1995; McInerney, Roche, McInerney & Marsh, 1997).

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Goals, school motivation and achievement

Many Navajo children appear to suffer educational disadvantage which is reflected in poor school retention and school achievement. Motivation and achievement for any individual is the product of a complex set of interacting goals, and these goals may be differentially salient to individuals from different cultural backgrounds. In the case of Navajo children, it has been argued that cultural conflict between the values and goals of schooling and those of the Navajo community predispose Navajo children to drop-out (see, for example, Deyhle, 1992; James, Chavez, Beauvais, Edwards, & Oetting, 1995; Ledlow, 1992).

This study reported in this paper is grounded in the goal theory of achievement motivation which maintains that the goals stressed by schools do have important implications for whether children develop a sense of self-efficacy and a willingness to try hard and take on challenges, or whether they avoid challenging tasks, giving up when faced with failure (See Ames, 1984, 1992; Covington, 1992; Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Maehr, 1989). Goals are cognitive representations of the different purposes that students may have in different achievement situations, and are presumed to guide students' behaviour, cognition, and affect as they become involved in academic work (Ames, 1984, 1992; Dweck & Elliott, 1983; Pintrich, Marx & Boyle, 1993; Wentzel, 1991). For many Navajo children the language of the home is not English, and the culture of the home often strongly reflects the parents' culture of origin. Consequently, both until they first go to school, and throughout their schooling, many Navajo children are brought up in an environment which is vastly different in culture from the mainstream.

Currently, little is known about the range of goals that such Navajo students hold, nor about the cultural, social and external influences determining the salience of these goals within school settings. The literature suggests that children from Western societies have values and goals which are the antithesis of those from non-Western indigenous societies such as the Navajo (Deyhle, 1989; James, Chavez, & Beauvais, Edwards, & Oetting, 1995; Ledlow, 1992; Sanders, 1987; Yates, 1987). It is believed, for example, that individuals within Western societies are competitive, seek power and control over others, and are desirous of individual success through the achievement of personal goals while those within non-Western indigenous societies are affiliation oriented and motivated by cooperation and social concern. Moreover, group needs are considered more important than individual needs and, therefore, it is argued that indigenous people eschew competitiveness and individual striving for success. It is also believed that individuals from indigenous societies are strongly present- and past-oriented while members of Western societies are future-time oriented, planning for the future and for how to succeed. Thus, it is argued that

members of indigenous societies are more motivated by present-time rewards such as token reinforcement than individuals from modern Western societies. Furthermore, it is proposed that Western style schools, which emphasise individual mastery and performance goals (reflected in competitiveness and individualism), are poorly suited to children from indigenous societies who, because of economic disadvantage and poor academic achievement, are likely to have poorer self esteem and self-confidence within the school context, and see little purpose in completing school (see Deyhle, 1989 & 1992; James, Chavez, Beauvais, Edwards & Oetting, 1995; Sanders, 1987; Yates 1987). Many of these beliefs have very little empirical basis.

In this qualitative study we sought to examine the applicability of goal theory to the Navajo group, and widen the focus to encompass a range of potentially culturally relevant goals, viz., task/excellence, competition, power/group leadership, affiliation, social concern, recognition and token reward. We also considered the importance of self esteem, sense of competence and sense of purpose to Navajo motivation. In particular, we examined the nature of the goals which orient Navajo children at school and related this to the stereotypes about relevant goals described in the literature.

In particular, the specific aims of this qualitative research were:

1. To establish that the concept of school-based education is important to the Navajo community and, in particular, to examine the cultural relevance and importance of a range of personal, social and educational goals drawn from the Inventory of School Motivation (McInerney & Sinclair,1991; McInerney, Roche, McInerney, Marsh, 1997);
2. To discover the referent persons or groups whose normative influence is thought to be relevant to Navajo students in determining the salience of these goals;
3. To investigate the external environmental influences perceived by Navajo community members, teachers and students as inhibitors of school motivation and achievement;
4. To investigate views held by Navajo adult community members, teachers and students on the nature of effective schooling; and
5. To triangulate results from the qualitative data analysis with findings of the quantitative studies reported elsewhere.

Method

Procedure

This qualitative research was conducted through individual semi-structured interviews. To facilitate the conduct of this research the Chief Investigator lived for a period of two months on the Navajo

Reservation to establish the project and gather the data. The interviews provided an opportunity to collect qualitative data related to Navajo beliefs about schooling and learning. Interviews conducted by the chief researcher lasted approximately forty minutes and were tape recorded. Student and teacher interviews were conducted in the school tutorial room. Community interviews were conducted at a range of venues convenient to the participants. The purpose of the study was explained to all participants, and all participants were volunteers.

Analysis

Each of the tape recorded interviews was transcribed and content analysed using the NUD.IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing) program. The NUD.IST program was selected as appropriate for this qualitative data as it assists in the management of a thorough and systematic analysis of large quantities of qualitative data. Initial 'cleaning' and indexing of the data were completed by two trained research assistants under the supervision of the chief researcher. Preserving the naturalistic quality of the data was of paramount concern, therefore the transcripts were only minimally edited. Only those discourse particles such as repetitions, hesitations and minimal responses, which, it was agreed, served only to obscure the coherence of the speaker and contribute no meaningful content to this study, were edited.

Following this editing process, key concepts (nodes) emerging from the data were constructed as a 'tree' (see Table 1). Nine key nodes were established: Demographic (1), People (2), Quality (3), Impact (4), Context (5), School (6), Behavior (7), Sense of Self (8), and Outcomes (9). These 'parent 'nodes each have a number of 'child' nodes which allow for detailed conceptual linking of realted pharses or concepts through indexing and coding of each text (interview) according to these nodes. Text was then examined and indexed to one or more of these nodes to facilitate further analysis. These coding and search facilities assist finding patterns in the data. This detailed coding work is currently proceeding. The results presented in this paper represent the initial findings from the first run through the data while editing and indexing the interviews.

Participants and Setting

The study was conducted at Window Rock High School. Window Rock School District is located in Window Rock, Apache County, Arizona. Apache County has been cited as the ninth poorest county in the United States in a 1993 ranking of poverty areas. Window Rock, Arizona is the headquarters of the Navajo Nation, the tribe with the greatest number of enrolled members. The Navajo Nation is the largest geographic reservation in the United States with land in the four states of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah. The Window Rock School District serves students from six

communities: Fort Defiance, St. Michaels, Oak Springs, Sawmill, Pine Springs, and Red Lake. These six communities are governed by five Chapter Houses, the local level of Navajo Nation governance comparable to villages and towns or cities. More than 13, 000 people live in the six communities.

Window Rock High School, the site of the research study, is located in Fort Defiance, a few miles from the tribal headquarters in Window Rock. Approximately 800 students are served in grades 9 to 12 in this comprehensive high school accredited by the North Central Association. Not surprisingly, 98% of the student body are Navajo. The High School is a modern school with impressive teaching facilities. In addition to the regular program that might be found in any Arizona high school, Window Rock High School also offers Navajo Culture and History, and Navajo language along with Spanish and French as foreign languages. Advanced Placement classes in English, Math, Social Studies, and Computer Programming are also offered. One-fourth of the student body is enrolled in the computer programming class. As a result of a video productions class, short news articles written by students have been aired on a public service program called News 101, broadcast over two major channels in New Mexico and Arizona. The research was conducted through personal interviews with twenty students from grades eight through twelve at Window Rock High School (4 per grade), ten members of the Navajo community, and nine Navajo teachers on the staff of Window Rock High School. There were approximately equal numbers of males and females interviewed.

Results and discussion

From the preliminary results presented here , perceptions of students, staff and community members regarding the strengths, weaknesses, and cultural relevance of education provided for Navajo students in Window Rock are described. Insights are also gained with regard to the perceived determinants of motivation of Navajo students and, in particular, an examination of the relative importance of family, school, peer, and social environmental influences. In the following sections we present and discuss the preliminary findings related to the four research questions listed on page 3.

Relevance and importance of school-based education

It is the general belief among this Navajo community that school-based education is important for a variety of reasons. First, that it will assist students in developing self-sufficiency and competitive skills. Self-sufficiency, discipline and perseverance are qualities highly valued by the Navajo community. Second, in the longer term, the acquisition of the skills of self-sufficiency and

competitiveness will strengthen the community and ultimately assist in a less turbulent integration with Western American society and its values.

Competition

With specific reference to competition, competitiveness as it is viewed from a traditional Navajo perspective contrasts significantly with that of a typical Western American notion, though once again, a range of views are represented. There is little evidence in these data to suggest that competition, as it is typically understood from a Western American perspective, that is, a ruthless desire to win at all costs, is considered a primary goal or is actively sought among Navajo students, rather, the concept of competition is tempered with a strong sense of affiliation to the Navajo group. It seems that individual achievement is not sought at the expense of the community.

"It doesn't feel right to stand out above others."

Ray (student)

"Competition for self-gain, maybe yes, but not competition to outdo the other person."

Benjamine (community member)

"There is a Navajo tradition that you try not to glorify yourself or to stand out, in a sense, and sometimes that is used in a negative way to berate people who are successful, although we have tended in the past to glorify the athletes."

Patrick G (education official)

However, many contrasting views were expressed relating changing perceptions of competitiveness to changing times.

"Traditionally, if you win, you win. If not, that's OK. It is important in modern times. Kids with educated parents are competitive. They go to the point where they take their kids out and find programs outside the high school, summer programs and some of the other University programs to boost up things."

Jack Y (teacher)

"(Competition) is not traditional, but we accept it today. In the Navajo way of thinking that's getting too selfish, that you shouldn't compete in that sense. Competition is equated with shades of selfishness in the traditional view."

Jennifer (teacher)

"I think that it is wise to compete if you're thinking seriously about college because I think it's where a lot of competition is, at universities."

Jack Y (Teacher)

These views demonstrate the ongoing struggle to reconcile traditional Navajo values with the practice of education in which competition is seen to have a place.

Affiliation and social concern

Motivation to do well at school is stongly linked with social concern and affiliation among the Navajo community. In particular, affiliation to the family appears very strong and is linked by many respondents to school motivation.

"Success to a Navajo is different than it is for your typical Anglo child, who tends to think in terms of a good job, a nice car, a home in the suburbs or at least, that's the stereotype we would have in the Anglo world. I think success to a lot of Navajo students means being able to help their family. Success is more of a group thing than for the typical Anglo."

Patrick G (education officer)

Desire to be with friends is also a motivator to attend school as indicated in the following quotation:

"Some of the students are doing so poorly and sometimes don't even like school, but they're here because their friends are here and they like to hang around with their friends."

Marie U (teacher)

Social concern for the wider community is also frequently expressed:

"Social concern is a strongly prevalent concept among Navajo students. I'd say a very strong traditional concept There's much less emphasis on what I can do, that **I can succeed primarily for my benefit**, it's I can succeed to **help someone, to help others**, my family, my tribe, whatever."

Patrick G (education officer)

Power and group leadership

From the Navajo perspective, quality leadership above all emphasises respect and regard for wisdom. It also emphasises that leadership is something which *emerges* out of mutual respect rather than being imported or decided through an elaborate election system.

"Navajo respect elders and ask their opinions."

Paula (student)

"The leadership role emerges from an individual who gains respect from the community. The community is like an extended family."

Marie A (community)

Recognition

A strong view was expressed by the participants that it is very important for students to receive appropriate feedback on their school achievement from parents and teachers. It is also acknowledged that while this does not traditionally happen in Navajo households, it is a practice that should be encouraged. Recognition can include tangible rewards such as new clothes or shoes, an outing, or certificates, but most significantly, it should be verbal attention.

"I think (recognition) is very important to them because if they're not ... getting this from their parents, they're not getting it from anywhere else except here at school, and for one reason or another, they don't get any recognition from the parents."

Marie U (teacher)

Normative influences in achieving at school

There is overwhelming evidence to demonstrate that parents, closely followed by the extended family, are the prime referent groups in influencing a students progress in school (see also Parent & Bunderson, 1996). Most important, according to the students, was the knowledge that parents show care, are willing to be involved, support and encourage when necessary, and to reward when appropriate. The most frequently quoted view was that a generally supportive home environment, one which encourages, recognises and acknowledges effort, is essential for educational success.

"Parents should be there to support their kids and tell them they are doing good or they could do better or try harder."

Janelle (student)

"The model of the parents in the home. The parents are the number one teachers in these people's lives. Navajo students are highly motivated because of the atmosphere they are raised in, their environment, the encouragement they get from their parents and they like to be challenged."

Benjamine (community)

Above all, therefore, a supportive family environment, one which espouses education as a worthwhile pursuit, is felt to provide a solid foundation on which to build future educational success. This is a view commonly held by those parents who have benefited themselves from such an educational experience, and who wish, therefore, to avail their children of these opportunities. Their views reflect an awareness of the inevitability of change and of the need for integration into the wider American society: education is seen as an essential tool for that integration/fusion. On the other hand, an unsupportive, indifferent home environment was considered the most salient negative influence on students' school motivation. Among the correlates of this opinion which was cited by the respondents were poverty and isolation, limited understanding of the value of education, antipathy to education because of poor personal experiences, substance abuse, and family problems such as domestic violence and abuse.

Both teachers and peers, particularly Navajo teachers, were also cited as influential persons contributing to a student's motivation and accomplishment of educational goals. However, there were considerably less references to these groups in the interviews than to parents and the extended family.

"I think Navajo teachers are good, personally I feel more comfortable with a Navajo teacher than a teacher of a different background because they understand what it's like to grow up on the reservation and they speak our language and because in Navajo there are some words that you can't translate into any other language or into the English language."

Bobbie (student)

"The way the teachers teach, I think they should put more effort in what they're teaching and how they're teaching. Be more interested in it so we can be interested in it too, make it fun for us."

Farrelyn (student)

A number of students and Navajo teachers also stated that teachers should be urged to make the work more challenging. There was a general feeling expressed that Anglo teachers, in particular, expected little of their Navajo students and limited the students' opportunitites, therefore, to engage in challenging work at a level that might be expected of Anglo students. Several students indicated that they were embarrassed when they visited off-reservation schools and witnessed the more challenging work expected of their peers.

"(Schoolwork's) not difficult as it should be. It should be more challenging because right now it seems that we're not benefiting from going to school here, because other schools in the cities have high expectations from their students, although their credits may not be as high as here, but then their schooling is a lot more difficult because the teachers expect more from them as students."

Bobbie (student)

Peers were also perceived by students and teachers as significant influences in motivating student learning and achievement, though to a lesser degree than parents and teachers. This was confounded by the observation that peers could also influence a student negatively into joining gangs and working against the school ethos. In general, it was thought that students who were located within a peer group which espoused the importance of learning at school, and set goals to achieve and to get ahead though further education, were advantaged in their own motivation to learn and to succeed at school. However, the influence of a negative peer group was less direct, with most students suggesting that an individual could still be highly motivated and achieve well while located in a peer group which did not espouse educational values. Nevertheless, in this latter case, it was felt that the task of being motivated and achievement oriented was the more difficult for these students.

"(Some students) (L)ike to leave school to be like friends, like maybe some of their friends drop out and they all say, dropping out is cool so why can't I do it?"

Erna (student)

External influences inhibiting motivation and achievement

The most frequently cited factors which inhibited school motivation included substance abuse (alcohol, drugs) within the family, a cause of family breakdown, often resulting in a student fulfilling family duties at the expense of school work. Other negative influences cited were gang behavior,

student substance abuse, and pregnancy, some of which could be regarded as consequences of the former factors.

Geographical isolation, poverty and lack of family resources, as well as the dramatic lack of employment opportunities on the reservation for graduating students, were all considered important elements inhibiting motivation and achievement. However, the respondents emphasised that these were far less significant influences than those family characteristics discussed above. The C\community workers and counsellors interviewed stressed the importance of community involvement in education as a motivating factor in promoting success at school.

Effective schooling for Navajo

Navajo community members, teachers and students believe that more Navajo history, culture and language courses should be included into the curriculum to enhance the education of the students. Many respondents thought that this would assist younger members of the community in becoming familiar with and/or reinforce links with their cultural heritage.

"Another strength I think I could see is that, for once, especially in the area of language and Indian literature, social studies, teaching Navajo government and to some extent Navajo culture I think those are beginning to slowly emerge - it's still in it's infancy, elective courses. But at the same time outside this school we are getting a lot of certified, trained teachers who are being trained to teach Navajo language and culture and Navajo government as well as Navajo literature. So that's a big plus for the students here. There is hope that the Navajo Indian studies program can excel within the next 10 years."

Daniel (teacher)

Some respondents suggested, however, that cultural transmission is the responsibility of the home and that the school should concentrate on teaching the acadmic skills necessary to survive in the larger world.

"If any, I'd say it has to do with home. I don't see culture can really fit into the school system we have".

Jennifer (teacher)

Cross validation of the psychometric scales

Earlier psychometric studies (McInerney, 1995a and b; McInerney & Swisher, 1995; McInerney & Sinclair, 1992; McInerney, Roche, McInerney & Marsh, 1997) have indicated that the motivational profiles of Navajo students are very similar to those of other indigenous and Western groups. In the present study, it was, however, necessary first, to demonstrate the relevance of the dimensions considered in the psychometric studies to the Navajo, and second, to ascertain if there had been some key motivational element(s) missing in the earlier studies that might more effectively explain differences in levels of motivation and achievement among Navajo students than the dimensions considered.

For this purpose, those dimensions of the Inventory of School Motivation that had been used in quantitative studies conducted earlier were critically evaluated for cultural relevance and perceived importance in predicting school motivation and success. There were ten scales in all: task/excellence (e.g., the more interesting the schoolwork the harder I try, and I try hard to make sure that I am good at my schoolwork); competition (e.g., winning is important to me); group leadership and power (e.g., I often try to be the leader of a group); social concern (e.g., it is very important for students to help each other at school); affiliation (e.g., I try to work with friends as much as possible at school); recognition (e.g., having other people tell me that I did well is important to me); token (e.g., getting merit certificates would make me work harder at school); self-esteem (e.g., On the whole I am pleased with myself at school); sense of competence (e.g., I like to think things out for myself at school), and sense of purpose for schooling (e.g., It is good to plan ahead to complete my schooling). The 100 questions representing these scales were randomly assigned throughout the form and contained 24 negative items to guard against response bias. Items were answered using a Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

Each scale, and all items comprising these scales, were scrutinised by the respondents for cultural relevance. All scales and their specific items were considered by the interviewees to be culturally relevant, that is, were understood by Navajo, and were considered relevant to the educational context in which the Navajo find themselves. There were some caveats to this. For example, while competitiveness was accepted as relevant, and appropriately measured by the scale items, it was considered to be a growing new 'value' among students and the community as a whole. Many suggested that it was a 'necessary evil' in order for the Navajo community to survive and prosper in the modern world. Many respondents also suggested that the questions measuring group leadership/power in effect measured only "seeking for power" (considered a Western preoccupation) rather than what is traditionally understood as "good leadership" within the Navajo culture. The

items measuring social concern were considered good indicators of what is understood as effective group leadership among the Navajo.

"I think all of them would have applied to them (Navajo students). As for looking at it from the traditional perspective, the only one (not culturally relevant) would be, I guess, competition. I grew up traditionally. My Grandmother raised me and Navajo was my first language, and, using that, I think the only part would be competition. I mean, we practice it today, there's competition everywhere but traditionally we're not supposed to compete with others".

Jennifer (teacher)

All respondents were asked to indicate,from the range of scales presented, those which were most strongly linked to motivation and achievement. Scales that were considered most important in determining students' level of motivation and achievement were task/excellence (what might be termed intrinsic motivation) and the sense of purpose that students had for their schooling (achievement goal orientation). Less important, but nevertheless relevant dimensions were competitiveness, power/group leadership, affiliation, social concern, recognition and token reinforcement. These qualitative results confirm the results of the psychometric studies. Each of the sense of self scales were also considered important.

"These (self-esteem, sense of competence and sense of purpose) have their counterparts in Navajo cultural beliefs. All three of them are critical to student motivation"

Although the interviews were semi-structured, they allowed the respondents the opportunity to suggest any further culturally relevant motivational variables not covered in the study that might impact upon students' motivation and achievement at school. No further dimensions were suggested, and all respondents considered the range represented by the Inventory of School Motivation comprehensive.

Conclusion

While in previous research, issues of cultural differences between Navajo and Western values towards formal education have been the focus, the present investigation shows that compatability on many fundamental educational issues actually exists. The most important observation from these data is that the two cultures are not bipolar as has been implied by previous research. For example,

the common belief that Western (American) culture emphasises competition and individualistic values while the Navajo culture emphasises cooperation and collectivism is misleading and only serves to reinforce a simplistic stereotype based more on intuition rather than substantive empirical evidence.

We interpret these data as evidence that there is no stark dichotomy between the values and perceptions of the two cultures. Instead, a more accurate account demonstrates the picture as more complex and dynamic in nature. Through time and continuing interaction between the Navajo and the Western American nation, a move toward a *blend* of earlier differences is being effected. This is evident in the responses of different generations, elders, community workers, and students.

Similarities between the two cultures abound. For example, the overwhelming importance accorded to parents, their positive attitude to education, and subsequent supportive behavior was marked. It is clear from the interviews that the most important influence on school motivation was the family. Teachers were rated the second most important, and peers were the third. Other factors, such as the relevance of the curriculum, opportunity for employment, and cultural values were also significant but to a lesser extent.

On the other hand, traditional Navajo values of a sense of community, the sense of duty, obligation to give something back to the family, and the community as a whole, **still retain** great significance among all the interviewees spanning three generations. It is suggested that this general sense of social concern is more important for the young Navajo student than for the typical young Western American. This is particularly evident in the responses to educational outcomes, where, after having completed education, a significant number of students reply that they will be returning to the reservation in spite of the restricted employment opportunities, emphasising close bonds with family and community.

From this qualitative study we feel that the relevance of the dimensions of the Inventory of School Motivation are demonstrated, and that the findings from the large scale psychometric studies reported elsewhere are corroborated. For this reason, considerable trust can be placed in the earlier published quantitative findings. These research findings, combined with those from the earlier studies, have significant educational implications, especially in relation to the ways in which those who administer and teach in Navajo schools attempt to enhance student motivation and achievement.

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