

**Complex Ecologies of Indigenous education
at the Native American Community Academy**

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Abstract

The Native American Community Academy (NACA) is demonstrating an example of Indigenous philosophies and practices in education through its holistic, student-centered approach to education. NACA was one school in a large statewide study on Indian education in New Mexico. Focus groups with students, teachers, and community members illustrate the evolution of complex ecologies NACA creates to facilitate students' growth intellectually, socially, emotionally, and physically. The experiences and perspectives of the participants at this secondary level charter school are shared to illustrate how this school exemplifies a model of Indigenous education, how it creates and builds community, and how it teaches students to know themselves by motivating a critical Indigenous consciousness and a sense of service toward building sustainable communities.

The overarching goal of the Native American Community Academy (NACA) is to inspire “a commitment to community and service.” NACA is a public charter school that serves about 200 middle and high school students in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The school weaves an integrated academic curriculum, a wellness philosophy, and culture and language contexts together to reach this goal and to offer a unique approach to Indigenous education. This paper addresses how NACA is demonstrating a contemporary example of Indigenous education rooted in Indigenous philosophies and values, while meeting the policy expectations and high stakes testing requirements of the state. The research for this paper derives from the New Mexico Indian Education Study, 2025 (NMIES). NACA was one school in the NMIE study, which was a statewide study commissioned by the New Mexico Public Education Department to learn about the status of Indian education and the impact of the New Mexico Indian Education Act.

Theoretical framework

Indigenous educational philosophy upholds that to become of a complete human being, an individual has to become of aware of their own worth and role in contributing

to the well-being of their community. Discovering your worth and role involves finding your identity and passion rooted in life experiences shaped and influenced by your cultural community (Cajete, 1994). Becoming a complete human being is rooted in ones' experience in their cultural community and their resulting communal attachment. This experience is Indigenous education. It is connected to place, which is inclusive of the environment, people, spirituality, and culture. Place is significant because one learns their connection to their community through their participation and relationships experienced through place (Kawagley and Barnhardt, 1999). Education for Indigenous peoples traditionally occurred as a way to learn about life through the whole of nature in ways that were directly tied to experience such as through participant observation, hands-on learning, and storytelling. These educational experiences occurred within one's community setting for the purpose of cultural transmission. (Cajete, 1994, Kawagley, 1995, Benham and Cooper, 2000).

Colonial assimilationist approaches in education began to impact the educational lives of Native peoples in the United States in the late 19th century. The assimilationist agenda created many problems that continue today. However, within the past several decades, educators and scholars have documented influential and successful efforts to create positive and transformative changes in schools, and often in public schools which were created upon Westernized institutional structures, policies, and bias (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998; Blum-Martinez and Pecos, 2001; Holm & Holm, 1995; Lee, 2006, 2007; Lomawaima and McCarty, 2006; May, 1999; McLaughlin, 1992; Sims, 2002). Current research has also addressed what it means to be culturally responsive in Indian education (Belgarde, Mitchell, & Moquino-Arquero, 2002; Castagno and

Brayboy, 2008; Demmert and Towner, 2003; Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). These efforts have set the stage for “visioning” future educational prospects for Native students. Most importantly, it underscores that the tremendous advances of these progressive communities was staged not by accident, but by a design that facilitated individuals to imagine themselves and their communities in the distant future.

Central to the NMIE study, therefore, was an approach to broaden the time horizon beyond the past and the present, and begin to strategically formulate what vision the future holds for Indian education in the state of New Mexico. In this respect, this paper focuses on one school and community from the NMIES that has exemplified many of the best practices in Indigenous education described by participants across all 16 schools and communities. NACA also demonstrates an effort to practice philosophies of Indigenous education, thereby creating complex ecologies of Indigenous education for a school that is funded by the state, located in a large city, and serves students from multiple tribal backgrounds.

Research Process

Drawing from the fields of education, sociology, planning, economics, anthropology, and Native American studies, the NMIES examined how schools teach students, what they teach students, how they assess students, what school environment or climate students and community member’s experience, and what participants’ envision for the future. To achieve this, the researchers, the Indigenous Education Study Group (IESG), identified seven critical areas of inquiry to examine. They included issues and definitions of best practices in: pedagogy, accountability, language, curriculum, successful students, school climate, and vision. A research literature review was

conducted on each area by first identifying any related research conducted in New Mexico, then identifying related research in the southwest and across Indigenous communities in the United States and world-wide.

The study used an interdisciplinary and Indigenous approach in methodology and analysis, and it involved a majority of Native scholars and practitioners. These perspectives enhanced the research process to create a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary research approach rooted in Indigenous methodologies, beliefs, and practices. The Indigenous research approach entailed adhering to tribal community protocols with regard to research in their community. It also entailed an understanding of the community's history and nature of interaction at a personal level, school level, and community level. In essence, it emphasized Indigenous ways of knowing and interacting.

We conducted focus groups and/or interviews in 16 communities and schools with separate groups of students, teachers, and community members. Participants volunteered to take part at the request of the IESG, a school or community liaison, or the principal of each school. The methods for soliciting participants varied in each community according to the appropriate protocol of the school or community. Most participants were randomly selected among willing participants.

At NACA, we conducted focus groups with 7 students, 3 teachers, and 6 community members. We asked participants for their perspectives based on questions from the seven critical topic areas. We coded the data according to topic areas to identify patterns that emerged within these areas from their perspectives. Each principal investigator (PI) assigned to a particular community was the first coder of the data, followed by a research assistant or another PI who participated in the focus group or

interview session. A third reviewer (another PI) compared the first levels of coding to the transcripts to determine their levels of agreement or disagreement. This served as a reliability check on the first two coders. For those codes where there was disagreement, the IESG group discussed the code, associated quotations, and context of the quote until the group arrived at a consensus on how to code the data.

It is important to note that while much of the understanding derived from the transcripts is based directly on the transcript and the context of the situation, it is also derived from the lived experience and knowledge of the Indigenous researchers. Many of the PIs come from the communities of study or have had significant experiences in the communities outside of the professional realm. This study stands apart from many others in this respect because the analysis is enhanced by the researchers' own perspectives. I was the PI working with NACA. I have worked with NACA in many capacities (i.e., school board, curriculum writer, language immersion camp coordinator, and parent), and these experiences have enhanced my personal understanding and knowledge of NACA's educational approach and impact.

Analysis

We utilized the computer program Atlas ti to code the transcript data. We coded quotations from the transcripts according to the seven critical areas (called super codes) and attached a description to the super code to narrow down and specify the content and meaning of the quotation. We also created new super codes where the data was expressing sentiments or ideas different from the original seven areas (such as *Relationships* and *Attitudes and Beliefs*). The findings reported for this paper are based on analyses for NACA participants alone.

There were eighty pages of single spaced transcriptions for NACA. Specifically, there were twenty-six pages for the student focus group, twenty-nine pages for the teacher focus group, and twenty-five pages for the community focus group. A research assistant and myself coded each of these transcripts and their quotations from participants. After the coding process was complete, we were able to analyze the codes and the quotations within each super code, which ground our analyses in the perspectives of the participants.

Results and Conclusions

The critical areas that emerged most frequently from NACA participants included perspectives on pedagogy, curriculum, school climate, accountability, language, vision, and relationships. The analyses of the participants' perspectives within these critical areas have led to three conclusions based on the results. The three major conclusions are listed below followed by summaries and quotations from the analyses:

1. NACA demonstrates a unique integration of Indigenous education through its holistic, rigorous, student-centered educational approach
2. This holistic approach lends to the creation and building of community amongst students, parents, teachers, staff, and the local community.
3. NACA is enabling students to know and love themselves and their communities

Holistic, rigorous, student-centered education

Teachers, students, and community members discussed the importance, value, and relevance of NACA's wellness philosophy as it related to Indigenous educational philosophy. The school promotes becoming a complete human being by focusing on students' academic, physical, social and emotional development. For example, students

discussed use of a “wellness wheel” that includes all those components to identify their development in each area. The wellness wheel is one aspect of NACA’s overall wellness philosophy, which is to promote healthy development and lifestyles among NACA students. It promotes this philosophy based on Indigenous understandings of wellness and based on the current social and economic conditions under which NACA students live. For example, one Native language teacher, Mr. Young¹, shared his discussion with another teacher about how to teach about Indigenous values for foods and decolonization of our food choices. He reflected on that conversation,

How do we apply our traditional teachings to a contemporary society? One of the conversations that really sticks out to me is one Darren and I had. We were talking about food and we were talking about the sacredness of food and how you should never talk down about food or how somebody prepared it. But he was saying he was at one of the family gatherings and his cousin spoke up about what they were eating. There was cake and soda... she was disciplined for speaking out... So we talked about the fine line that exists of like okay, you're not supposed to say stuff like that because of the disrespectful manner and nature of your comments but yet there is the reality of the matter that the food that we are eating is in a different context then it was hundreds of years ago. Hundreds of years ago, we had this food and we prepared it in a certain way and we put our hands on it and our feelings into it so that there was no question as to where it came from and who made it. So we treated it in a certain way. But then we bring soda and we bring chips and we bring whatever, cake, and we try to treat it the same way. We try to hold those same ideas in order to pass them on, but it's in a different kind of context. So we were wondering, we have a lot of conversations about how do we teach that? How do we teach that kind of sentiment? But like almost in an analytical way and having them challenge some of our teachings (IESG, N1 p2).

He acknowledged the dilemma with teaching the values of Native communities in a context that has been colonized and how that has affected the quality of food choices. He articulated the importance of having students learn those values regarding food but also understand the depth of how to exercise those values when living in a colonized state. His comment reflects his desire to teach students to become decolonized and critically

conscious of their food choices. NACA's wellness philosophy embodies this perspective. They do not allow students or staff to drink caffeine nor soda on campus. They do not allow junk food. To promote healthy eating, they have lunch catered by local vendors who utilize nutritious foods, low in fat and sugar. Given that the school currently has no permanent building and no kitchen facilities and has the option to utilize an adjacent school's cafeteria, they are showing tremendous commitment to provide healthy choices to their students. NACA invites families to sessions in their wellness classes to learn about how to cook and eat healthy. The wellness class is required of all students, which incorporates experiential and physical learning activities, including yoga, running, and hiking. Students also learn conflict resolution and personal reflection techniques. This holistic approach to student, family, and community wellness serves as an important example of Indigenous education in this contemporary public school setting.

Similarly, NACA uses this holistic approach to set high expectations of students and to prepare students for college. Students each belong to an "advisory" meaning a group of students in the same grade are assigned to a faculty advisor, where time is devoted to discuss college life, preparation, and readiness. NACA encourages all students to participate in summer pre-college bridge programs. They also provide many summer learning activities and programs for students as well. Teachers in each content area are encouraged to work across disciplines through integrated curriculum. Students are also provided with challenging learning opportunities, such as participation in the National History Day project. Each year, students have entered projects and many have won awards for their creativity, articulation, understanding, and depth of research such as the use of primary sources in their projects.

High expectations of students are illustrated in the expectation for students' to demonstrate their knowledge. Students participate in student-led conferences throughout the year to discuss their academic performance, but they also relate their performance using attributes in the wellness wheel. They discuss how they are feeling and growing at school socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually. Adriana explained the student-led conference this way,

A parent-teacher conference, but it's way better 'cause we get to do it our way to where it's not really just with your mom or dad, or your parents. You can have different family members or friends come in. You talk about your grades. You talk about what you like here at school and what you don't like, and how you can fix it. You have goals of yourself or for yourself. And you talk about how you want to reach it. You also have a wellness wheel, like we do it every year in advisory so like every week, and it talks about how you're feeling in academics physical, intellectual (IESG, N2 p5).

At the end of the school year, each student is expected to share what they have learned through "Student Demonstrations," where they decide on three topic areas to demonstrate their progress and learning for parents, family, teachers, and community members.

Additionally, participants discussed the intentional integration of the protocols, morals, and values of Indigenous communities into the curriculum to instill a foundation of the students' cultural identity. One community member, Carrie, discussed a weekly morning ritual of the school that draws on Native songs and communal gathering practices to incorporate this custom into the school.

They gather students in a circle on Monday mornings, and they begin with the drum. They actually sing together. So that's something that's a part of their ritual for the school. And that's so important to have and so I think that that makes it feel like it's a community and it's unified (IESG, N3 p3).

In addition to creating new traditions for the school, teachers utilize assessment practices that respond to a holistic view. The Native language teacher Mr. Young did not assess

students for content knowledge alone, he also evaluated students based on their development as caring and empathic human beings and on the quality of relationships they have with one another. Mr. Young said, “Another way that I evaluate if they're receiving some of the things that I'm teaching them is how they treat each other out here when they're not in class” (IESG, N1 p2). He looks for his students to demonstrate respect, compassion, and helpful behavior with others, as these are also attributes associated with the way the Native language is used and the way Native people treat one another. Likewise, he creates a reciprocal and respectful relationship with his students. He paraphrased how he explained it to his students, “The relationship that we're gonna have in this classroom, I'm gonna treat you like one of my nieces or nephews - so that it does not end once we are out of this class. It does not end once you've graduated from NACA. We're always gonna have that relationship and I expect you guys to acknowledge me and I will acknowledge you like that” (IESG, N1 p1). These examples show that NACA is practicing what it means to be a socio-culturally responsive school by focusing on students’ lived realities, cultural heritage, and values and by empowering students as decision makers in demonstrating their knowledge.

Building Community

A vision for the school as identified by participants is to build capacities within students to support and serve their communities. Teachers work to stimulate a critical Indigenous consciousness and its associated values of giving back to community among students. A critical Indigenous consciousness is an awareness of one’s Indigenous identity as it resides within existing and historically situated social, economic, and political conditions of one’s community (Lee, 2006). Teachers are cognizant of the

importance of attaining this level of consciousness among Native students. One teacher, Ms. Dannon, explained it like this, “I envision a lot of young people, especially Native young people, really having a voice and really advocating for themselves and for others and really giving back to their community. I think that goes beyond just what we teach in the classroom (IESG, N1 p1). Similarly, another teacher from a local Native community, Mr. Leonard, said, “I try to give 'em the solutions or help them develop tools in order to realize the situation and actually give 'em the tools to change their communities - just inspire them to be better than what they see around their communities” (IESG, N1 p2). He was referring to some of the social and health problems that are prevalent in the local communities.

The staff and teachers of NACA realize they cannot and should not try to foster the holistic growth of students alone. They seek out students’ families and communities as resources in order to support students’ holistic development and growth. Ms. Dannon articulated NACA’s view on family as a resource,

I was always taught that you - to utilize your own resources and that means bringing in people, Native people, that have the knowledge and the experience, whether it's a combination of traditional teachings and western teachings, what you utilize those people to be the educators of your children because for me, by not utilizing those people, you're kinda just wasting your resources... I think NACA's a place where we're able to bring in all those people, grandmas, aunties, uncles, everybody comes for an event and you have - you're able to connect on that social level and then try to bring in more (IESG, N1 p1).

The focus on holistic education, rigor, and integrated curriculum has attracted like-minded staff. Teachers are attracted to the school because of its mission and community oriented emphasis. Alan, a community member who served on the school board described it like this,

I think one of the things that I thought was particularly interesting was the integrated curriculum that I don't know how official it is but I know it exists because of our size and of the staff. When we were fortunate enough to interview and talk to teachers wanting to come here it seemed like people that wanted to get involved, that was one of the number one reasons. They wanted to be part of the family that looked a little more holistically at what was going on with these kids instead of just being one stuck in a cubbyhole and running kids through an assembly line process. It seemed like some of the folks were - this was more of a calling than a job (IESG, N3 p1).

Being a new school, NACA is still learning and working on becoming a resource for the larger surrounding Native communities, such as through a community-learning center.

The school's principal has consistently stated that one major impetus for conceiving the school was to create a school that conforms to the community, rather than the typical expectation that the community conforms to the school. They currently offer various services to the community and families, such as access to the school based health center, financial literacy courses, tax preparation, family nights for learning how to help their children with homework in various content areas, and community feast days to celebrate and honor Native people and communities served by NACA.

Student self-efficacy

Students' sense of academic self-competency and strength in Indigenous identity is evident as NACA implements its holistic and rigorous educational approach. NACA also locates opportunities for students to foster their self-confidence and demonstrate their academic and cultural competencies. For example, the students in the study discussed the opportunities afforded to them to share their work in local and national venues (i.e. Art show in the city, the New Mexico film festival, the National History Day competition).

They also discussed their enthusiasm to draw on familial knowledge, thereby “validating” their knowledge in academic settings. For example, Denise described using her grandmother’s journal from boarding school as a resource for her history project. She said,

We’re doing Indian Boarding Schools or basically Indian schools. And like and then the teacher’s kind of like encouraging us to go like interview people from our families, not to just take it from like Web places and books and stuff. So I’m actually getting to like read my grandma’s journal before she passed away (IESG, N2 p3).

Use of such resources provides meaning in education for these students. They can connect content directly to familial experiences. As previously noted, use of primary resources such as Denise’s journal has also been rewarded at the national level by the National History Day competition, which has cited students’ use of primary documents as advanced research skills.

Further supporting an optimal learning environment, the students and community members described NACA’s school climate as safe and family-like. Teachers emphasized a positive youth identity, and their pedagogical practices and curriculum empowers students to become decision makers in courses, discipline, and school goals. Self-efficacy and competency is enhanced through the advisory course, which helps to set high expectations for students and for students to become familiar with and confident in their knowledge and perspectives. For example, in this particular advisory, the students illustrate their critical thinking and analytical skills when they critique a Native author’s position and purpose in writing her book. The students Karen and Carl had read several autobiographies of Native authors and felt demeaned by one author’s reasons for writing.

Karen: *Finally she (the advisory teacher) just made us read it because we had a lot of complaints because we had read the autobiographies*

by the lady who wrote it, and made all of us do that because she was saying stuff like 'I bring dignity to Natives everywhere' and stuff like that. Just really kind of like -

Carl: Like she wrote it above us all.

Karen: Like we need her writing stuff. So we all kind of like, so all of us, we got kind of mad about that because of like why do we need your writing to be dignified (IESG, N2 pp1-2).

The offense taken implies the students have strong cultural identities that do not need an intellectual to speak for them, nor to dignify them as Native people. Teachers at NACA are not trying to romanticize Native people nor create false idyllic visions of Native ways of life. They are most interested in stimulating and nurturing critically conscious students who believe in themselves, and who are inspired to contribute to their Native communities in positive ways. Mr. Leonard stated this well,

I think one of the things that I want the kids to walk away with is that there's always something bigger than them. It's not always about me, the individual, and it's about their family, it's about their community that they live in, so I think that's how I evaluate some of my students is that just have the mindset that you're always gonna help people (IESG, N1 p5).

The students are responding to this approach. Benjamin, an 8th grade student, exemplified this critical Indigenous consciousness. He said,

I want to go like into toxicology and like with teens and stuff. And then when I'm through with that, I would like to work on the rez or here in New Mexico. Someplace close to home because the highest rate of suicides are like teens, especially Native. And I would like to help in that (IESG, N2 p2).

The goals of Mr. Leonard, Benjamin, and NACA's philosophy reach beyond mastery of content knowledge and high achievement on standardized tests. NACA is passionate about the students becoming healthy people who are grounded in their identity, who believe in themselves, who are prepared for college, and who work to better their communities. These efforts outlined above are only a few in the many that demonstrate

how NACA is influencing youth toward a commitment to their communities and planting seeds for transformation.

Implications

This paper has deliberately focused on best practices at NACA. Given the countless negative descriptions of Native people as “at risk” or culturally deficient, this paper utilizes a strengths-based approach to demonstrate how schooling can respond to Native students and all that they bring to school. Schools of all students can learn from NACA’s specific attention to the needs and interests of Native students and their families. The passion, commitment, capacity, and competency of NACA to educate Native youth is now becoming very clear as it approaches its fifth year of operation. NACA’s approach has been to care about the students, value their heritage and knowledge, believe they can succeed, utilize familial and community resources, and hold high expectations.

NACA has shown how a contemporary public school can uphold and implement the values and philosophies of traditional Indigenous knowledge. The goal of NACA is to create commitment to community and service. This goal is consistent with Indigenous educational philosophy, which promotes self-awareness, building relationships, and contribution to community. Additionally, NACA relates to Indigenous educational philosophy by facilitating student growth toward achieving consciencization (or critical consciousness) and transformation in Native communities (Smith, 2003). Smith says transformation is more than just change, and he expressed the need to understand the deeper meaning of transformation for Native communities. NACA’s emphasis on a holistic education, building communities, and knowing self are elements to understand what it means to transform Indigenous people and communities.

NACA provides evidence of best practices in Indigenous education in New Mexico by reminding us that education should be focused on students and their lived experiences and knowledge; it should challenge students to know themselves and set high expectations for themselves; and it should be relevant to their lives. NACA's success is not in its test scores, but in its ability to prepare students to become contributing members and transformative change agent in their communities and in the world.

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¹ All names are pseudonyms