

Navajo Students Practicing Self-Determination in Transitions to Postsecondary Education and Employment: An Inclusive Transition Taxonomy

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The purpose of IDEA 2004 is to facilitate the movement of students with disabilities from high school graduation into further education and employment (Johnson, 2004). Many rural secondary schools do not have transition service programs in place to provide students with disabilities opportunities to attain improved educational outcomes. In fact, many American Indians in rural areas do not graduate from high school. The total dropout rate in rural areas is 17% for Euro-Americans, 28% for American Indians/Alaskan Natives, and 44% for Navajos (USDA Economic Research Institute, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). U. S. institutions of higher education report undergraduate enrollment by ethnicity as 67% for Euro-American and a *disconcerting one-percent* for American Indians/Alaskan Natives (Horn, Peter & Rooney, 2000). Unemployment rates in all BIA service regions range from a low of 41% to a high of 71%. Moreover, 64% of Navajos without disabilities and 72% with disabilities are unemployed in the Navajo Nation (Brown et al., 2000; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). These in-school and postschool outcomes for American Indians/Alaskan Natives require rural public, private, BIA, and tribal

secondary schools to structure transition programs to align with best practices of transition services.

Two purposes provide the framework for the themes addressed in this paper. One purpose is to introduce a conceptual inclusive transition taxonomy, sensitive to cultural differences, by infusing a new category, cultural development, and adding community involvement to the category of family involvement into Kohler and Field's (2003) transition taxonomy. The second purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how self-determination as defined by Martin and Marshall (1995) and Serna and Lau-Smith (1995) can be infused into educational practices with cultural sensitivity. Navajo culture and education literature will serve as the exemplar of how culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) youth with disabilities and those at-risk for school failure in rural secondary schools can self-determine a course of study and develop positive bicultural identities. Due to the brevity of this paper, the conceptualization of the inclusive transition taxonomy, consisting of cultural development, student focused planning, student development, program structure, family/community involvement, and interagency collaboration is limited to a broad scope. This broad scope creates a need to collapse the category of program structure with student development and exclude the category of interagency collaboration. The first section of the paper considers the category of cultural attachment in values of school and culture of Navajo youth to begin the conceptualization of the inclusive transition taxonomy. The next three sections view student focused planning, student development/program structure, and family/community involvement through the lens of Navajo youth and culture.

Navajo Culture and Transition Taxonomy

Cultural Development

Values and behaviors presented in this paper are not intended to present Navajo people as homogeneous. Additionally, heterogeneity within homogenous groups makes identifying a definitive behavior of any culture impossible, and this effort is *not* attempting to stereotype or collapse individuals into commonalities. Frankland, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, and Blackmountain (2004) provide guidance in defining levels of cultural attachment as they stratify Navajo people into traditional, semi-traditional and modern groups. This cultural stratification provides the means to view Navajo students with disabilities and their families in relation to education and transition services.

McInerney and Swisher's (1995) study of academic motivation found no evidence of cultural discontinuity between behaviors of Navajo students and school values, as related to achievement motivation. At the same time, they conclude that "those who fail to cross the cultural boundaries of the school may maintain values in opposition to school values in order to preserve and protect an identity which they feel is threatened by such cultural traditions" (McInerney & Swisher, p. 15). This finding validates differing levels of cultural attachment and the existence of cultural discontinuity between school and home. The findings of McInerney and Swisher suggest opportunities for Navajo students with disabilities and those at-risk for school failure to practice values of the mainstream while preserving cultural integrity deserve consideration in the provision of educational and transition services.

"The relationship between traditional culture and education has been contentious for many years" (Willeto, 1999, p. 2). Willeto's study indicates traditional values and practices of the Navajo people, even though complex and multifaceted, are not the cause of poor in-school and postschool outcomes for Navajo youth. Studies have attempted to define the relationship

between Navajo values and the individualistic school culture in the form of academic achievement for many years (Frankland et al., 2004; McInerney & Swisher, 1995; Vadas, 1995; Willetto, 1999). These studies assert that cultural attachment can promote academic achievement but overall is not a significant factor in predicting academic achievement or failure. At the same time cultural attachment does contribute, for some students, to cultural discontinuity between the values of school and home. The remainder of this paper will focus on the relationship of cultural attachment to transition related services, and how rural public, private, BIA, and tribal secondary schools can provide students opportunities to learn skills to function with adaptive behavior in two worlds through the inclusive transition taxonomy.

Student Focused Planning

Developmental Stages of Navajo Youth. “An important aspect of student focused planning is educational decisions based on students’ goals, visions, and interests” (Kohler & Field, 2003, p.176). The Navajo culture provides a social development structure that encourages its youth to self-determine their educational attainment. Frankland et al. (2004) describe the developmental stages of traditional Navajo youth and identify the early teenage years as a key developmental stage in self-determination and education for Navajo youth. Frankland et al. (2004) state: “between the ages of 10 and 15, Dine` [Navajo] children assume increased responsibilities in the home and are allowed to make decisions regarding their life, including schooling, with little deference to parental authority” (p.197).

After the age of 15 the question of culturally appropriate self-determination becomes salient. Frankland et al. (2004) articulate that although the primary transition goal of traditional Navajo youth is to provide financial support or physical labor to the well being of the family, that

“ultimately they [Navajo youth] should be self-sufficient, able to care for themselves, and serve as contributing members for the well being of the family and community” (Frankland et al., p. 197). This general view of transition for Navajo youth supports an assertion that for many Navajo’s in today’s society, on and off the reservation, traditional, semi-traditional, or modern, educational attainment may be the method in which Navajo youth may best serve the family and community (Vadas, 1995; Jackson & Smith, 2001; Serna & Lau Smith, 1995; Van Alstine, Ramalho, & Sanchez, 2002).

Hales’ (2000) research affirms many Navajo youth may self-determine their educational decisions. Hales’ study included high school and college Navajo students enrolled in a hospitality and tourism program and surveyed students about which individuals influenced their decisions about plans after high school. The highest response, by far, were responses of self-influence such as “my life, my interest, my choice” (Hales, p. 73). Hales’ findings suggest Navajo students can self-determine their educational aspirations early in their developmental years by goal setting and carry their self-determined goal through to its logical end.

Time-Orientation. Short and long-term goal setting is important to the development of student self-awareness (Kohler & Field, 2003). The small number of students mentioning goal setting, or future-planning, in Hales’ study (2000) may be due to values focusing on present-time orientation. The Navajo culture maintains a concept of present-time orientation (Chopp Lotta, 2001; Frankland et al., 2004; McInerney & Swisher, 1995). It stands to reason the recognition and application of this cultural value, as all other cultural values, depends on the level of cultural attachment of the student and family. One researcher demonstrated how to preserve the Navajo cultural value of present-time orientation while promoting a future-time orientation skill through a culturally appropriate instructional strategy. Chopp Lotta (2001), in her study of gifted and

talented at-risk Navajo adolescent girls, presented a self-determination practice that asked students to project a postschool vision relating to careers “through discussing *current* values and behaviors in relation to future dreams and goals” (p. 33). This exemplifies one strategy of how educators can acknowledge and respect native cultural values while providing opportunities for students to learn skills necessary to advance in mainstream society.

Hales (2002) provides a view of the acceptance of future planning by some Navajo students. He found choosing a program of study and learning about skills and knowledge necessary for further education and employment made the high school experience more enjoyable for Navajo students. Navajo students expressed knowledge of the concept of a course-of-study and the need for skills and knowledge necessary for postsecondary education and specific careers. To accomplish this for all Navajo students who respect the value of present time orientation, or other values that may be counter to school values, educators must develop appropriate transition service strategies and curriculum, become aware of cultural differences, and work cautiously to avoid the pernicious effects of an educational system intending to “civilize” cultural groups, promote a hidden individualistic curriculum, or serve as a change agent without reinforcing traditional cultural values (Spindler, 1997; Van Horn, 2000; Yazzie, 2000).

Student Development/Program Structure

Student Development. Students develop occupational skills and career awareness through related courses and curriculum (Kohler & Field, 2003). Navajo education literature provides some guidance in culturally appropriate career education for Navajo students. Hales’ (2000) study examined transition services that prepare Navajo students for careers in the hospitality and tourism industry. Exposure of students to the hospitality and tourism industry, and the

requirements to attain employment within the industry, contributed to many students deciding to pursue education opportunities after high school. Additionally, Hales found students rated the hospitality and tourism class significantly higher than a general high school course in providing information on requirements to be accepted into a community or four-year college.

Two other researchers in Navajo education literature have utilized curriculum to increase career awareness among Navajo students. Chopp Lotta (2001), in her study of gifted and talented at-risk Navajo girls, utilized a one-day workshop intervention to significantly increase student career awareness behaviors. These behaviors included researching careers in the library and asking adults about education, entry, and training requirements of their particular employment positions. Gilbert (2000) adds to the already compelling evidence of the usefulness of implementing programs that support increasing awareness of opportunities for further education and employment for Navajo youth. Gilbert found significant differences in Navajo students who received instruction, as opposed to those who did not receive instruction, in how to approach career options and decision-making in this five-week summer program.

The transition service interventions for career and postsecondary education mentioned in this section can easily be infused as a half credit course or nine-week section during the regular school year in a general education course or implemented as a brief summer program. Rural secondary schools providing services to Navajo students with disabilities and those at-risk for school failure must implement opportunities in dedicated environments to increase awareness of further education and employment (Hales, 2000; Gilbert, 2000; Chopp Lotta, 2001).

Program Structure. Little empirical research exists that studies career and postsecondary education transition programs in rural schools (Sheehey & Black, 2003). The only published empirical studies focusing on rural schools and transition outcomes found a lack of career

education programs (Dunn & Shumaker, 1997; Schalock, Holl, Elliott, & Ross, 1992; Sitlington, & Frank, 1994; Spruill & Cohen, 1990; Spruill & Kallio, 1994). Barriers to transition programming included: (1) job exploration activities, (2) interfacing with natural support systems, and (3) pressure to fit vocational in with ALL other graduation requirements. Considering all four of these studies are prior to IDEA 2004, current research needs to investigate how rural schools can provide students with disabilities and those at-risk for school failure opportunities to learn how to manipulate their secondary education to meet their postschool outcomes. Studies in the Navajo education literature focusing on transition programs in secondary schools are also few. Three studies of Navajo secondary transition programming focuses on curriculum (Chopp Lotta, 2001; Gilbert, 2000; Van Alstine, Ramalho, & Sanchez, 2002), and one examined high school transition programming leading to postsecondary education (Hales, 2000). These studies report the same barriers to transition programming as earlier studies. Another consideration when developing a program structure for Navajo students with disabilities and those at-risk for school failure is that to be culturally appropriate, transition programming must include family/community involvement.

Family Involvement

Family involvement supports and advances student-focused planning and student development activities (Kohler & Field, 2003). Some researchers suggest that parents do not play a role in the lives of Navajo students in behaviors relating to secondary school processes (Hales, 2000; Frankland, 2004). In Hales' study (2000), lack of parent involvement was an issue stated by teachers and administrators. Hales found that teachers and administrators criticized parent involvement in academics such as not helping students with homework and promoting school attendance. Cultural differences seem to influence parent participation in the education of their

children. Parents may not perceive their role as supporting the academic aspect of the student's education but more of supporting an education of native cultural values (Geenan, Powers, & Vasquez-Lopez, 2001).

Willeto (1999), in contrast to Hales' (2002) research, found that parental education aspirations for their students had a positive affect on the aspirations for further education on their children. The educational attainment of parents also predicted the in-school performances of Navajo youth. Hales (2002) found that for some students grandparents influenced Navajo students to pursue further education. Perhaps the most promising finding of the Navajo education literature is that traditional values can be preserved even when engaging in mainstream education (Vadas, 1995), and that "Navajo families can promote traditionalism without concern for negative educational consequences" (Willeto, 1999, p. 17).

Community Involvement. The community can be viewed as the extended family in the Navajo culture, and it plays a vital role in the education of Navajo youth (Jackson & Smith, 2001; Van Alstine, Ramalho, & Sanchez, 2002). Bandura's (2002) assertion is that "group pursuits are no less demanding of personal efficacy than individual pursuits . . . [and] . . . people who work in collectivist societies need, or desire, to be efficacious in the particular roles they perform just as those in individualistic societies" (p. 269). This view of causal agency should impress upon educators that involving the community in educational affairs should permeate Navajo education as a strategy to increase personal (student) agency and increase collective (community) agency.

The Crownpoint Institute of Technology epitomizes Bandura's (2002) postulation of causal agency as it utilizes a community transition team approach to raise awareness of education and transition in students and community (Van Alstine, Ramalho, & Sanchez, 2002). This model

exemplifies how a secondary school could build around the local culture, serving as a tool to preserve the local culture, while teaching skills required in the mainstream and promoting educational attainment. Jackson and Smith (2001) add to the evidence illustrating the importance of the community in the educational decisions and attainment of Navajo youth. They found themes for pursuing further education for Navajo youth centered on their self-determined future role, supported by the family, in the local community.

Summary

This paper introduces an inclusive transition taxonomy for use that may provide opportunities for Navajo youth and their families, and other CLD populations, in rural secondary schools to self-determine a postschool vision and maintain positive cultural attachment. Rural secondary schools need to provide Navajo students and those at-risk for school failure, their families, and communities opportunities to provide and participate in culturally appropriate transition services. This review of Navajo education literature also found the existence of differing levels of cultural attachment among Navajo people, supporting the assertion that Navajo youth with disabilities and those at-risk for school failure deserve individualized education plans that are culturally appropriate. Rural public, private, BIA, and tribal secondary schools that address these needs will assist Navajo youth with disabilities and those students at-risk for school failure to attain skills promoting high school graduation, further education, and employment designed to support the Navajo Nation in its move to self-determine its role in the 21st century.

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