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# High School Counseling: Essential Services for Reservation Based Native Americans for Beginning Counselors

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# High School Counseling: Essential Services for Reservation Based Native Americans for Beginning Counselors

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## Introduction

This chapter is focused on the work of contemporary school counselors in the United States who support the social and educational development of reservation-based Native American high school students. Unfortunately, most U.S. citizens, whether highly educated or not, know little about the historical or present day socio-cultural conditions of life among the Native people of their country. There are hundreds of tribal groups across the United States that have survived hundreds of years of oppression and attempts at forced assimilation that originated in organizations such as religious groups, educators, civil servants, and non-Native immigrants who settled on and laid claim to Native lands with support from policies of the federal government. Despite these efforts, tribal communities continue to survive as distinct cultural and sovereign political nations within the United States.

In Washington State, the homeland of the Colville Confederated Tribes whose life-ways and social-cultural conditions this chapter has as its focus, there are at least twenty-one federally-recognized and distinct tribal groups. For the most part, children of these communities are educated in public schools and are eligible for and in need of specialized school-based services including school counseling. Within the framework of this chapter the following topics are presented: 1) the importance of within- and between-group differences and similarities among tribal groups and between tribal groups and non-Native populations; 2) a brief overview of tribal history and cultural life-ways of the people; 3) ongoing changes in federal policies as related to tribal populations; 4) school counseling as a service appropriate for Native students; 5) adaptations of counseling techniques appropriate to Native populations; and 6) a case study of a Native American high school counselee.

While there are aspects of school counseling services such as helping students grow in self- and other-awareness, and becoming effective decision makers that are similar across ethnic and cultural populations, there are many specific and complex social and behavioral dynamics that are unique to Native American high school students. Beginning as early as pre-school, many Native Americans freely choose their play and recreational activities with little adult supervision or direction. They also tend to learn more effectively and spontaneously, when engaged in experiential “hands-on” instruction rather than more abstract styles such as reading, recall, or reflective writing (Bandura, 1997).

It is widely recognized by psychologists around the world that early life experiences strongly influence adolescent values, expectations, and lifestyle choices. Reservation life for children and adults is shaped by the geographical territory, climate, and the social-cultural and economic conditions of the people. Located in North Central Washington, the Colville Reservation is a sparsely populated, arid territory that encompasses approximately 1.5 million acres that receives approximately 10 inches of rainfall per year. Most reservation occupants are tribal members who hunt, fish, and gather wild berries and roots on the open range land as part of their sustenance. Young children and adolescents usually participate in these activities. It is also common for the people to gather in their

long houses to celebrate the Spring Root Festival where community members share prayers and a meal of traditional foods. Their ancestors were nomadic hunter-gatherers and members of 12 distinct bands who depended on the land and its resources for their livelihood (Anglin, 1995). The tribal bands included: Methow, Entiat, Okanagan, San Poil, Lakes, Kalispels, Spokane, Coeur d'Alene, Moses, Columbia, Wenatchi, and Chelan. After being held captive by the U.S. Army as a result of the Nez Perce retreat led by Chief Joseph in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Joseph band of the Nez Perce was placed on the Colville near the village of Nespelem. Descendants of the Joseph band remain on the Colville and are currently included among enrolled tribal members.

The question of how these tribal people came to be called "Colville Indians" allows for insight into how they and other tribal groups were generally treated by the United States federal government. Colville was the last name of a British official of the Hudson's Bay Company. He set up a trading post in the region where valuable furs, hides, and artifacts made by the people were traded for goods such as guns, iron cooking utensils, cotton and wool materials, and most damaging, alcoholic beverages such as rum and whiskey. These beverages were unknown to the tribal people of the Northwest who had no experience with fermented liquids. Once they realized the sudden and powerful effects alcohol had on their minds and emotions, they wanted more of the magic drink and would exchange anything for it including their land (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 2004). Thus with the arrival of non-Native settlers and the introduction of their trading products came a powerful threat to the survival of the aboriginal people. To this day substance abuse is considered one of the major life challenges to tribal people of the Colville reservation and Native people around the nation (Amodeo & Jones, 1997).

The author of this chapter has lived on the Colville reservation for a total of twelve years over a 46 year span from 1964 to the present. Employed as a teacher, school counselor, and consultant to tribal and public schools that serve reservation communities, the author has known hundreds of tribal members from childhood through their adult years. During these years, many talented young adults have not survived the trials of adolescence. At the same time, more tribal youth and their families recognize the importance of formal education and career training for their personal and community well-being. They are not only seeking to complete high school, but to further their education in colleges and universities.

### **Social-Cultural Differences Within Native Groups and Between Natives and Non-Natives: Reflecting Tribal History**

Social-cultural differences such as parenting practices, early developmental experiences, and family and interpersonal relationships, result in important individual differences among Native students and between Natives and non-Natives. The quality and extent of formal educational achievements among previous generations of family members are often predictive of the educational achievement levels of current high school students. Counselors must honor cultural norms and values, varied as they are, when working with Native students and families. When Native parents themselves have been successful in

high school and college, the behavioral expectations they convey to their children are focused on academic success and personal striving for future careers. These expectations and values are not usually shared by Native parents who dropped out of high school and live with persistent economic, motivational, and social struggles. Often Colville tribal members who graduate from college want to live away from the reservation so they can explore a variety of career options or advanced educational programs. Through influences of modern technology such as computers, the internet, television, etc., reservation-based Native Americans do not have to leave their homes to discover the variety of lifestyles around the nation and world. College and professional athletic events are followed on TV. Athletic superstars are highly regarded as are popular entertainers in music and theatre arts.

Within-group differences among Native Americans result in varying emphases on the role of formal education and future expectations for high school students. Students whose parents have completed some college or currently are studying for a college degree take their education much more seriously than those whose parents did not complete high school or a general education diploma (GED). This is evident in their attendance records, the classes they choose as electives, and the grades earned.

If counselors would ask five-year-old Native boys and girls living on reservations in Eastern Washington, what happens at a pow-wow or rodeo, they would gain accurate, firsthand information about these events. Conversations among Native high school students indicate they enjoy describing their early rodeo rides on calves or lambs. Riders are “loaded on” their animal in the “shoot” – a wooden pen containing the animal and rider until the signal is given for release into the arena. Young men manage the shoots and train young riders to yell, “Outside, Cowboy”, when they are ready for their ride. Students offer humorous accounts of their perilously short or relatively long runs. Sharing personal stories is an important form of interpersonal bonding and entertainment. It is central to shaping the identity and values of Native students in their social-cultural lives. However, Native students born and raised in urban centers may know little or nothing of reservation experiences and lifestyles. Athleticism, strength, and endurance are highly valued by reservation-based Native students. Making the high school athletic teams is a source of pride for students and family members. In most reservation communities, high school sports events are a major draw for community members regardless of age. Great-grandparents in wheelchairs are present at every game regardless of the cost or inconvenience of travel.

### **Hunter-gatherers to computer technologists: Past and present clashes**

Among Native students whose parents have completed college and found employment at professional levels, personal interests and future expectations are very different from those of students who have little or no interest in attending college or seeking full time employment. Family role models and life expectations of traditional people consist of surviving according to the practices of their ancestors and living in their home communities. Hunting, fishing, gathering berries and roots, raising horses, dancing, and

attending community events make life meaningful. Known to anthropologists and archeologists as “hunter gatherers”, researchers have documented Native tribes’ occupation of the Eastern Washington for at least 12,000 years. Given their history in the region, the peoples’ deep respect for tribal traditions is understandable (Anglin, 1995). If tradition-oriented students can earn a high school diploma without major disruption to their family commitments, they will pursue one. However, if graduation limits participation in cultural traditions, students may drop out of high school. Considering this practice, most tribal education offices offer members the opportunity to train for the General Equivalency Diploma (GED) – a certificate that is widely accepted by colleges and employers in place of a high school diploma.

### **Federal efforts to enforce assimilation**

Tribal communities of the “Inland Empire” of Eastern Washington are surrounded by agricultural and economic endeavors emanating from the Caucasian societies that were founded in the region in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many important, even drastic changes have altered tribal peoples’ life-ways. The imposed changes reflect evolving socio-economic struggles that are the result of varied federal and state policies and programs (Prucha, 1997). Initially the government agency that dealt with tribal nations was the Department of War (Deloria & Wilkins, 1999). With the drive for Western expansion and the growth of towns and cities that were guarded by federal military troops on what was once tribal open range land, relationships with tribes were transferred to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in the Department of Interior in 1849.

The intended goal of the government was to eliminate Native armed resistance to the confiscation of their lands and to dominate Native people, their resources, system of government, and religious/spiritual practices (Prucha, 1962). The BIA established schools on their own or in collaboration with various religious groups so that Native children could be “Christianized and civilized”. In this effort, children were removed from their families, often without their parents’ permission, and sent great distances to strict impersonal boarding schools which forbid the use of Native languages to be replaced by English and replaced Christian religious practice for those of Native spirituality. Native clothing was exchanged for that worn by non-Natives. Long hair was cut short regardless of the protests of the students for whom the cutting of hair was done only to mourn the death of a family member. Through these various forced changes in students’ place of residence, the ways they communicated, dressed, worshiped, recreated, and learned, it was expected their Native identifies would be replaced with adaptation to and acceptance of non-Native cultural norms. Native ways were relegated to categories of “savage”, “uncivilized”, “pagan”, “ignorant”, and “shameful”.

### **The Federal Indian policy of termination**

From the 1950s to early 1960s, tribes had no choice but to deal with the federal policy of “termination”. It proposed the sale of reservation lands on the public market that were not deeded to individual tribal owners. Proceeds of the sales would be distributed among tribal

members so they could set up farms or ranches, thereby discontinuing the reservation system and the sovereign status of the tribes. Responsibilities of the federal government to provide health or educational services as specified in treaties and executive agreements would be abrogated. Termination was not generally accepted by the tribes but tended to create serious disagreements among tribal members particularly between those on and off the reservations. Proponents of the policy failed to realize how deeply tribal people felt they were connected to the land because it was given to them forever by their Creator.

In 1924, Native Americans were granted U.S. citizenship, allowing full rights as dual citizenship to those who met their tribe's blood quantum requirement for enrollment (Prucha, 1962). Because of inter-marriage between full-blood Natives and non-Natives, the Colvilles and other tribal groups in the nation have documented the family trees of all their members. Natives who can verify they are at least one-quarter Native blood are eligible to become enrolled tribal members and are thereby entitled to services such as Indian Health medical care, educational benefits, and a share of financial profits derived from tribal enterprises such as casinos, resorts, mining, and logging.

Among the Colvilles, off-reservation enrolled members usually supported termination while enrolled members on the reservation generally opposed it (Dahl, 1994). At the core of this conflict is the fact that some tribal members have become socially and culturally assimilated into the mainstream of U.S. society rather than continuing to live close to traditional Native ways on the reservation. These factions exist to the present and still contribute to conflicts among tribal members especially since the number of off-reservation Colvilles is almost equal to the number of on-reservation members. Those members who choose to live off the reservation have the right to vote for tribal council candidates and on referendums raised by the tribes' general councils. They wield considerable political power regardless of their distance from the reservation.

The policy pendulum swung from termination to "self-determination" in the late 1960s. Reflecting the momentum of the civil rights movement, self determination advocated restricting the authority of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) as overseer of tribal governments (Huffman & Miller, 2006). While reservations were preserved, tribal members who held deeded land could sell it to anyone who offered an acceptable price. Sales of reservation land to non-Natives compromised tribal sovereignty but gave some members monetary assets they could use according to their personal choice.

By this administrative policy shift, major responsibility for the management of tribal lands, resources, and human services was turned over to relatively inexperienced, popularly-elected tribal councils and their employees (Prucha, 1997). In private conversations, some tribal leaders described "self-determination" as "termination through the back door". What they referenced were the unrealistic expectations that inexperienced tribal council members could manage multi-million dollar budgets and large business contracts as well as trained and experienced federal bureaucrats. Some tribal members regarded self-determination as a set up for economic and social ruination of tribal communities and the inevitable liquidation of their assets.

In addition to the challenges of managing economic, political, judicial, and educational services, most tribes have limited professional and curricular resources to

prepare members with the life skills that can lead to viable, self-sustaining employment in established careers and occupations. Currently, it is difficult for Native people to live according to their ancestors' traditions because of the reduction of their land base and the depletion of natural food sources. Many Natives cannot live the lifestyles of non-Natives because of limited formal education especially at the post secondary level. Furthermore, many reject integration into a foreign culture even though it is "mainstream" across the United States. However, the depth and range of cultural and economic changes experienced by Native communities in the last century have contributed to widespread poverty, high unemployment and under-employment, and poor physical and mental health conditions (Prucha, 1997). Many reservation-based Natives feel they are forced to live in two worlds yet greatly prefer to live according to their traditional Native culture if that were possible.

In summary, from the beginning of their contacts with non-Native populations that came to live in North America, Native people were at a major disadvantage with regard to their social-cultural autonomy. When tribes accepted treaties with the newly formed republic of the U.S. government, the language of the documents was always English (Prucha, 1997). This contributed to serious misunderstanding among Native people regarding their rights and status as separate yet dependent nations. Gradually, tribal sovereignty was eroded to the point that tribes relied on the federal government for basic services and life sustenance. As Native people came to realize they were citizens yet protectorates of the federal government, they experienced a sense of confusion, loss, and disenfranchisement (Deloria & Wilkins, 1999). They had to make major acculturative adjustments in their daily lives as well as their world view. No longer were they the sovereign people of the land where they once had freedom to live according to the beliefs and traditions of the ancestors. They had to learn new languages, new ways of providing for their community, and new ways to express their spiritual beliefs. Furthermore, they were subject to the authority – often extremely harsh – of the U.S. military, territorial governors, and agents of the federal government. The forced assimilation policies of the U.S. congresses were intended to put an end to the "Indian Problem" (Prucha, 1997). However, despite the need to acculturate in or to survive, Native people have held to their traditions and beliefs as best they can.

By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Native Americans made up less than 1% of the total United States population. For tribes of the far Western United States, profound acculturation happened quickly. In the forty-six years of the author's experiences among the Colville Confederated Tribes, the number of fluent Native language speakers is markedly decreased due to the deaths of those who were raised as Native speakers. Most tribal members are under 40 years old and have used English as their primary language. Seldom do they hear or encounter others who use their ancestors' languages. Current use of communication technology and frequent exposure to mass media has influenced the interests and activities of Native and non-Native high school students. Traditional cultural practices appear to be waning in the face of current interests and life choices among Colville youths. To appreciate the many adaptations Native youths and their families have



made, counselors serving tribal populations need to know about the history, social patterns, and acculturation pressures endured by students and their communities.

### **The Evolution of School Counseling: Services to Multi-Cultural Populations**

School counselors promote the educational success, social responsibility, and developmental growth of all students (Dahir & Stone, 2009). Many students and families, Native and non-Native, live in conditions that negatively affect their ability to secure their basic needs and to maintain hope for the future (Bruner, 1996). This is especially true for single-parent families where the head of the household is unemployed or has earnings at or below the national poverty level. For teen parents who are attempting to finish high school, life becomes a challenge of balancing financial, social, parenting, and educational responsibilities. Students living in large urban centers have access to alternative high schools, public services, and job opportunities that often exceed the supportive programs available in small communities (Sciarra, 2004). Given the increasing influences of the global economy on the U.S. job market that includes the outsourcing of well paying industrial and manufacturing jobs, public expectations have placed increasing responsibilities for preparing students for the work world on school personnel (Hackney & Wrenn, 1990). For example, in 1995 the Washington State legislature required all persons of school age to attend school regularly or face court-ordered detention. Schools are required to maintain detailed attendance records for all students and are held accountable to the courts.

School services continue to be shaped by the social and educational needs of the students and communities served. Administrators and teachers are among the established professionals whose roles are central to the academic and social lives of students enrolled in K-12 schools (primary and secondary education). However, the role of school counselors is often less understood and their services may vary from school to school. Introduced to high schools in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, counselors focused on the basic education, social development, and vocational training of culturally diverse students located in large Eastern cities (Parsons, 1909). For immigrant families who sought opportunities in a new country, counselors helped students learn the behavioral conventions of large cosmopolitan cities such as New York and Boston (Parsons, 1909; Myrick, 2003). Students needed survival skills that prepared them to find sustainable employment in a competitive economy. Frank Parsons of Boston, Massachusetts witnessed worker exploitation and realized that unless immigrant youths received guidance and an education, they would be powerless and exploited. Starving men, women, and children worked hard for pennies a day.

Parsons convinced the Boston Board of Education to provide vocational guidance in the schools so that students could simultaneously receive basic education and job readiness skills. He developed interview techniques that allowed him to detect the fields of work that might suit his students' abilities and interests. Parsons documented his approach to counseling in his book "Choosing a Vocation" (1909) that was used at the nation's first counselor-training program at Harvard University. As counseling services – often referred

to as counseling and guidance – became widespread they were offered as a regular part of school services. In contemporary schools, counselors help students develop plans for academic success that will prepare them for vocations or careers. However, many other services such as substance abuse treatment, health awareness, and anger management training, have been added to the counselor role and usually vary according to the student population served (Gysbers & Henderson, 2005).

In Native American communities, student needs are somewhat similar to those of Parsons' clients. Helping Native students bridge the cultural variances between their way of life and that of mainstream U.S. is still an important support service of counselors. Some Native students are eager to leave what they view as the severe limitations of reservation life. They want to become personally and economically independent and make their way in diverse communities. There are also students who never want to leave their reservation and the bonds they have with the tribe and the land. For them, pow-wows, memorials, and long house traditions hold deep significance and give life meaning. To better understand the world view of students, counselors need to know the members of the students' families and their degree of adherence to traditional or more contemporary ways of life. Developing school-community relationships based on mutual trust and respect takes time. Counselors, who are not from the reservation community, need to patiently and consistently take steps to become engaged with the Native community. Participation in events such as memorials, potluck dinners at community centers, athletic games, rodeos, etc. allows for informal interactions among the people on their terms rather than the school's. This reflects the counselor's flexibility and openness to becoming part of the community.

As is true for most helping professionals, school counselors work with a team of professionals that often includes teachers, social workers, substance abuse treatment specialists, and school administrators. In Native communities, team members are often a mix of tribal human service employees and non-Native school employees. Parents and guardians are also essential contributors to identifying the counseling services that are beneficial to students. Everyone has a perspective on the needs of students with parents, usually mothers or grandmothers, most invested in the happiness and well-being of their sons and daughters.

Counselors need a wide repertoire of techniques and skills to meet the needs of culturally-diverse students, parents, school staff, and community members. In general, effective communication, particularly listening and client advocacy skills, are essential. Again, knowing and respectfully relating to students' family members allows a counselor to realize how they are socially connected within their extended families and the wider community. Native parents often feel intimidated when meeting with school personnel who usually have more formal education and professional experience than they. It is crucial that counselors clarify the purpose of any discussion in positive terms that focus on helping students succeed at school and beyond. When parents feel a positive connection to at least one of the professionals, they can set aside some of their anxiety and take an active part in the discussion. Insofar as reservation-based Native Americans experience cultural norms that are very different from those of mainstream United States citizens,

school counselors must be prepared to understand the Native people's situations and perspectives.

In and around Eastern Washington's reservations, Native peoples' direct experience with cultures other than their own is relatively infrequent. Two of the largest tribes of the state (Colvilles and Yakimas) have over two million acres each as their homeland. In these vast areas, many Native families live in the hills and along rivers and streams that are even far removed from tribal villages and communities. Travel to off-reservation cities like Spokane or Yakima are infrequent except for medical services or shopping. For many Native people born and raised on reservations, the financial costs, and complexity of urban living is highly stressful. Being an anonymous individual is deeply distressing for most Natives of all ages. Even when a school is on the reservation, Native people often feel it represents the loss of the autonomy and freedom the people knew before non-Natives arrived in their territory. The fear of being embarrassed by their appearance, manner of speech, or lack of familiarity with educational programs or jargon is often enough to keep some parents away from school conferences even when greatly concerned about their children's education.

For most reservation-based Native Americans, long-term planning is not done. Few aspects of their lives are predictable. Living in the moment and being spontaneous is far more practical than a carefully planned lifestyle. Often Native people joke about "being on Indian time". Daily priorities rather than the clock usually determine what has to be done to meet personal and family needs. For example, a parent may not attend a conference at school because a family member is sick and needs care. In other situations, parents may have the time to come to school but they lack fuel for their vehicles. For some, traveling 40 or 50 miles round trip to a meeting can be financially prohibitive. In such cases, counselors may set up conference calls that allow all parties to be engaged in constructive discussions. The practice of setting priorities according to conditions and needs of students and families can prevent conflicts. Flexibility on the part of school personnel conveys the need for parental participation in all aspects of their students' education. It is very important for counselors to avoid expressing impatience verbally or non-verbally, when making compromises that respect parents' particular social-cultural circumstances. Clearly expressed warmth and good humor are usually appreciated and can enhance cooperative interpersonal relationships between home and school. If Native parents are not supportive of teachers and staff members, the chance of students considering school as important is very low.

In Northwest Native communities, such seasonal activities as gathering and preserving traditional foods are still part of contemporary reservation life for many families. When memorial gatherings are held to honor the lives of deceased members, it is traditional to serve all who attend a special meal that includes Native foods like camas, bitter roots, wild choke cherries, deer meat, and fish. Harvesting and preserving traditional foods requires particular timing, tools, and is skill-intensive. Parents and grandparents often need assistance from high school students to complete this work. Families, especially those who have minimal economic resources, also rely on Native foods for part of their daily sustenance. Parents and guardians may sign their students out of school for

hunting and fishing trips. Such requests can be troublesome particularly when students are behind in their work or are failing classes. Counselors need to use effective negotiation skills to mediate between teachers, students, and parents. The situations are made easier for all concerned when there is an on-going and positive existing relationship between the family members and the school personnel.

While participation in family activities is meaningful to the cultural identities of students, it also increases the pressure to demonstrate academic competence as Native Americans living in two distinct cultures. Counselors need to communicate understanding and respect for the traditions of the students and their families. At the same time, they need to reinforce academic progress and the mutual goal of high school graduation. When students do not graduate with their classmates, it is very disappointing for families and educators. Some families may place responsibility for the lack of achievement solely on the school particularly if they feel and think that school personnel have behaved with indifference or negativity toward their students. Asking a parent what he/she thinks would help their student succeed at school is a much more effective way to develop a dialogue than telling a parent what the student needs to do to succeed.

### **Individual Counseling**

When Native students feel emotionally safe and connected with their counselor, often due to shared interests and experiences outside of school, self-referral is common. The nature of the students' perceived problems may vary greatly including: anxiety about interpersonal relationships; fear of unwanted pregnancies and contracting sexually-transmitted diseases; objections to teacher behaviors in the classroom particularly verbal exchanges with students; problems with use and abuse of substances; disagreements with peers related to jealousy about dating choices; conflicts with parents about students' rights and choices; fear of illness and death among family members; coping with tragic, sudden deaths of friends or family; and feelings of depression about lack of promise for happiness in life. There are also the less complicated issues such as: finding a missing cell phone or I-pod; completing a big class project on time; changing a class schedule because the subject is "stupid" or "too hard"; requesting letters of recommendation and copies of transcripts for college and scholarship applications.

Giving students time to examine their issues and formulate a set of problem-solving strategies is helpful and usually appreciated. One of the happiest rewards a counselor can experience is to have students remark on how relieved and thankful they are after a counseling session. Helping students recognize their negative self talk and learning to substitute positive self-talk messages is very useful. Carefully mapping out step by step solutions to problems can help students gain needed analytical skills. Thinking through situations and developing action plans can be empowering. The pattern Native students often see among adults is denial or ignoring problems until they are severe. Under these circumstances, complications escalate and stressful feelings become burdensome if not overwhelming. Many students unquestioningly follow the patterns of adult models in their family and community when attempting to resolve emotional problems. Strategies that are

often modeled include interpersonal violence, suicide, or using drugs and alcohol in an attempt to escape. Counselors can help students develop habits of positive self talk, interpersonal communication skills, and problem-solving techniques. This replaces the models they often experience in their communities that they recognize as ineffective.

There are frequent instances of students coming to school feeling sick or very tired to the point of exhaustion. As young adults, they are often left to manage their own daily life with little or no parental supervision. Students frequently need counseling to help them calm down because of emotional distress related to situations that happen outside of school including direct conflicts with family members or witnessing conflicts of others at home. It is always important to listen for the feelings that students may not yet recognize themselves. Various types and ranges of emotion are often identified as “anger”. Feeling sad, confused, or disappointed may be a more accurate description. Students’ personal and family circumstances are subject to sudden and drastic changes. The overall unpredictability of life circumstances is unsettling and distracts students from their schoolwork.

When parental partnerships become frayed or dissolve into ongoing conflicts, students usually feel vulnerable. They take responsibility for the care and protection of themselves and younger siblings. When adults get into physical fights, older children may intervene to protect their parent or guardian, usually their mother, aunt, older sister, or grandmother. In some households violence is frequent and exacerbated by substance abuse. Often students attempt to mask their difficulties by assuming an attitude and appearance of quiet aloofness as though impervious to chaos all around them. It is important for a counselor to respect students’ silence about domestic troubles. However, when those students ask for help, a counselor must respond immediately and make time for them.

For students who do not want to come to a counselor’s office to avoid standing out, counselors can have brief yet meaningful contacts in lunchrooms, hallways, or libraries before and after classes, during breaks and lunch hour, and at athletic and recreational events. Informality and responding to the opportunity of the moment are common characteristics of Native interactions. Some students prefer to share their concerns with peers rather than adults. It is beneficial for counselors to train and support a group of peer helpers who have the counselor’s support when the needs of students are complicated. While helpful peers do not replace the services of the counselor, they can provide a bridge between the counselor and students.

### **Group Counseling**

Counseling groups are effective settings for guiding students through interpersonal conflicts that involve three or more students. In schools with enrollments of more than 50% Native Americans who live in nearby reservation communities, relationships among students are those of extended family members. Almost everyone is a cousin or closer relative. Traditionally, family members support each other whenever there are problems to solve especially when dealing with individuals or organizations outside the Native

American community. Among high school students, issues often arise over boyfriend/girlfriend loyalties. When two students are dating, a third person who seems overly friendly toward a known partner can lead to serious animosity. Physical fights among girls usually happen because someone is flirting with another girl's boyfriend or makes derogatory comments about a female rival either to her face or behind her back. When there is a fight between two individuals, the effects reverberate throughout the respective families and can be highly disruptive at school.

A high level of counselor vigilance and observation of student interactions is required to facilitate timely interventions. Frequent and honest communications between counselors and all other members of the school staff allow for shared awareness of the needs and challenging situations of students. Counselors must also be in regular contact with parents/guardians in order to remain informed about the positive and negative events among students' families and peers.

Emotional vacillations contribute to what many refer to as high school "drama". Psycho-educational groups focused on communication skills and emotional awareness of self and others help students gain some level of objectivity about personal responses to events in their lives. Native students who have experienced and observed interpersonal violence from early childhood have little tolerance for behaviors they interpret as physically or emotionally threatening. Name-calling, gossiping, and verbal taunts produce tensions that aggressive and defensive students interpret as reason for a fight. A prolonged look in the direction of another, a "snapping of the eyes", or rolling of the eyes can taunt another and result in a fight. Some students resort to a passive stance and deny their rights and feelings. Those who take an aggressive stance among their peers may feel empowered when arousing fear or compliance in others. While females can be as aggressive as males, they are more likely to use verbal rather than physical violence. To be effective, counselors have to realize that students from Native communities bring many challenging issues into their school experiences. Excessive absenteeism is one way many students avoid conflicts when they feel overwhelmed by interpersonal tension and stress whether they originate at home or school.

Traditionally, local tribes have used talk circles to resolve interpersonal conflicts (Anglin, 1995). A common goal of the talk circle is to enrich students' feeling of belonging to their community. Group leadership is provided by a community member, usually an elder, who has credibility and respect among the people. When a counselor is a group leader, he/she is responsible for maintaining balance among participants and openness in the circle. Every group member has the opportunity to address problems and possible solutions that will help the members. An eagle feather or a carved talking-stick is held by each person when speaking. This is a reminder that everyone in the group is heard and respected.

The benefits of talk circles are as follows. 1) Students realize they can listen to others attentively even when disagreeing with them. 2) When each person participates in the circle, fear and tension about being excluded is reduced. 3) Misunderstandings based on rumors or gossip can be dismissed through direct communication. 4) By using a traditional practice in the school, Native ways are given a place of respect among the

students and staff. 5) Communication skills practiced in the group apply to other life contexts.

In summary, group counseling can incorporate many aspects of tribal community life. Most Native students can benefit from both individual and group counseling depending on the needs and circumstances of the situation. Students know who their extended family group members are but often find difficulty feeling comfortable in a school setting where there are several groups that may be unknown and therefore somewhat suspect. By including students in group sessions that over time address a wide range of needs and interests, many students can strengthen skills that transfer to other aspects of group experiences in their personal lives. Being effective listeners, reserving or by-passing judgments of others and finding common viewpoints among peers are some of the benefits of groups. Following is a case example of a Native high school student that will demonstrate how important both group and individual counseling services are for Native Americans.

### **The Case of Mikayla**

The living conditions of reservation-based Native Americans are more difficult than most counselors may recognize. It is not unusual for two or three families to occupy a small two-bedroom home. In winter, heat comes from a wood stove. Water may be supplied by a creek or well, negating indoor plumbing. Unemployment may run as high as 40% or more especially when the wider economy is slow. Food banks and food stamps are commonly used for basic nutrition. The case of Mikayla (not her real name) can provide insight into how counselors can serve Native students in seriously distressful personal and family circumstances.

As a reservation-born and -raised 13-year-old with stunning natural beauty, Mikayla presented herself like young women seen in fashion publications. Her tall athletic physique suggested there were few sports she could not master. She moved with the grace of a dancer when playing basketball and volleyball. Mikayla loved the challenges as well as the adulation of being an excellent athlete. Sports afforded her a confident public role that was not available in her personal or academic life. Coaches and teachers encouraged her to build on her athleticism in preparation for college scholarships. However, college was not relevant for Mikayla since few of her family members finished high school.

Nothing seemed to happen according to a timely plan for Mikayla, whether it was starting the school year or getting medical attention someplace other than a hospital emergency room. There were many factors that contributed to the chaos that permeated her life. When she was six years old, her mother died in a car accident on a remote reservation road. Mikayla's mom and a few friends had been fishing on a river near their village. Everyone in the group had been drinking all day and decided to return home when the night grew cold. That drive ended in death – an all-too-common experience on reservations around the nation. No one at home was alarmed when Mikayla's mom did not return that night. She often stayed away for several days and depended on neighbors or extended family to care for her children. If she returned home, it usually resulted in loud

arguments or fights that sent her children running to a neighbor's home for the rest of the night and possibly several days depending on the parents' issues. As a little child, Mikayla overheard the gossip about her mother's drinking and neglect of her children. She trained herself to disregard the comments and acted as though she was indifferent to the stories that circulated in the community. Community gossip was a favorite pass time that Mikayla recognized as such.

Although they were saddened by their mother's death, Mikayla and her siblings were not shocked when it happened. They had been with her when she was highly intoxicated and drove at high speeds along narrow winding roads. In small communities populated by extended families, every serious injury or death affected every family. After the community wake and burial for Mikayla's mom, life for the family became much quieter than it had ever been. The sudden change felt awkward and uncomfortable for Mikayla and her siblings.

Mikayla's dad stayed at home until he grew impatient with his children and family members who came for extended visits. When he left home, usually saying he needed to look for work, no one knew when he might return. Despite his marriage to a tribal member, Mikayla's dad was considered an outsider. Many in his deceased wife's extended family regarded him as the probable cause for her drinking habits. He never held a steady job or provided adequate financial or emotional support for the family. As a non-tribal member he was not allowed a share in the tribal dividends that were distributed to all enrolled members of all ages. When hired for part-time jobs, the only work available to him, he put his oldest child in charge of the younger siblings. Community members expressed their disapproval of the man by ignoring his presence when he stopped at the store or post office. His social marginality became more pronounced after his wife's death.

Regardless of conditions at home, Mikayla spent much of her time visiting with friends and neighbors. She felt no need to let anyone at home know where she was going or how long she might be away. She often had meals with her friends or brought them home with her to snack on whatever could be found in the kitchen. If her dad was home, Mikayla asked for money to buy snack foods at the town store for herself and her friends. If coaxing did not work, Mikayla and her friends washed dishes, swept the floor, or did other chores. She knew if she worked her dad would feel guilty for refusing her request. She was an effective manipulator and recognized this as a skill that served her well. Mikayla also knew that her dad kept funds hidden at home so he could buy illegal drugs when he needed or wanted them.

As an astute observer, Mikayla watched for the behavioral warning signs that her dad was about to lose control of his temper. That is when she quickly escaped to a friend's home or hid in her room, preferably under the bed, so she would not be found. She remembered, but infrequently talked about, the fear she experienced as a child when he went into a rage. However, when anxiety-provoking situations arose in her teen years, she recalled experiences from her past. She needed to talk through those situations. Sharing the experiences with her counselor helped her realize what she felt and the behaviors that could help her cope and regain her balance.



Mikayla took part in local rodeos at a young age and continued into her teen years. She loved competing, winning top prizes, and receiving public applause. The sense of being powerful and getting what she wanted also applied to her family relationships. If she wanted money from her dad or a ride to a cousins' house in another village, she looked for the opportune time to make her request. If she sensed that her dad was edgy or upset about something as common as not having money for gasoline, Mikayla knew it was important to give him his space and go walk around the village and visit neighbors.

When she met with her counselor and discussed her interpersonal relationships and the effects they had on her emotional life, the persons most important to Mikayla were her dad, her older female siblings, and her boyfriends. Her counselor had known her mother when she was a child in elementary school. This historical connection allowed Mikayla to speak openly and honestly. She used words like "paranoid", "schizo", "raging", "random" to describe her dad's behavior. Her older sisters were "selfish", "bossy", "loud", and "hot tempered". Boyfriends were "good friends", "fun", "kind" and "respectful." Former boyfriends were "cheaters", "possessive", or "too clingy". Mikayla was highly verbal and wanted weekly counseling sessions. She expressed herself clearly but often felt overwhelmed by her situation. Stability in her personal relationships was lacking yet was something Mikayla wanted. She was often very tense and teachers said she was easily distracted. The tension contributed to complaints of headaches and flu-like symptoms. The school administered over-the-counter medications and had a bed in the nurse's room where she rested.

From an academic perspective, a review of Mikayla's cumulative school records indicated a history of poor attendance with various health problems or family emergencies as common excuses for absenteeism. Sometimes she came to school to escape home even when she was sick. The troubled expression on her face was a signal to the counselor that Mikayla did not feel physically or emotionally able to attend classes. She often complained of lack of sleep due to disruptions at home. When allowed to rest at school, she often slept for several hours.

As Mikayla's siblings grew older, they chose to leave their home community for wider educational, social, and employment opportunities in large cities. Although Mikayla missed her sisters, she had her grandparents, aunts, uncles, and many cousins who lived nearby. When her dad was away for several days, Mikayla found a home with neighbors or relatives. She had a key to her house and could get clothing or things she wanted like games and CDs. As a pre-teen and early teenager, Mikayla had the personal responsibility and independence of an adult. Her way of life made it difficult to accept the directions of teachers. Because her dad let her have her own way, she did not think other adults could tell her what to do.

When she was not promoted from grade eight to high school because of her frequent absences and low achievement rates, Mikayla and her dad looked for a regional high school that would admit her. Given the few high schools in the area, Mikayla realized she needed to present a strong rationale to support her admission. She cleared that hurdle and entered grade nine two weeks late. Her class schedule was developed with respect to her previous record. An immediate obstacle arose with the early morning bus ride to

school. Mikayla's bus picked her up at 7:30a.m. Within one month, Mikayla and her dad were summoned to court for school attendance violations. Based on her dad's highly emotional and evasive responses to the judge's questions at the hearing, the judge asked tribal social services to investigate Mikayla's home situation.

Outside of court when Mikayla's maternal aunt accused Mikayla's dad of being an unfit parent, he physically attacked her. When the police intervened and the aunt pressed charges for assault, Mikayla became a ward of her tribe. After an investigation into their family life, it was determined that she was physically, emotionally, and sexually abused by her dad. After a difficult trial, he was imprisoned and Mikayla was placed in the home of a maternal aunt.

Once again, her life was in chaos. Although her dad was a convicted felon, she regarded him as her only parent. She was able to forgive his behavior due to her realization that he was mentally ill and felt her statements in court put her dad in jail. When her older sister offered Mikayla the chance to move in with her, she decided that putting a distance between herself and her community would be a new start. She also considered running away and staying with friends. However, she realized she would be found and her friends would get into trouble.

Mikayla kept her resolve to avoid showing her feelings. On the day she left her village to drive to the airport and fly away, she sat in her aunt's car with her eyes closed and a hood pulled over her head. She did not say good-bye to her friends or pack her belongings. She just left.

### **Learning from Mikayla**

Life for Mikayla was a daily challenge that she learned to "normalize". Her frame of reference was her village, small, remote, poor, and distant from mainstream U.S. communities. The outside world was an imaginary place that she witnessed only through the media. What was real life was reservation community life. Although she sought out personal support and caring treatment from adults in her life, she was used to being on her own and rebelled if teachers attempted to be directive.

### **Summary**

Counselors who work with reservation-based Native American high school students face unique challenges that are rooted in the complex socio-cultural and economic factors of the peoples' historical and present interactions with non-Natives populations and governmental agencies. In many ways, schools represent the power system that took over Native lands and become adversaries of tribal people. This presents a paradox given that school success offers tribal members a means to rise above the constraints of poverty and develop the leadership and professional skills that contribute to Native peoples' strengths and independence. Counselors need to be well-informed about Native history, nationally and locally. It is also important to know the cultural norms of their students especially regarding extended family relationships and traditions. With strong spiritual connections to

the natural world, the belief systems of traditionally-oriented people are rooted in living close to nature, a way of life that often presents conflicts with the lifestyles of mainstream citizens and government agencies.

Given the cultural factions among the tribes, counselors need to be sensitive to the belief and lifestyle variances among Native people. Some Native students aspire to complete college while others attend school primarily to be with friends or play sports. The prevalence of drug/alcohol abuse among adolescents and adults casts a wide and disabling pall over most Native communities. Some students and families follow a lifestyle similar to their ancestors with regard to living close to the land and resources of nature. Others want to leave the reservation and live in large cities that have become somewhat recognizable through the media, and where goods and services are available in the public marketplace. For a counselor to be effective, it is important to develop connections with the families through participation in community interactions and celebrations. When Native parents call a counselor and share their concerns about their students, a level of confidence is expressed. Building on this confidence with timely and helpful follow through is critical to forming school and community partnerships that can begin to resolve many of the life threatening problems that have existed in the past and continue into the present generation.

Evaluation of counselor effectiveness with Native Americans can be accomplished through conventional measures such as Native student retention rates, graduation rates, improved grade point averages, and improved attendance rates. These are indicators that are important for funding sources as well as the educational efficacy of the school from the perspective of tribal councils and other regional, state, and national agencies concerned with educational services for Native American. School counselors have a unique role that encourages the development of culturally-sensitive and effective bridges between Native families and schools. While some elements of services are objectively measureable, they are intermingled with many other aspects of student and community life that complicate specific statistical analyses. Practically, the number of students who self-refer and willingly participate in groups indicates student acceptance and recognition that counseling support is important to students. Similarly, frequency of parent and community initiated contacts with the counselor reflect an awareness that counseling services are recognized and valued.

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### **Author's Brief Biography**

Susanna Hayes was born and raised in Michigan and attended St. Mary's College of Notre Dame, Loyola University Center of Humanistic Studies in Rome, Loyola University, Chicago, University of Arizona, and University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She arrived on the Colville Reservation in Washington State in 1964 after graduating from Loyola. She served as a volunteer teacher and counselor until 1968. She left the reservation for advanced studies at Arizona and then Ann Arbor. Upon completion of a doctoral program in counseling psychology at Michigan, she returned to work on the reservation. In 1977 at the invitation of Western Washington University, she established the Center for Indian Education and provided education and training to para- and professional educators who served Native American students on or near reservations in Washington State. In 1990 she began teaching in Western's graduate programs in mental health and school counseling. After retirement from WWU in 2006, she taught for Loyola in Rome for a semester and then returned to the Colville Reservation where she currently lives and works.