Theorizing Community and School Partnerships with Diné Youth

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Introduction

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH shows that partnerships among families, schools and communities are crucial in helping students succeed in school (Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Sanders, 2002; Hidalgo, Siu & Epstein, 2004; Klug & Whitfield, 2003; McCarty & Bia, 2002; Sailor, 2004; Ward, 2005). Schools need well-organized goal-oriented and sustainable partnership programs that systematically strengthen and maintain family and community involvement (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). The community influences on our children function through processes of socialization, social control, social participation and mutual support (Sailor, 2004). Overall, the community is a "designated space where people live and share some sense of belonging" (Sailor, 2004, p. 395). In the school community, children also need to feel that they have socially defined roles, relations and structure within their school experiences (Ward, 2005).

There is still much research needed in order to know the strengths of various racial, ethnic and cultural characteristics of families and communities (Epstein & Sanders, 2002). More attention needs to be given to "family and community rituals, values, cultural norms, aspirations for children, racial identity development, and formal and informal networks of support" (Epstein & Sanders, 2002, p. 529) among diverse cultural communities that students come from. Even the meaning of schooling and educational attainment should be identified in terms of relevant social and cultural processes for Native American[1] populations (Ward, 2005).

There are at least three issues that add to the complexity in creating school and community partnerships in Native American communities. First is the issue of "the" community. A critique within multicultural education is that multicultural education's application of community has relied on narrow notions of community (Nieto, Bode, Kang & Raible, 2008). These notions assume that the surrounding community is functional and has the resources to support students that may not have the supports at home. The second issue that adds to the complexity of community and school partnerships is the narrow notions of community that are applied to the partnerships; these notions are insufficient within ethnic minority communities

because previous research is based on Western research interpretations. Within Native American communities, school orientations differ substantially from negative to positive dispositions toward school based on the history (Ward, 2005). Third, the consideration that schools are still organized along white, middle-class cultural expectations (Klug & Whitfield, 2003) is important if schools and communities are to identify common goals for the students.

    In this paper, I describe how four Diné[2] youth participants defined community and theorized about the types of community and school partnerships that could effectively support the youth. By researching through an indigenous methodology and theorizing through a Diné framework I am able to discuss the participants' needs holistically through an inherent system of relationships that make up the Diné philosophy of community. The recognition of philosophies, beliefs and ways of knowing of the people is vital to our self-education and self-determination (Brayboy, 2005). To contribute to the goals of self-determination and self-education for the Navajo Nation, I retheorize community and school partnerships rooted in the Diné philosophy of community identified as *k'é.* By doing this I also contribute to the theorization of curriculum for Diné schools that should address character development based upon the Diné Ké concept. Development of this concept has been identified as a part of the curriculum according to the amendments made to Title 10 (Education) in the Navajo Nation Code under the Navajo Sovereignty in Education Act of 2005 (20th Navajo Nation Council, 2005).

Western Schooling and Diné Philosophy

    When discussing the Diné youths' responses and understanding their theories, we need an understanding of the context in which the youth are situated. First, I briefly describe the history of Western schooling for Native Americans to situate the youths' perspectives and experiences in a history of colonization and assimilation. Second, I describe the Diné philosophy of community, *k'é,* which becomes the framework from which I discuss the youths' responses and theories.

Western Schooling for Native Americans
    Many historical events lead up to the disruption of the communal way of living for Native Americans. Indigenous people throughout history have always been characterized as "problems" that necessitated solutions (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). Western schooling as the solution to the Indian problem aimed to assimilate, civilize, Christianize, Americanize, detribalize and deculturalize Native American peoples (Adams, 1995; Huff, 1997; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Reyhner & Eder, 2004; Spring, 2001). Schools created for Native Americas, often referred to as Indian schools, became "natural laboratories for research" (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997, p. 115) that resulted in many theories on how best to assimilate the Native Americans into the European culture. Richard Henry Pratt believed that the failure of previous attempts to civilize Native Americans was the lack of attack on the tribal way of life, which he claimed was "socialistic and contrary to the values of 'civilization'" (Spring, 2001, p. 28). It was believed that once the Native Americans were detribalized, they would fully assimilate into mainstream capitalistic America (Reyhner & Eder, 2004; Spring 2001). Western schools promoted individualism. Underlying this idea was Pratt's belief that the Native American should become individualized with individual wants: "He will say 'I' instead of 'We,' and 'This is mine,' instead of 'This is ours'" (Oberly, as cited in Adams, 1995, p. 23). Ultimately, the goal of Western schooling for Native Americans was to eradicate the culture of the Native American

people. The heart of the culture that was targeted, and that still affects the Diné today, was comprised of our values of a communal way of living and the ability to communicate those values through our native language.

Diné Philosophy of Community

I describe a traditional Diné philosophy of community, *k'é,* within which our ontological and epistemological understandings are rooted. This understanding is necessary because existing research frameworks are insufficient in analyzing the Diné youths' experiences due to their Western roots and perspective of knowledge as objective. We seek authentic frameworks from which we can explain our experiences, instead of fitting into another category created elsewhere. It is difficult to describe the participants' ideas, frustrations and solutions without understanding these perspectives.

The concept of *k'é* speaks directly to the way relationships of respect and interdependence should exist between people. The teaching of *k'é* was the specific reason that the Holy People of the Diné created the Kinaaldá puberty ceremony for females to ensure our existence, survival and reproduction. The importance of the ceremony is to teach females about how to be "good" mothers and women. "Good" mothers taught their children how to build and value relationships. They modeled for their children how to treat other people and nature through a worldview of *k'é*.

K'é. With an understanding of *k'é* as a framework, I will be able to discuss and describe the participants' responses through a way of knowing from a Diné perspective. *K'é* has been defined as kinship, clanship, peace, love, kindness, cooperation, thoughtfulness, friendliness and respectful relations with nature and others (Lamphere, 1977; McCarty & Bia, 2002; McCloskey, 2007). The principles for adhering to Diné values according to a Diné grandmother quoted by Karen Benally and Ann Hedlund (as cited in McCloskey, 2007) is found in *good thinking*: "Good thinking means teaching our children that we must know one another in the family. We must maintain harmonious relations. We must share with one another. We must be able to depend on one another" (p. 51). Joanne McCloskey (2007) claims that the previous statement made by the Diné grandmother embraces the enduring principle of *k'é* in which the relationships between family and others stem from feelings of love and loyalty.

K'é as a framework is made up of four qualities. It is important to note that *k'é* is not simply one thing but means all the positive virtues previously described based on the context in which it is used. I describe *k'é* by these qualities to make its understanding practical for the reader who does not have a previous understanding of *k'é*. The first quality that the community should embody as guided by *k'é* is the basic knowledge of each other in the family. Recognizing kinship through clans demonstrates knowledge of who you are, how you should relate to people, and how other people relate to you. Also, in nature, we recognize relationships with certain natural elements. The second quality is that of maintaining harmonious relationships by expressing love, compassion, friendliness, kindness, and peacefulness as one would to family members. The third quality is sharing with one another and being generous, unselfish and thoughtful of others. The fourth quality is being able to depend on one another and being dependable oneself. With these qualities in mind, along with the responses from the participants, I was able to understand how *k'é* meant community. In other words, what I have attempted to explain about the elusive concept of *k'é* is exactly what the participants defined as community.

Modes of Inquiry

Indigenous social constructionist methodology

Based on the colonizing history of research with indigenous peoples and considering an indigenous worldview, I synthesized what I termed an "indigenous social constructionist" methodology. First, I critiqued an old order of Western research for two reasons: 1) Research is a colonizing act; 2) Epistemological and ontological perspective have been insufficient when describing the Diné youth's experiences. From this critique, I identified my role in this research as a facilitator and collaborator to avoid the perpetuation of colonizing research. I valued subjectivities of the participants and questioned the authority I had throughout the research process, especially in the way I represented the participants and community. The collaboration called for by indigenous researchers, moves research away from one person being an "expert" or authority. I worked toward valuing indigenous voices and ideas (Lassiter, 2000; Rigney, 1999; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2001). This research aimed at social reconstructionism is to contribute to the ongoing efforts of self-determination and self-education for the Diné first, and the academy second.

The aim of social constructionism is to understand and reconstruct what has already been established with an understanding of the existence of multiple realities (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Social constructionism acknowledges that a common socio-cultural context affects how the individual constructs his/her own knowledge about his/her world (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Reagan, 2005), which is an important concept when working to understand the world of the Diné youth. In alignment with an indigenous approach to research, constructionism seeks to place more control in the hands of the participants (Burr, 2003), which is potentially empowering as it seeks to use participant-led ways of understanding their world. Working collaboratively with the participants is important in describing the perspectives of the youth through their own ideas and words.

Study Design

Guiding Questions

Through discussions of community with the participants, we questioned what community meant along with potential ideas of how partnerships with the schools can be created. This grassroots approach to school and community partnerships unearthed many issues that make it more complex than one might expect. These guiding questions began a conversation that allowed the participants to dig deeper into what they considered their everyday knowledge of community and their position within it. The questions were: If community is "a designated space where people live and share some sense of belonging" (Sailor, 2004, p. 395), then how do Diné youth define community? What are the norms, values, rules, resources and supports that make up their community(ies)? What are the strengths of the identified communities? How can we use them to create partnerships with schools?

Participants and Site

This study is based in a rural town on the Navajo Reservation in Northeast Arizona that I call Sleepy Rock. Sleepy Rock contains one school district, which is comprised of 98% Diné students (Arizona Department of Education, 2008). With the assistance of the staff members at

the Navajo Nation Office of Youth Development[3], I identified and recruited four male participants ages 16 and 17 years old at the time of the study.

Data Collection

Photograph production phase. Prior to our individual interview sessions, I gave each participant a disposable camera and instructed them to take pictures of what they considered to be community. I had the film developed and sent the photographs back to the participants. I then instructed them to select ten photos to share during our first interview session. The photographs were only used as prompts for the interview and not included in the data.

Semi-structured individual interviews. In the semi-structured individual interviews, I used open-ended questions that aligned with my first guiding question. I interviewed each male participant for approximately thirty minutes. I used an interview guide that allowed room for the participants to reflect specifically on the photographs and drawings that they created.

Interactive group interview. The second round of interviews was collaborative and I engaged *talking circles* (Graveline, 2000; Wilson, 2001). For the second interview I asked the same questions that I asked in the individual interviews, but this time I used *talking circles* as the dialectic and interpretive processes with the Diné youth in order to access a holistic understanding of their ideas. There was an emphasis of mutual respect towards the perspectives of all the participants in the talking circle that enabled us to share freely our ideas. It was also a place that promoted self-reflection and reconciliations.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In the analysis and interpretation phase, I again engaged the talking circle with the participants in a collaborative effort to analyze and interpret our discussions on community and partnerships. We began an inductive analysis that involved finding patterns, themes, and categories in our data. Brayboy and Deyhle (2000) claim that analyzing and interpreting data with participants allows the researcher to illustrate the range and variation in how events are interpreted for a more holistic picture. Also, they claim that the participants could give feedback and thoughts on what actions to take.

Diné Youth Theorize, I Discuss

Diné Youth and Community

The participants identified three concepts that fed their final definition of community. Their definition ultimately became a statement of what community *should be* rather than what it currently was, in order to support the needs of the youth. The three concepts they identified described a place where they can feel comfortable and were able to depend on others despite their styles of clothing and personal interests. The three concepts were individuality, dependence, and comfort. The participants referred to the judgment placed on people from sub-groups within their community as a weakness and obstacle to a more supportive community. I discuss the participants' responses through the framework of *k'é* as I describe a holistic understanding of the Diné youth's community. The participants identified what community should be. They identified the essence of *k'é.*

First, according to *k'é*, the individual perspectives and personal styles should not be a defining issue for the way people relate to one another. The relationships that people shared and

maintained were the underlying factors in the way people related. In fact, an early ethnography about the Diné stated that "individuality was not only permitted, but encouraged" and that a Diné motto was "Unity in diversity" (Kluckhohn & Leighton, 1974, p. 311). The Diné saw individuality as something positive that promoted creativity. Today, personal styles and ideas can bring negative judgment to the individuals when familial relationships are lacking.

Second, *k'é* emphasizes dependence on others. As a traditionally communal people, our survival has depended on cooperation, and it is specifically acknowledged during the Kinaałdá ceremony because, like many other ceremonies, it would not be possible without the cooperation of family and friends. Cooperative relationships go deep into our belief system and are at the very root of maintaining harmonious relationships as described by *k'é*. Acknowledging the existence of *k'é* consciously acknowledges our dependence on others. Since the participants could not pinpoint what it was that glued us together, I interpreted the glue as our communal roots as Diné which are still passed down to younger generations.

Third, *k'é* emphasizes the feeling of comfort and connection one might feel from relatives, specifically one's mother. Knowing relations is one of the most basic teachings of the Diné. We are taught to know our clans and introduce ourselves by them whenever we meet other Diné. When one shares a clan with another, the clan members should consider other clan members family and treat them as such.

Functional Community

James Coleman (as cited in Ward, 2005) states that a functional community should make up for the lack of resources for those students who do not have family support. Based on the participants' responses, however, a functional community to support their needs might not exist in the way the youth explained it. One participant stated that the community needs to learn how to be "positive and functional." The dysfunction that is currently present within many Native American communities specifically comes from the history of Western schooling for Native American peoples (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Duran & Duran, 1995). The lack of communication and understanding between the older generation and the younger generation results not only from the language barrier created by Western schooling's efforts to eradicate the native languages but also from the overall goals and methods of Western schooling.

The participants did not specifically link the negativity within their community as resultant of Western schooling tactics to the weaknesses in their community. Because *k'é* was ingrained in the worldview of the Diné, its breakdown is difficult to pinpoint, and the participants had trouble articulating why their community was not functioning positively. The participants did state, however, that they needed to learn the history of the Diné in order to understand their parents and elders better. I identified through my review of history two assimilationist goals that have contributed to the breakdown of *k'é* and that are rooted in the history of Western schooling for the Diné along with other Native Americans. These two goals were to attack the communal ways of living and eradicate the language.

Communal ways of living. A general characteristic of Native American cultures is our view of relationships. Specifically as Diné, our communal way of living was based on the value of *k'é*. The notion that Native Americans should be more rooted in individualism was one of the key factors that led to the creation of boarding schools (Brayboy, 2005). Communal living was targeted by the assimilationist goals. An assimilationist strategy that still affects the Diné youth today was the emphasis on individualism as a European value rather than the communal values of Diné people. *Individuality* is encouraged by the Diné because it sets the individual apart from

others and allows for various forms of personal expression and creativity (Kluckhohn & Leighton, 1974). The Diné were not threatened by individuality because of the underlying value of *k'é*. *Individualism* as a goal for Western schooling, however, aimed to remove the sense of community from the Diné and instill a desire for individual property and wealth.

The participants kept noting that they were different from each other and seemed to value individuality; they also noted, however, that they were connected. In the analysis discussion of community, Dean[4] stated that community meant "different points of view." He added, "We're all different, but we're all the same… no matter what we say, we're still a community." In other responses, Carlito and Duke also alluded to the idea that they were individuals. In addition to the idea of individuality, they claimed that there is some sort of "glue" and always a connection. Although the participants noted the individuality amongst people, they also stated that people from different "subgroups" judged people from other subgroups. The attempt to destroy the communal concept of *k'é* for the Diné and instill a sense of individualism seems to have created a type of hierarchy in which some Diné rank others outside their subgroup. In other words, the people in the subgroups that the participants identified decide who is superior or inferior to their own subgroup, despite any type of kinship ties.

Prior to Western schooling, the Diné were able to express their styles, likes and dislikes without concern for how others would react or without thinking their expressions made them better than anyone else. That type of freedom existed because the important relationship people had with each other did not revolve around similar likes and dislikes but around the familial relationships they had. The lack of *k'é* no longer allows individuality to exist without threatening the existence of the individual.

Ability to communicate. The Diné youth still feel the effects of another assimilationist strategy—the attempt to eradicate native languages. That goal has yielded multiple negative effects. The participants' responses expressed their frustration with not being able to speak and understand the Diné language. Dean specifically referred to the inability to understand the elderly woman who scolded him for reasons unknown. He also referred to the meaninglessness of posters in the Diné language. He demanded that posters that are meant to be encouraging should be presented in a way he could understand. The participants also expressed their frustrations at not having the respect of the older generation when they attempted to learn about "The People." One participant claimed that older people stated, "You should know this!" The underlying concept of respect could possibly be found and expressed through the language and understanding of *k'é*.

The attempt to rid the Diné of our language has taken from us a way to communicate expressions of relations toward other people and also with the Holy People. Specifically, the language is crucial to the concept of *k'é* because through clans and terms of relation, we feel a belonging and our role with our families and our deities. *K'é* as a concept, can only be fully understood through the language and does not simply translate into an English term. It is a dynamic concept that can change form depending on the context. Along with eradicating a way for the younger generations to communicate with the older generations and the Holy People, a loss of language meant a loss of a concept important to our identities. One of the first lessons that I was taught as a young person was to always introduce myself by my clans so that people knew who I was and where I came from. It positioned me in the world in relation to others and their clans. Without an understanding of the Diné language, *k'é* has a very simple meaning despite its importance as the basis of our existence and survival as Diné people.

Breakdown of k'é. Not only are the assimilationist goals still affecting the Diné youth today, but the methods the federal government employed to reach the goals also continue to affect them. The theories behind assimilation manifested in the creation of federal boarding schools. One of the main purposes of the boarding schools was to remove Native American children from their homes and communities at an early age and place them into educational institutions that would minimize their contact with their families and cultures (Adams, 1995; Duran & Duran, 1995; Reyhner & Eder, 2004; Spring, 2001). Specifically in relation to *k'é,* boarding schools destroyed its essence. Many of our elders grew up in institutions and were raised without the modeling or value of *k'é.* In turn, they did not know how to relate to their children or could not teach *k'é.* Only fragments of this value remain for many Diné today, especially without an understanding of the language. To recognize clans and relationships is one of the meanings of *k'é* still valued by many. Other families, however, have lost it. We cannot hold them accountable for the history but only try to understand and offer support. The support and understanding can be initiated through discussion to know the needs of the people, as the participants suggested.

I do not label the researched community as dysfunctional because the people there are still making great strides towards survival as contemporary Diné. Many families and people in the community are still working towards a healthier existence. As a community, however, we need to return to our sense of *k'é* if we are to support our youth— not only to promote their academic success, but also to encourage them to lead positive healthy lives and to know their place in the world as Diné. I now discuss their descriptions of the type of partnerships they suggest for implementation through the framework of *k'é.*

Diné Youth and Theories of Partnerships

The participants described school and community partnerships as a process of building positive relationships. They described the creation and promotion of an ideal community, starting within the school, in which the community members would recognize when someone needed help and would be able to provide support or links to resources. The participants identified three strengths of their community that can be used to create effective partnerships to support the youth. They were:
1. Pre-existing relationships inclusive of the feeling of comfort and ability to socialize.
2. Open-minded and friendly youth.
3. Offices and programs available for the wellbeing of the community members.

With these strengths, the youth identified the community partnerships as, what I termed the *small community of k'é*, that is made up of three relationships within the school and the fourth relationship between the *small community of k'é* and the outside community. The participants identified the school as the best place to begin the process of returning *k'é* to their community. They identified the youth as the people who need to begin the process.

Small Community of K'é: Four Relationships

The four relationships that needed to be engaged to create a community of support were: Peer-to-peer relationships; Peer-to-liaison relationships; Liaison-to-resources and supports relationships; Small Community of K'é and the Outside Community Relationships. The last relationship listed is the effective school and community partnership. Due to the complexities of creating partnerships between school and the Diné community, the first three relationships are

necessary prerequisites to creating a community that can effectively support the youth and their needs.

Peer-to-peer relationships. These relationships exist between the youth and their friends and acquaintances in their school. The peer-to-peer relationships I refer to for these partnerships exist only within the school. These relationships are crucial because, as the participants claimed, the youth trust and are more honest with other youth. When I asked the participants who they envisioned as the community members who could help other youth in their small community, Duke responded, "Students." Zandian stated that if youth had trusting relationships, they could overcome their fear of talking about their problems and "most likely feel better about themselves."

The participants referred to the influence their older peers had on their decisions and often referred to the amount of influence they could have on younger peers. In a reflection by Dean, he remembered how easily influenced he was by people he thought "were cool." He stated that when he was younger, he would watch older students he rode the bus with "cuss." He remembered thinking, "They looked cool to me… I'm going to sound cool like that too if I say that." Zandian recalled talking to younger students during his visits to his mother's classroom. He said one day when he was "dressed up" a kid asked him, "Why you dressed up?" Zandian replied to the student's question, "I just want to look good, you know, for the girls… But I told them for the basketball games, you have to represent your school and community." Zandian then stated, "It's pretty cool to talk to little kids because they respect you." The reflections from the participants described the amount of influence that older peers have on the younger ones. In addition, Dean attested to the way positive influences can help alter a negative outlook. He claimed that, as a freshman, a few upper classmen befriended him and helped him stay on the "right track." He claimed that these friends helped him realize that there was more than one side to every story and that helped him find a more positive outlook.

Peer-to-liaison relationships. I used the term *liaison* with the participants when I explained my understanding of their discussion. I identified the second relationship in the *small community of k'é* as the *peer-to-liaison relationship*. In this relationship, the peer would be the youth who needed help and the liaison would be one of the youth who the participants described as "exemplary," "open minded folks" who were friendly and able to talk to anyone.

In our discussions of how the youth could support other youth, the participants noted that there are some issues that youth cannot help with, and other resources would be necessary. Dean claimed that there was complexity in the youth finding assistance in the outside community because the youth feared the lack of privacy or the outside community did not fulfill the request of the youth. He then stated that there needed to be some sort of bridge between the youth who is helping his or her peer and the outside community. Duke agreed with Dean and added that the youth within the school who are exemplary and are good role models could build bridges to the outside community. He stated that those youth "could be the connection that gets the bigger community involved with the smaller community inside the school." In the *small community of k'é*, the liaison would have to be able to maintain his or her relationships with peers and with the outside community.

Liaison-to-resources and supports relationships. The third relationship is the *liaison-to-resource and supports relationships*. In this relationship, the liaison would be the youth who communicates well with his or her peers and with adults in the community; the resource and supports would be the people in the various offices and programs in the community such as the Department of Behavioral Health, the Navajo Nation Police Department, Indian Health Services

or the Office of Youth Development. The parents, teachers and other adults in the school would also be considered resources and supports. Duke stated that if a youth had a problem, he or she could talk to the liaison one-on-one. Then the liaison can suggest who the youth could talk to for help. The relationship between the liaison and the adults is important because if the liaison is referring his or her peer to an adult for help, the liaison has to know that the peer can trust the adult.

Small community of k'é and the outside community relationship. The fourth relationship is the *small community of k'é and the outside community relationship*. In this relationship, the *small community of k'é* is made up of the youth and people in the school who acknowledge *k'é* as a way of relating to others. The outside community in this relationship means the people who are outside of the school. The fourth relationship is the effective school and community partnerships that can support the youth and their needs. It is evident that there are some prerequisites in establishing that partnership in order for it to be effective for youth who do not have that support elsewhere for various reasons. According to Ward (2005), "the meanings given to schooling may range from positive to negative and lead to acceptance, adaptation, or rejection…which in turn, will then influence their participation in important social institutions of the community and society" (p. 17). Analogous to the concept Ward addresses, the participants' theorized that once the youth learn how to navigate a positive community and know the resources available to them, they will be able to navigate their outside community in the same way. Furthermore, once the *small community of k'é* works its way into the mindset of the youth, Duke stated that maybe the outside community will "tag along."

The four relationships I described are crucial to the effectiveness of the school and community partnerships. The participants identified the community and school partnerships as a process of building positive relationships. I theorize what the relationships mean and how they look, through the framework of *k'é*.

Recognizing Relationships in the Small Community of K'é

The foundation of the *small community of k'é* is the recognition of others in the community. This recognition directly aligns with the first quality of *k'é* described previously as the basic knowledge of each other in the family. Through the recognition of clans, a person demonstrates knowledge of who he or she is, how he or she should relate to people and how other people should relate to him or her. I step back from this statement and restate that if there are youth who do not know their clans; it should not be held against them in a way that might exclude them from the small community. Although the clans identify our relations, the concept of *k'é* goes beyond kinship ties because it focuses on the way we behave based on caring relationships in general. Duke described how a basic recognition of other people is important to youth by stating, "It's more insuring… to understand that you have people alike with you that can help you too." In our first talking circle, the participants also described a positive community through comments such as "don't judge what you see" and "don't just ignore the person." These two comments speak directly to the first quality of *k'é,* which is also the first concept the *small community of k'é* has to embody. The basic recognition of other people without judgment is the foundation for the relationships that make up the *small community of k'é*.

Harmonious Relationships in the Small Community of K'é

Once there is a basic recognition of people and relationships in the small community, the next component to add is the second quality of *k'é*. The second quality of *k'é* is that of

maintaining harmonious relationships by expressing love, compassion, friendliness, kindness, and peacefulness as one would to family members. The *small community of k'é* would view the maintenance of harmonious relationships as the ability to trust others and to be trusted in the community. The participants claim that trust is a key factor in creating a supportive environment for the youth. When discussing how the partnerships would work, Zandian claimed that building relationships with positive peers could help change negative attitudes, especially with "younger students." Dean added his description of a program that "buddied" two people up who looked out for each other. He also claimed that his involvement with that program helped him go down a positive path. Carlito stated that the youth needed someone they trusted to share their problems with. Dean added that the youth are more honest with each other and trust other youth over adults. The youth seek harmonious relationships that enable them to trust and to be trusted by their peers; this trust is necessary when maintaining *peer-to-peer* and *peer-to-liaison relationships*.

In addition, Dean stated that the outside community needs to "step up and do what they say." That statement alludes to the lack of trust between the youth and adults in the school and community. Not only does Dean feel that they cannot trust the adults to keep their word and carry out requested services, but he also feels that adults in the community cannot keep their secrets safe. He states that the youth fear the lack of privacy. The youth need to feel that they are respected in their relationships with the adults of their community which is the reason for the *liaison-to-resources and supports relationships*.

In keeping the relationships within the *small community of k'é* harmonious, the youth will be able to access a positive support system they might not otherwise have. As trusting relationships are built with the peers inside the school and resources and supports are identified and explained, the youth can carry over their positive view of *community* to the outside community. As the youth move their positive view of community outward, they will be more thoughtful of others around them, which is the third quality of *k'é.*

Sharing in the Small Community of K'é

The third concept of *k'é* is sharing with one another and being generous, unselfish and thoughtful of others. The participants did not speak about sharing or selfishness specifically, but they did describe many instances when they felt that people were not thoughtful of others. Zandian described how often verbal harassment occurred at places open to the public, such as basketball courts. Dean added that parents also contributed to the harassment during basketball games. From these descriptions, the participants agreed with each other that people of the community need to be more thoughtful of the youths' feelings. The other incidents the youth described included judgment from elders in their community. The participants discussed ways to create relationships with the elders by chopping wood for them or helping them in some way. Dean stated, however, that there are youth who would say, "You never did anything for me, so why should I listen to you?" Based on what the participants have said, the idea of building bridges between the elders and the youth depends upon sharing and being generous. Not only is this quality necessary for building relationships with the elders, but it is also necessary for building relationships with the other adults of the community. As the youth become a part of the *small community of k'é* and learn how to share without expectations of payment, they will go out into the outside community with the same understanding. This quality of *k'é* is crucial for the *small community of k'é* and outside community relationship because it could be considered an application of *k'é* that the people in the outside community can see by the way the youth contribute to the community.

Dependence in the Small Community of K'é

The fourth quality in the framework of *k'é* is being able to depend on one another and being dependable. This quality is what the participants considered to as the "glue" that makes the community coherent. The "positive and functional" community that the youth claim they need recognizes that people of a community depend on each other. Duke worked through his description of what the "glue" was that held a community together. He stated that although there are individuals in every community, "everyone needs everyone." He added that we do not acknowledge that we need others such as the "person that works at the store or at the laundry mat." The recognition of *k'é* acknowledges the dependence we have on each other and also that we are all being depended on and have a role to play. This quality is what the *small community of k'é* runs on. The constant acknowledgment that we need each other could promote a sense of self-worth to many youth and others in the outside community. Furthermore, the recognition of our dependence upon one another can help us as Diné be a communal functioning people again.

The *small community of k'é* is an attempt to return the Diné community to a communal existence in which relationships are valued and everyone has a role. The youth want to feel comfortable and know the people around them. They want to be able to depend upon one another and to contribute to the overall well-being of the community. The participants know that youth trust other youth more than adults and are able to confide in one another. Within the support system called *k'é*, everyone is recognized as a relative and treated as such. This type of support system returns the Diné youth to the type of existence promoted by the Holy People through the Kinaaldá ceremony. It could return the Diné to a communal existence of recognizing relations, our dependence on one another and the maintenance of harmonious relationships as our ancestors existed prior to contact and the era of assimilation.

Addressing the Complexities

Supporting the Whole Child

The participants' theories address the concerns described as the complexities of creating partnerships between Native American communities and schools. The partnerships described by the participants have an overall goal of creating a sense of belonging and positive support systems for the youth. This type of system promotes support for the "whole" child as called for in the literature (see Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Sanders, 2002; Klug & Whitfield, 2003; Ward, 2005). The partnerships that seek to affix the youth in the community note that the community and the youth cannot be separated because the relationships *are* the community. As the youth become a part of the system of relationships within the *small community of k'é*, they acquire a role within the community that is valuable and necessary to other members of the community.

The *small community of k'é* ascribes a structure of relationships to the youth within the school in which they have their socially defined roles. The *small community of k'é* would reside beneath structures of the school system itself. The underlying worldview of *k'é* promoted in the small community within the school might provide what Donna Deyhle (1995) described as "cultural integrity" for youth who do not have a strong connection to their culture. In her discussion of "cultural integrity," Deyhle (1995) concluded that Diné youth from more traditional families, who had strong Diné identities, were more likely to succeed in school than those who did not. Furthermore, she states that the students who do not have a sense of "cultural

integrity" from their home lack the important social and cultural resources they need to succeed at school and in the general community. Youth with weaker Diné identities can view school as organized through white middle-class expectations, as institutions opposed to their identities. The promotion of *k'é* as a way of relating to others as Diné could be considered a social and cultural resource and could promote a positive Diné identity for the youth.

Identifying a positive identity for Diné youth is an issue the participants questioned. Dean claimed that elders often made the statement, "Diné, the people," but they never explained what it meant. The discussion about the lack of communication between the older generations and the younger generations resulted in Duke wishing that the older generation would understand that the youth live in a "modern world." He questioned how the youth could grow and be successful as contemporary Diné with respect for their elders and traditions. The participants had the desire to learn more about the Diné history and culture because they thought it could help them understand what it means to be Diné.

Contemporary Diné

Viewing and navigating the world through a series of harmonious relationships in which we treat all people and nature in a respectful way is the philosophy of Diné. *K'é* as an existence, philosophy, worldview or way of knowing was the impetus for the creation of the Kinaałdá ceremony by our Holy People. The Kinaałdá ceremony was the very first ceremony created for human beings to ensure our survival. Our survival as Diné is based on the maintenance of our relationships. The ideal type of maintenance is modeled by the relationship of caring that should exist between a mother and her children. Returning to the lessons of the Kinaałdá connects us directly to our emergence as humans. Embodying *k'é* could be the way we define ourselves as authentically Diné in the modern world. Identifying as Diné through an embodiment of *k'é* could move community members away from judging people from various subgroups. The way we express our *individuality* would no longer threaten our existence. Promoting *k'é* as the foundation of our existence is a holistic approach to supporting the needs of the youth.

Holistic Approach

The *small community of k'é* describes a holistic approach to understanding students' needs and to creating a positive functioning community. As the literature states, schools and communities need to have a common goal so that students will be successful (Klug & Whitfield, 2003; Ward, 2005). Goals that nurture the *small community of k'é* for the Diné youth will support the "whole" child through partnerships specifically geared towards their overall wellbeing. The *small community of k'é* as a process works towards the creation of a positive functional community that can support the youth. As noted earlier, the prerequisites of establishing trust within the four relationships in the *small community of k'é* are essential in working towards effective school and community partnerships. As identified by the participants, the process of the *small community of k'é* should begin in the school. School has been identified as an institution that needs healing relationships with the Native American communities (Duran & Duran, 1995). School is where the return to *k'é* could emerge.

Healing Relationships with Institutions

Due to the history of Western schooling and Native American communities, schools can still be seen as assimilating mechanisms. The literature states that schools, alongside health care providers and other community institutions, have been identified as institutions that should be included in endeavors designed to curb the damaging issues that Native communities confront

such as alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, and suicide (Duran & Duran, 1995; Klug & Whitfield, 2003).

The participants specifically identified the school as the starting place in promoting a more positive community. If school becomes redefined as a place where the youth have positive relationships, then perhaps our youth would not feel the need to cope with the problems that exist in their everyday lives through destructive mechanisms. With the school as the hub where relationships are acknowledged, created and respected by the youth themselves, they might see school as a place of empowerment where they have control of their futures and communities.

Empowering the Youth

As Epstein and Sanders (2002) stated, the youth need to feel that they are actors in the processes of their everyday lives and not just acted upon. By providing an awareness of and a means to community programs through the relationships within the *small community of k'é,* the youth can identify and use services and information provided. Having access to resources and supports through their trusted relationships, the youth could embody the capabilities to help themselves if they did not feel confident before. Feeling capable and confident could possibly empower them to take control over their own existence.

Conclusions

Using *k'é* as a framework to discuss *community* and *school and community partnerships* has helped me identify the essence of the way the participants view their needs. This type of understanding could not be interpreted through a Western lens because *community* is not a static entity that can be easily defined or generalized. Through the framework of *k'é,* I see that *community* is an ongoing system of recognizing and maintaining harmonious relationships that can support the youth through partnerships based on relationships.

In consideration of the multicultural imagination, this study articulates an indigenous perspective of community and school partnerships by unpacking the complexities that stem from a history of colonization and assimilation through education. The participants described their ideas about their community and theorized how to promote a positive functioning community that can support their needs holistically. The youth participants rarely mentioned academic success and as Ward (2005) notes, when working with Native American students, goals of promoting academic success take a backseat to seeking ways for supporting our students in the ways they desire.

In advancing forms of curriculum theorizing, this study includes and retheorizes community within the curriculum as Nieto et al. (2008) suggest. More importantly, this study contributes to research that can support the Navajo Sovereignty in Education Act of 2005 in which k'é should be considered a part of the curriculum alongside the acquirement of basic skills in a general mainstream curriculum as stated in subsection 110 (20th Navajo Nation Council, 2005, p. 13). The youth participants envision a positive healthy community rooted in traditional values while they move forward as modern Diné, acknowledging that it is their responsibility to make it happen.

Notes

1. Native American – Also known as American Indian, I use this term to identify the indigenous peoples within the United States of America.

2. Diné- Native American tribe located in the Southwestern United States also known as the Navajo. I use the term Diné because that is how we identify ourselves as a people. I only use the term *Navajo* when I am quoting or referencing another researcher's work in which they use *Navajo.* I include myself within the researched community of the Diné by using phrases such as, *our youth,* or *our ways of knowing,* etc. I do not take an objective position in the research because I am Diné and from the community.

3. The Navajo Nation Office of Youth Development (OYD) reaches out to the youth through specially created community events. OYD enrolls the youth (14-21 years of age) in programs and tracks records of services utilized. The youth gain experience and receive incentives such as certificates and money.

4. Pseudonyms were used for the participants and community.

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