

# TRADITION BECOMES THE TEACHER

COMMUNITY EVENTS ENRICH EDUCATORS' PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

By Margery Ginsberg and Anthony Craig

**O**ne way to approach the improvement of instruction is for educators to learn from student interactions in cultural events that fully engage students' motivation and curiosity. In such a context, educators get to know students in new ways and to connect student strengths to classroom instruction. This can be especially powerful when the learning context is a shared and collaborative experience among educators.

Two elementary school staffs came together to learn from the interactions of American Indian students and families through participation in the Tulalip Tribes' Salmon Ceremony. Such cultural events in communities throughout the United States have the potential to stimulate new ideas for teachers to create more inclusive, relevant, and engaging learning environments.

Although we are cautious about educators making hasty conclusions about entire groups of people from limited interactions, we believe that, with knowledgeable community members and elders as guides, significant community events provide educators with opportunities to understand expectations and interactions in ways that might not be possible otherwise. The implications for teaching and learning in schools are profound.

## BACKGROUND

As is true for many school districts, the teachers in Marysville School District in Washington state, most of European-American descent, teach students from communities where the process of socialization generally differs from educators' own childhood experiences. With this in mind, Marysville School District has focused a portion of teachers' professional learning on ways to create greater congruence between the strengths that students exhibit in their communities and opportunities to learn in the more formal context of school. The importance of connecting the culture of the community to the culture of the classroom has

**Drumbeats begin the annual**

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**Tulalip Tribes of**

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Photo by NATALIE FOBES/Getty Images

**An elder drums at a Salmon Ceremony of the Tulalip Tribes in Washington state.**

a well-established legacy in educational research (Vygotsky, 1978; Mohatt & Erikson, 1981; Heath, 1983; Au & Kawakami, 1985; Zeichner, 1995; Gay, 2000). In addition to the potential of such connections for democratic pluralism, scholars and practitioners commonly agree that help-

ing students to bridge the participation structures in their homes and communities with the structures found in most classrooms is foundational to academic success.

As authors, we also believe that collaborative learning among teachers in a shared context can build a collective

commitment to instructional innovation. One of us has been an educator in American Indian communities and one is American Indian and currently teaches in an Indian community. Ultimately, our hope is to encourage pedagogical imagination without reducing children and community members to static

lists of presumed characteristics and learning styles.

To guide the process of bridging community-school interests, Marysville School District, which serves the indigenous communities of the Tulalip Tribes, has established a district-level RESPECT committee. The goal of this committee is to strengthen the districts' commitment to equitable student performance. With a focus on teaching and learning that is inclusive, relevant, engaging, and valuable to learners and families, the committee recognizes that content-focused instruction is insufficient without a fundamental awareness of and respect for learner diversity and motivation. Marysville recognizes that opportunities for teachers to strengthen their cultural awareness require reaching outside of the usual context of professional development. In particular,

community gatherings can be valuable occasions to learn from traditions that have historically served children well.

Here we describe one of several ways that schools and districts can develop a professional learning agenda focused on attending community events to build upon teachers' understanding of children's strengths. Although our example focuses on how and what teachers learned from attending a significant ceremonial event, the Tulalip experience sheds light on professional learning opportunities that exist in communities everywhere.

#### ORIENTATION TO A COMMUNITY GATHERING

To reach out to local educators, a member of the district's RESPECT committee (one of the authors) drafted an invitation to educators in two elementary schools to attend the practice session for the Tulalip community's annual Salmon Ceremony and the actual ceremony. The invitation set the stage for learning from students' cultural context and stressed the importance of the Salmon Ceremony to the Tulalip community.

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#### WHAT ARE THE CHILDREN LEARNING?

To sharpen teachers' focus on student strengths and knowledge, the initial learning agenda included a 10-minute video clip of a previous ceremony. As educators watched, they were asked to keep in mind the questions, "What can you tell about what the children are learning, and how? What are some of the strengths that children exhibit that might have implications for teaching and learning?" The videotaped ceremony stimulated discussion for participants.



*This description captures elements of the videotaped ceremony practice.*

As the familiar drumbeat of the Snohomish Welcome Song begins, 100 singers and drummers enter the Tulalip Longhouse.

As is traditional, three head women lead the procession, followed by the eldest male drummers beating their hand drums and raising their hands to greet and thank all visitors who have come to lend support as tribal members pay honor to the first returning King Salmon of the season.

Intermingled among these elder drummers, singers, and dancers, one sees dozens of young children ranging in age from toddler to teen joining in with a focused reverence. As the ceremony unfolds, not a single participant, adult or child, steps out of line. Each participant appears to feel a responsibility for this important work. Every song, dance, and story compels tribal members of all ages to sing and dance in order to conduct the ceremony as it has been for generations.

The beauty and power of ancient songs and dances come alive in the young children as they dance around the three sacred fires on the dirt floor of the longhouse. The importance of the youth in the survival of this culture is evident as this short video clip comes to a close.

# Inclusion

RESPECT AND CONNECTEDNESS

A TEACHING RUBRIC

|   | Clear evidence | Possible evidence | No evidence at this time | Ideas/ questions | Connection to learning from community culture |
|---|----------------|-------------------|--------------------------|------------------|---|
| Routines and rituals are present that contribute to respectful learning (e.g. norms are clear, cooperative learning).                                 |                |                   |                          |                  |   |
| Students and teachers comfortably and respectfully interact with each other for social and academic support (students support each other's learning). |                |                   |                          |                  |   |
| Students and teachers share a relationship that may be subtle (e.g. students share thinking, humor used mutually).                                    |                |                   |                          |                  |   |
| Teacher arranges activities to allow for closeness and independence.  |                |                   |                          |                  |   |
| Teacher acknowledges students' identities and membership in cultural groups   |                |                   |                          |                  |   |

Source: Marysville (Wash.) School District, adapted from Ginsberg (2003).

|   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| <p><b>MORE TOOLS ONLINE</b></p> <p><a href="http://www.nsd.org/news/jsd/">www.nsd.org/news/jsd/</a></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invitation for educators to the ceremony.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agenda for the initial learning experience.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rubrics                     <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Attitude:</b> <i>Choice and personal/cultural relevance.</i></li> <li>- <b>Meaning:</b> <i>Challenge and engagement.</i></li> <li>- <b>Competence:</b> <i>Authenticity and effectiveness.</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
|---|---|---|---|

Seeking to create for teachers the same conditions for learning that we seek for students, the goals for the initial teacher preparation session, participation in the Salmon Ceremony, and the follow-up debrief were to develop an understanding of Tulalip First Salmon Ceremony, establish common understanding regarding the potential of a community context as a site for learning, and experience a community gathering to learn more about

cultural strengths, talents, and values to integrate with teaching and learning in classrooms.

The agenda for the initial professional learning clarified the purpose, what participants would be able to know and do as a result of the learning, and the resource materials available to inform their thinking. Among the materials was an article from *Educational Leadership* entitled “Lessons at the Kitchen Table,” (Ginsberg, 2007). The article served as an entry point into a discussion on what to look for at the Salmon Ceremony and the importance of a focus on community strengths or funds of knowledge (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Awareness of such strengths can yield valuable clues for how teachers might further develop their own classroom expectations and learning interactions

with students. For example, a strength that a teacher of young children might notice as part of the Salmon Ceremony are the clear norms of collaboration that are demonstrated by elders and youth for younger children who are learning ceremonial protocol. Teachers might also notice various forms of narration throughout the ceremony — for example, the use of story, song, and movement.

### PRACTICE CEREMONY FOLLOW-UP

Following the practice for the Salmon Ceremony, one of the authors sent a letter thanking teachers for being present and showing their enthusiasm and love for students and the community. As several participants noted, it had been a great evening, full of learning and culture. The letter included comments from the families about their children’s excitement to see their teachers: “They were so proud to tell anybody who would listen, ‘That’s my teacher!’ and ‘My teacher is here!’ ”

The letter also included an approach for teachers who would attend the actual ceremony. Underscoring the privilege of going behind the scenes of this ancient ceremony, teachers were asked to focus on how children are taught and the high expectations that are held for them. They were also asked to record their thoughts after the ceremony to aid their collective mem-

ory for a follow-up discussion where participants would apply insights to instructional practice.

Setting the stage for educators to learn from a community gathering was, in some ways, easier than developing a follow-up session to make sense of and apply insights to classroom environments. Most teachers are willing to extend themselves beyond the boundaries of the schoolhouse if they believe there will be a way to use experiences to construct more effective classrooms. However, the easiest initial bridges to build after attending any event are often the superficial ones. Clearly, being an attentive witness does not necessarily translate into being a discerning interpreter. At the same time, with guidance from community members, thinking through some of the threads of a story can lead to understanding aspects of students’ potential that can be forgotten in the rush of a school day.

### APPLYING INSIGHTS FROM CULTURAL EVENTS

During the initial learning, we asked teachers to list their observations and insights after seeing the practice ceremony video clip. After attending the practice ceremony in person, or, for some teachers, the actual ceremony, teachers replicated this in a personal journal or with a partner. As we interacted with teachers over the following weeks, we noted a range of teacher observations from the ceremony about positive student learning and the environmental conditions that supported it. The list included:

- Clear norms and predictable routines;
- Structured participation that allowed for approximation;
- Repetition;
- Children have a clear understanding of events without explicit lectures;
- Young children watching and learning from older youth and elders;
- Close proximity of children to adults;
- Multiple roles and forms of participation;
- Well-modeled, interactive, and respectful participation;
- Voices — everyone sings;
- Physical movement;
- No distinction among who belongs to whom;
- Various stories with examples of the ethic of “no enemies”; and
- The use of rhythm in transitions.

We used this list and its insights to revise teaching rubrics based on generic ideas about supporting intrinsic motivation across student groups. Our goal was to assist teachers in providing instruction that is motivating and culturally responsive. Although classrooms may not elicit children’s intrinsic motivation in ways that are similar to a community’s deep collective memory and norms, they can approximate the conditions upon which children’s learning thrives.

We planned to take the revised rubrics to a concluding gathering with teachers, where we could apply the revised rubrics to

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a videotaped elementary school literacy lesson to apply the professional learning to ongoing instruction and reconsider classroom practices. One of the teachers had volunteered to have one of her lessons with students taped and to reflect with the group on the lesson. (See one example of a revised rubric on p. 39.)

### “NOTICINGS” AND “WONDERS”

After watching the video of the classroom lesson and using the rubrics to assess the lesson, teachers offered feedback for each category. Their feedback was communicated as “noticings” and “wonders” on a two-column chart. “Noticings” are attributes of the lesson that clearly connect to student motivation. “Wonders” are probing questions that allow teachers to think more deeply about their practice.

Following the video, teachers noted the high student energy, concentration, and effort they saw during the lesson. Teachers believed that the revised rubrics were more congruent with the tribal communities’ values and norms. Changes within the rubric included new considerations regarding multiple opportunities for children to learn, based on observations of the ceremony that included repetition, learning from elders and older youth, singing, physical movement, various stories, and ways of developing collective memory. Another set of changes to the rubrics focused on expectations of success, based on observations such as clear demonstrations of expectations, use of approximation, lack of distinction among who belongs to whom, and the example of elders as committed learners.

### EXTENDING NEW LEARNING WITHOUT A BLUEPRINT

Most teachers were able to watch the ceremony practice video, attend the practice for the ceremony, and attend the ceremony itself. Reflecting on the importance of these experiences as educators, they spoke of the potential of community learning to evoke memory, emotion, and new learning. They also indicated an interest in extending the use of the rubrics to their own professional practice. For example, several teachers mentioned that they would like to strengthen their knowledge of motivation and culture through collaborative lesson design, co-teaching, and peer-feedback with American Indian colleagues.

Educational researchers and theorists are clear about the importance of instruction on student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Brophy, 2004; Gay, 2000). They are also clear that culture and motivation are inseparable from learning (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000). At a time when there are many frameworks and approaches to implement them, there are still no blueprints for understanding and improving upon the cultural nuance of classroom norms and interactions. Fortunately, there are communities willing to help us learn.

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