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EARLY CONTACT, LANGUAGE ACCESS, AND HONORING EVERY CULTURE:

A Framework for Student Success

By Rosemary Gallegos

In New Mexico, families and their children thrive when offered a family-centered approach to education and when programs are culturally responsive. Two families, one Hispanic and the other Native American, exemplify this success.

Here we share their stories.

When Angelique Quiñonez was 18 months old, her family started receiving services from the New Mexico School for the Deaf (NMSD). Angelique's family lived in Anthony, a small town in the southwest part of the state and a four-hour drive from the main campus, and the services they received occurred right in their own home. NMSD's early intervention staff, deaf mentors, and early intervention specialists who live in the southwest part of the state visited Angelique's family regularly, helping her parents and brother to learn American Sign Language (ASL) and teaching them how to interact and communicate with their deaf child. Angelique also entered a preschool branch of NMSD in Las Cruces, New Mexico, which was close to their home, giving her additional exposure to language and communication through ASL.

When Angelique was 5 years old and ready for kindergarten, her parents made the difficult decision to move away from their extended family so that Angelique could receive the best education they believed possible and attend school at NMSD's main campus in Santa Fe. NMSD's family housing program supported the transition. In this program, a family lives on campus until their child is old enough to live without family present in NMSD's residential program or the family is able to move to Santa Fe. Angelique's brother Jason, who is hearing, became part of the sibling program; he attended preschool on campus with deaf and hard of hearing children, was immersed in ASL, and learned how to fluently communicate with his sister.

Angelique's family—and the teachers and staff of NMSD—ensured she grew up in a milieu

Photos courtesy of Rosemary Gallegos



At left and below: Students present information about Navajo traditions during NMSD's American Indian Celebration Day; an instructor gives her students a big "thumbs-up" on the work they are doing together on an iPad.



that was rich in language, both at home and in school. She communicates easily with Jason, her parents, her peers, and her teachers. Her communication and language skills are constantly improving, as is her self-confidence, and she excels in math, English, and art. Angelique is involved in many extracurricular activities and loves to play volleyball and soccer.

One of Angelique's most exciting experiences was when she represented her Mexican heritage through Folklorico dance with the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet company. Last fall, Angelique danced with this company of classically trained artists when the company performed on NMSD's campus for the 16 de Septiembre celebration of Mexican independence. When other students asked her why she was chosen to perform, she said proudly "because I am Mexican." Angelique has expressed that she would like to go to college at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., and study to become a math teacher and a professional volleyball player. At 9 years old, she has high expectations and aspirations for her future.

Elias Curley, who was born on the Navajo

reservation in northwestern New Mexico, began receiving NMSD's early intervention services when he was 2 years old in his home. He also attended our preschool branch in Farmington, New Mexico, which is close to the Navajo reservation. His family's home is four hours away from the main campus. His parents speak Navajo, and they are a part of a supportive extended Navajo family. His maternal grandparents are learning to sign because they want to share the Navajo culture and stories with their grandson.

Elias's mother, Krystle Curley, said their family "wants Elias to be a well-rounded child who will appreciate and embrace the Navajo and Deaf cultures" (personal communication). They added that, at the beginning, what helped them most was support from immediate family and home visits from NMSD early educators, deaf mentors, and other parents who were going through the experience of raising a deaf child.

Curley said that NMSD became a part of their



Above: NMSD students Jaqueline Sanchez, Antonia Maria Martinez, Angelique Quiñonez, and Julian Aranda-Sotelo perform with the Folklórico dance troupe from the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet during NMSD’s Mexican Independence Day Celebration.

come from the cultures of the children and families, or they have frequent interactions with members of these cultures. NMSD’s early intervention programs strive to employ early developmental specialists and deaf mentors who not only specialize in deaf education and early childhood development and are fluent in ASL, but who are also fluent in a Native American language or Spanish.

The Curley and Quiñonez families report that the trust they developed with NMSD providers made

lives while they were living on the reservation so they decided to enroll Elias in NMSD’s main campus. Through many NMSD supports, including the family housing program, they were able to transition to Santa Fe and become immersed in the Deaf community. Elias is now 7 years old. His family noted that he has become increasingly expressive, telling them his wants, needs, and feelings, and he interacts more meaningfully with his friends. Most important, they say that they have grown as a family; they support each other more, they have learned more about each other, and in addition to communicating in English and Navajo, they communicate with a new language, ASL.

The People Within the Framework

As a majority minority state, New Mexico is approximately 48 percent Hispanic, 38 percent white without Hispanic or Latino heritage, 10 percent Native American, 2 percent African American, and 2 percent Asian. The

state celebrates diversity within diversity; there are seven main Native American languages and 22 Native American tribes, including Pueblos, Apache, and Navajo. Within the Hispanic community, some individuals identify as culturally Mexican, others as culturally Spanish, and still others as culturally New Mexican.

NMSD reflects the state’s majority minority populations: 57 percent of the students are Hispanic and 15 percent are Native American. These students are almost all influenced by Spanish or by a Native American language in their homes. For example, families may speak English and either Spanish or a Native American language, or they may be trilingual but only use their Spanish or a Native American language when senior family members are present. Fifteen of the 140 families on NMSD’s main campus request written materials in Spanish and Spanish interpretation during school meetings and events.

The NMSD early intervention and early childhood specialists live in and are a part of each child’s community. They

their move to NMSD’s main campus possible. Once they and families like them arrive, NMSD strives to offer academic programs within a culturally responsive educational framework. The overwhelming majority of instructional staff on the main campus are not Native American or Hispanic, and most of our teachers and administrators did not grow up with life experience or cultural norms that are similar to those of our students. For this reason, it is important for NMSD and all its programs to have a framework that honors the cultural milieu of each student and provides each NMSD employee the opportunity to interact and grow within it. We know that interaction between diverse cultural groups helps decrease prejudice and increase empathy (Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011; Rodenburg & Boisen, 2013), so we structure opportunities for this interaction between our staff and New Mexico children and families.

Further, this framework offers teachers and staff guidance in exploring biases

and assists them as they develop cultural knowledge. This allows us to be culturally responsive and more effectively interact with the students and families we serve. Teachers and administrators make decisions for and about students on a minute-by-minute basis. Without training and interaction between staff and families to develop knowledge of students' cultural origins, staff may not be bringing the appropriate information to the important work they do (Lipsky, 2010).

NMSD teacher Laurie Anderson described her experience in coming to work at NMSD as follows:

Prior to living in New Mexico, I had never met or had contact with Native Americans. Since moving to New Mexico, I have learned that not all Native American tribes practice or believe the same things, nor do they uphold the same traditions. Each tribe has its own set of unique beliefs that are held sacred and private.

As a Caucasian female, I have learned that I am not to ask much about Native Americans and their beliefs or at least I need to maintain some distance between their culture and my questions and curiosity. To be invited to a Native American reservation is a great honor, one that I have experienced and hold special in my heart. When visiting a Native American reservation, I learned that it is proper to always bring something to share, such as a dish or a watermelon, as a way to express appreciation and respect; I also learned that when you are offered something at a Native American's home, it is polite to accept the offer, whether it be drink or food, regardless of whether or not you are in the mood to drink or eat. To not accept their offer or gift is considered rude.

I have also learned that Native Americans do not always use direct eye contact in the way I am accustomed to or

Without training and interaction between staff and families to develop knowledge of students' cultural origins, staff may not be bringing the appropriate information to the important work they do (Lipsky, 2010).

was taught. There is a quiet and sensitive silence that I often receive from my Native American students that I think reflects the respect they maintain for their elders. In my experience of teaching Native Americans, I have often found that students need extra time to process questions and ideas in order to respond. Some Native American students readily respond to questions and

participate in discussions, while others show greater reservation.

Finally, I learned that for Native Americans, certain cultural and family events supersede the importance of attending school. For example, if there is a cultural event planned on the reservation, students' families place attending this event as a priority over attending school in order to maintain and hold their culture and traditions in high regard.

I am from a different culture and thus have learned to avoid placing my own values or expectations on my students, especially when it comes to following certain social norms. Instead, I have learned to respect their values, and I have developed a sensitivity/awareness of what is more comfortable for them.
(Personal communication, 2017)

A key aspect of NMSD's multicultural framework is ensuring families have language access for meetings, presentations, and events. At NMSD, four out of nine staff interpreters are trilingual. It is their responsibility to interpret conversations and interactions in ASL, English, and Spanish. Our interpreters are always available to facilitate communication, and they raise awareness when our environment is not culturally responsive. For example, at the urging of its interpreter team, NMSD provides two screens and displays all PowerPoint presentations in both Spanish and English. Although trilingual interpreting is extremely complex (Annarino, Aponte-Samalot, & Quinto-Pozos, 2014), NMSD's interpreting team has committed to honing this skill and has been a significant influence on increasing language accessibility, inclusivity, and respect for diversity at NMSD.

Left: A student shows the student life educator her caterpillar, which will soon transform into a butterfly.



Developing a Multicultural Framework

The first step in developing a multicultural framework is establishing a school philosophy that honors diversity, views culture as an asset to student success, and has high expectations for all children. To achieve this, teachers and staff must have the opportunity to explore their own identities and core values so that they can begin to eliminate their own biases and examine some of their own stereotypes. They also must have the opportunity to interact with individuals in other cultural groups and to listen to their stories. Shira Grabelsky, curriculum specialist at NMSD, explained it this way:

I've learned that students are an embodiment of the cultures they grow up in, both at home and at school. It is not possible to separate the student from his or her culture, to look at the student in isolation. I've also learned that culture is not only about beliefs and values but also about how time is spent. Students who spend time on the rodeo grounds, for example, have the culture of bull riding in their blood, and students who spend time traveling to family in Mexico have U.S.-Mexican transnational family culture in their blood. You cannot separate that component of culture from the person.

These things I learned through conversations with students. I spend the first few minutes of every class checking in, and it is during these check-ins that I learn so much about my students; they share more when classroom content is relevant to them. (Personal communication, 2017)

When expectations are set for honoring diversity, strategies and programs can be tailored to fit individual students and their families. At NMSD, we have found that early childhood specialists working and living in the communities where children are born engenders the trust of families, and this trust relationship enhances the



Left: Elias Curley with his parents, Krystle and Tim.

beyond the things that we see; they must address “deep culture” (Hanley, 1999). Educational systems must include ways to ensure families have language accessibility so they can fully participate in their child’s education. We must ensure our staff members have the opportunity to engage in self-analysis and to explore their own identities, and we must listen carefully to our students and their families so that our instructional strategies are responsive to appropriate cultural norms. We must also make it a priority to interact personally with our students’ families, to experience their cultures, to build trust, and to reduce bias. Only then can we shape the educational environments that provide Angelique, Elias, and all of our students every opportunity for success.

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families’ ability to support the language and communication development of their children, which in turn leads to the children’s effective transition to school-age services. On the NMSD campus, activities such as honoring cultural holidays, drum making, and providing local cuisine at the cafeteria are important to acknowledging local culture and building students’ self-esteem.

However, we know strategies for being culturally responsive must go

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