Part I

Literacy Instruction for Native Americans

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McCardle & Berninger 1st pages.indd 8 T&F Proofs: Not For Distribution 6/20/2014 3:24:00 PM

2 Digital Tapestry

Weaving Stories of Empowerment with Native Youth

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"The truth about stories is, that's all we are"

—Thomas King (Cherokee Author)

For many Indigenous peoples (IP), storytelling is embedded into the tapestry of our lives. It is a way that we simultaneously learn historical knowledge and create new knowledge about our cultures and the complexities of daily life. Through and from story, we learn how to live in "right relationship" to our selves, each other, and complex webs of creation, from the cosmos above us to the insects below. It is our most fundamental form for expressing and transmitting cultural values, ethics, codes of conduct, and practical knowledge. In recent decades, social science research has shown the power of narrative in interrupting the transmission of intergenerational trauma in IP (Evans-Campbell & Walters, 2006; Lowery, 1999; Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 1999). That is, narrative can help mediate the effects of historically situated traumas that continue to produce responses impacting the conditions of daily life, including those that influence academic outcomes for Native youth. The process of creating and sharing narratives, or stories, is an important educational tool for reclaiming cultural knowledge and strengths despite legacies of colonization and ongoing discrimination. New digital technologies using video, photography, and audio combined with the availability of social networking sites and web-based interfaces are expanding the ways we can construct and share stories for healing in our communities. Digital storytelling (DS) is emerging as a particularly resonant practice that infuses traditional cultural aspects of oral tradition and storytelling with modern digital technologies Benmayor, 2008).

This chapter presents findings of descriptive thematic analysis of digital stories completed by Native youth in the Pacific Northwest region of the U.S. Researchers from the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute (IWRI) at University of Washington (UW) worked together with the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) to facilitate DS workshops, which were

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McCardle & Berninger 1st pages.indd 9 6/20/2014 3:24:00 PM

integrated into the Native Youth Enrichment Program (NYEP), a science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) curriculum for Native youth in the Puget Sound region of the Pacific Northwest. Analysis of the stories suggests that DS may be a useful tool of educational empowerment for Native youth.[1] Though we cannot empirically link DS directly to improved education outcomes, thematic analysis reveals themes supporting an increase in confidence in cultural identity, which aligns with established evidence that does make connections between positive cultural identity and improved academic success.

HISTORICAL TRAUMA AND EDUCATION

It is well known that education in indigenous communities is connected to complex histories of colonization and cultural stripping aimed at controlling and assimilating IP (Rehyner, 1992). From religious missions in South, Central, and North American Indigenous territories to Indian Boarding Schools in the U.S. and Canada, the effects have had wide-ranging deleterious impacts that continue to influence educational outcomes today. These historically situated colonial experiences have been shown to impact parenting abilities (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 1999) and to lead to high rates of drug and alcohol abuse, depression, anxiety, somatization, suicide, and hypersensitivity to stress (Duran & Duran, 1995; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Walters & Simoni, 2002; Walters & Evans-Campbell, 2006; Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 1999, 2003); many of these problems are correlated with high dropout rates and low educational attainment (Zimmerman, Ramirez, Wahienko,Walter, & Dyer, 1994). The effects of this "historical trauma" (HT) (defined as a wounding from massive catastrophic events targeting a community, such as forced relocation, massacres, and boarding schools) are both personal and collective and can be experienced even generations after a particular event (Yellow Horse Brave Heart & Debruyn, 1998; Walters & Simoni, 2002; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Walters, Mohammed, Evans-Campbell, Beltrán, Chae & Duran, 2011). An important component in the definition of HT is its cumulative nature: historically situated traumas coupled with ongoing experiences of contemporary discrimination compound and create effects far more severe than exposure to an isolated traumatic event (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Walters et al., 2011).

Native students continue to face daily discrimination, both overtly and in the form of *microaggressions*: chronic, everyday injustices, the wear and tear of interpersonal and environmental messages to people of color that are denigrating, demeaning, or invalidating based on their racial affiliation (Sue et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2008; Walters et al, 2011). These include overt racial stereotypes (e.g., being called Pocahontas, Chief, Squaw), or seeing images of themselves as school mascots (e.g.,

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Redskins, Braves), but also include more covert experiences of racism such as being made invisible (e.g., being told "you don't look Native") or completely dismissed (e.g., students not being called on for contributions in class, or others' eye-rolling when a Native student talks about topics relevant to her community). Additionally, current Western models of education, though improved from the injustices of Indian boarding schools and early missions, continue to alienate Indigenous ways of knowing, such as oral traditions, collective thinking, and holism (Pewewardy, 2002). These ongoing daily experiences can work together with the legacies of historically traumatic events to impose stress burdens on Native students that ultimately lead to poor educational outcomes.

INTERRUPTING HISTORICAL TRAUMA THROUGH CULTURE

Despite efforts to eradicate our communities and cultures, IP have survived and are thriving in many ways. Recent decades have seen a resurgence of Indigenous ways of knowing and culture, which have been found to positively impact educational outcomes (Zimmerman et al.; 1994; Whitbeck, Hoyt, Stubben, & LaFramboise, 2001) as well as reduce health and mental health burdens (Bals, Turi, Skre, & Kvernmo, 2011). According to the Indigenist Stress Coping Model (Walters & Simoni, 2002), strong connection to cultural identity and practice mediates the intergenerational transmission of trauma and its effects. For example, when Native students are actively exposed to and engaged in their traditional cultural practices such as language, ceremony, and art, they are more likely to achieve greater academic success (Whitbeck et al., 2001). Some programs seem to be realizing this phenomenon. In a recent review of field-based geoscience education for IP, Riggs (2005) found that successful earth system science education programs were those that linked directly to Indigenous cultural learning styles and traditional tribal earth science knowledge. (See also Semken, 2005.)

In a review of learning style theory, research, and models, Pewewardy (2002) found that American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) students are understood as learning in ways that are influenced by tribal culture, including language and heritage. He writes "AIAN students generally learn in ways characterized by social/affective emphasis, harmony, holistic perspectives, expressive creativity, and nonverbal communication" (Pewewardy, 2002, p. 22). He highlights kinesthetic, cooperative, and family and Elder roles in learning styles of AIAN and suggests that while there is much research yet to do on AIAN pedagogy, educators can begin by integrating culture-based education that appreciates tribal traditions, art, and Elder knowledge (Pewewardy, 2002). Storytelling in tribal communities is an ancient, sacred form that encompasses all three of these elements. Jo-ann Archibald (Q'um Q'um Xiiem) (2008)

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McCardle & Berninger 1st pages.indd 11 6/20/2014 3:24:01 PM

describes the oral tradition of storytelling as an important aspect of indigenous knowledge systems that are not only meant to be expressed and passed down through generations but also are meant to be used as educational tools.

STORY FROM PAST TO PRESENT

> *"Story is medicine"*
>
> —Theda Newbreast (Blackfeet Activist)

Although there is a dearth of empirical literature measuring the impacts of storytelling on education and other outcomes for indigenous youth, there is a body of literature that highlights the cultural importance of various forms of storytelling and oral tradition (Archibald, 2008; Basso, 1996). Oral tradition in Indigenous cultures remains one of the most important ways that IP preserve historical records, cultural traditions, and identities. It has been practiced in various forms throughout history and is seen as one of the most valuable tools for learning culture specific values and ethics, codes of conduct, creation stories, and practical knowledge associated with science (e.g., seasonal hunting and gathering, planting and harvesting, astronomy, and geography).

An important aspect of oral tradition, and storytelling in particular, is its dynamic nature. Though most tribal storytellers, often elders, uphold certain essential threads that maintain important lessons, or the spirit of the story, many details are shifted in relation to the particular time, place, context, and teller (Hopkins, 2006). Not only do stories emanate from a collective ethos and consciousness, but they also emerge from the unique individual voice of the teller. Stories have the freedom to shift and change according to the unique constellation of context and voice to promote multiple deeply contextualized "truths" (Hopkins, 2006) that together weave a singular cultural tapestry. Rather than accepting Western values of "historical fact" and written documentation, storytelling is more fluid and flexible. As such, oral tradition is allowed to bend like a tree in the wind according to context fostering opportunities to integrate creative and contemporary modes for communicating story.

In the early 1980s video emerged as a new terrain for Indigenous people to respond critically to historically inaccurate media that promoted stereotyped ideas of Indigenous life, partially because of what were seen as similarities between indigenous oral tradition and the new technology (Hopkins, 2006). Though there has been debate about technology as a potentially dangerous territory built on Western capitalist principles, IP have had a great deal of success in creating and sharing our own media in our own way. This success may be attributed to "the degree to which [we] subvert the colonizer's indoctrination and

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champion indigenous expression in the political landscape" (Masayesva, 2000, as quoted in Hopkins, 2006; p. 343). Bringing new technology for creating and sharing story into the hands of indigenous communities expands the possibility, not only for "subverting indoctrination" but also for celebrating the strengths of our culture and expression. Digital storytelling is emerging as a particularly resonant community-based practice for IP as it integrates principles of oral tradition and contemporary technologies.

"Digital storytelling (DS) is the practice of combining still images and/or video with a narrated soundtrack including both voice and music" (Miller, 2009, p. 6). Digital stories are short videos ranging from 3–5 minutes, usually with a written script between 250–500 words that tell unique, often intimate personal stories. The term digital storytelling was coined by Joe Lambert, founder of the Center for Digital Storytelling, which "evolved out of the mixture of community arts practices, helping people make art for civic engagement, and the new media explosion of the late 1980's and 1990's (Lambert, 2007, p. 25). What makes DS unique is the attention to both individual and group process. A typical DS workshop is three to four days long, and includes an intensive 7-step process (as illustrated in Table 2.1) that combines social/relational, literacy, and technological skill development with a collaborative, supportive sharing of ideas. Each person in a story circle has a set amount of uninterrupted time to speak, then others share feedback and suggestions on how the story might be written and/or visualized. The process relies on supportive and skilled facilitation that allows for self-reflection and critical analysis of personal and social issues connected to story. The writing process is also collaborative, where others help the storyteller refine the script. This is followed by technical assembling and editing of the video where participants storyboard (i.e., create a visual or written outline), then upload digital and archive photos, video, music, and narrated voice to edit together a cohesive story. The final step involves screening stories and/or deciding what bounds and limits will be placed on public access to individual stories (Lambert, 2009); participants are not required to share their stories if they are not comfortable doing so. DS is more about process than product (Lambert, 2007), and can thus be seen as a therapeutic tool for healing storied traumas, an educational tool for learning concrete technical and literacy skills, a means of building health and resilience (Gubrium, 2009), and a cultural tool supporting the use of oral tradition and art to reflect on and relearn cultural knowledge.

Iseke (2011) describes indigenous DS as a form of witnessing which facilitates healing. She writes "witnessing includes acts of remembrance in which we look back to re-interpret our relationship to the past in order to understand our present" (p. 311). DS also gives community members the opportunity for self-representation in media, which can work

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Table 2.1 Center for Digital Storytelling 7-step Process

Steps:	Learning Areas and Technical Process
1. Owning your insight 2. Owning your emotions	Social/relational (story circle)
3. Finding the moment	
4. Seeing your story 5. Hearing your story	Literacy (script writing) Technological (photo, video, audio)
6. Assembling your story	
7. Sharing your story →	Optional

to counter negative stereotypes often portrayed in mainstream media outlets (Pack, 2000). Like traditional storytelling, DS allows for the individual and collective voice to simultaneously and dynamically live and unfold.

The youth who participated in NYEP addressed topics of great cultural and personal significance, including health disparities, traditional foods, indigenous identity and original cultural knowledge. Lambert (2009) notes, "If we had to sum up our learning, it would be that we see story work, and our work in particular, as only valuable when it is owned as a technology of healing by a local population" (p. xvi). The CDS process, whose value Lambert (2009) describes as a "technology of healing" (p. xvi), has elements that align well with community processes used by many IP. The talking circle is an integral part of the way many Indigenous communities pass on cultural knowledge. In it, they pay witness to each other's stories and give youth space to think critically about their personal and community narrative. The articulation of that narrative, too often silenced in their daily lives, encourages the participants to define themselves and their experiences. In the context of our project,

McCardle & Berninger 1st pages.indd 14 T&F Proofs: Not For Distribution 6/20/2014 3:24:01 PM

the process allowed the youth to articulate their relationships to culture, health, and wellness for themselves and their communities.

NATIVE YOUTH ENRICHMENT PROGRAM

The Native Youth Empowerment Project[2] was a two-year (2009–2011) program working with 7th–12th graders from five Pacific Northwest school districts to establish (1) an innovative, culturally based 4-week summer intensive STEM career path program and (2) an enrichment program during the school year. Researchers worked with local area school districts to design and implement curricula that responded to the unique learning needs of Native youth and encourage STEM education and careers. Each program included a DS workshop conducted by CDS staff, with the goals of supporting students to: develop communications and technology skills through the production of digital stories; develop self-identities that explored participants' heritage and cultures; extend social networks; expand educational and professional horizons; and gain confidence and leadership capacity. The underlying assumption of the NYEP approach was that students exploring their cultural heritage would gain a stronger sense of Indian identity, which would contribute to these goals.

Over the course of the two workshops 25 students produced 27 videos. Five of the videos were group projects and are not included in this analysis and two students declined public access of their videos and are also not included. Students were from diverse tribal[3] and racial[4] backgrounds and ranged from 7th through 12th grade with the majority enrolled in 9th or 10th grades. The digital stories themselves provide strong evidence of student engagement and experience during the workshops. They present personal stories of life experiences, exploration of sense of self and identity, and relationships with family members and tribes.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL STORIES

Descriptive thematic analysis of twenty individual digital stories yielded several themes associated with cultural identity. This chapter focuses on involvement in traditional cultural practices as a central theme, which has been identified as a protective factor connected to positive cultural identity and improved academic (Zimmerman et al., 1994; Whitbeck et al., 2001) as well as mental health outcomes (Bals et al, 2011). Throughout their digital stories, NYEP students poetically narrate the importance of cultural art forms, traditional food, and lessons from elders. Sometimes concretely and sometimes more nuanced, all of the stories involve narrative processes that culminate in a sense of positive cultural identity and pride.

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McCardle & Berninger 1st pages.indd 15 6/20/2014 3:24:01 PM

TRADITIONAL CULTURAL PRACTICES

Music and Dance

For several students, music and dance was described as an important cultural practice and was also a way to transcend experiences of racism. For example, one student examined the frustration he feels when his family is treated disrespectfully because of their language skills. He used music and pictures of traditional Indigenous and folkloric dancers of Mexico, and his family religious altars to illustrate the beauty of his parents and their cultural heritage. He concluded his story by explaining, "*When I dance I feel the sound of every instrument . . . . This is why I am proud of who I am and of my culture*." Another student described music and dance as a way that he fulfills his responsibility to preserve his cultural heritage for himself and others. In a confident voice, he said "*Ever since I was in the womb, I've been dancing in my grandparents dance group. . . and now I proudly sing in the dance group as the leader in training.*"

Beading

For two students, beading was illustrated as part of a process for understanding themselves as mixed race individuals. One student, who seemed to be questioning her cultural identity, began her story with expressions of doubt and confusion about the connection between her life and heritage. However, throughout her video she described the traditional beading she learned from her ancestors. While three generations sit together to bead, she narrated, "*I tell myself, loop over and under. . .over and under. Pull tight but not too tight. That's your heritage isn't it?*" She described feeling confused about her racial identity because of the assumptions of others and continued, "*I keep telling myself, loop over and under. . . over and under. Pull tight but not too tight. Grab another bead and do it again*." She described a mist lifting as she finished her beading project. While showing a picture of beaded hair sticks and then a photo of her family, she said, "*I know that we make our own heritage and traditions. I am done. They are beautiful side by side. We are beautiful*." Another student described beading as a family event, led by her grandmother, connecting her to her Native identity. "*I bead with my mom, my grandma, my aunties, my sister, and my cousin. Even my uncle bead[s] with us sometimes. . . I like it because it was part of my culture . . . I started beading when I was in the* 4th *grade because I wanted to learn more about my Native side. I see my Nana do it all the time.*"

Traditional Food

As students explored the meaning of "traditional food" in the context of health and wellness, they discovered ways that traditional food is directly

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connected to their identities as Native people. Eight students centered a particular traditional food in their stories. One student described how she was transported back to her indigenous roots in Mexico as she touched tortilla masa (dough). While images of corn and rural Mexico faded in and out, she narrated the lessons her grandfather taught her, even though she didn't understand as a young girl. "*. . . every time I came down to El Rancho he would wake me up, and I would go with him to the corn factory and gather the corn and put it in the grinder and put the masa in plastic bags . . . he would tell me stories about the corn and how it'd be horrible if corn was to ever disappear.*" As she lamented her family move to the U.S. when she was 7-years-old and the abundance of processed food, she arrived at an understanding of her grandfather's teachings, "*as soon as I put my hands in the masa I realized what my grandpa meant . . . that people depended on him in that if they didn't make the masa for the tortillas, then it wouldn't just be the tortillas that would be gone, that our traditions would also be gone.*"

A student adopted from Guatemala by a non-Native family also articulated the importance of tortillas in his life as he explored his indigenous identity in an adoptive family. He narrated, "*I have to eat tortillas everyday. Sometimes I wonder why . . . after reading [a book about] and Indian in Guatemala, I found out why I am hungry for tortillas. She says, 'making tortillas is a reflex that's thousands of years old,' and it answered my question of why I'm hungry for my culture.*" Weaving photos of himself as a toddler, Indigenous people of Guatemala, and Indigenous music, he recounted his adoption, which occurred because he required extensive medical care, and his birth mother had no choice but to leave him in the care of doctors. He concluded by showing pictures of himself with his non-Native family, expressed gratitude, and acknowledged the importance of his Indigenous culture in his life, "*I've never thought too much about why eating tortillas is so important to me, but I do know that there is something I'm missing. I also know that while I have a great family, I will always be hungry for my tortillas.*"

Three students created stories that explore the role of "frybread" in Native communities. One student described misconceptions about traditional food in her community. "*Traditional foods lift us up both spiritually and physically. But back home people hold the common misconception that only frybread, Indian tacos, salmon, and berries are traditional foods.*" She asserted, "*. . . the first two [are] technically not traditional.*" Two other students told stories about the importance of frybread in their families, particularly as recipes are passed down from family and elders. While they centered frybread and Indian tacos in their narratives, each story highlighted the importance of family and elders in their understanding of tradition as the salient message. One student humorously illustrated his fondness for Indian tacos, "*They're kind of a big part of my family life. When we make them together, it's a way to bond. We're all in the kitchen: my mom, my grandma, my dad, and me. There's a lot*

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McCardle & Berninger 1st pages.indd 17 6/20/2014 3:24:02 PM

of laughing and jokes." While self-composed ukulele music plays in the background, he showed video of relatives and friends eating Indian tacos and giving "thumbs up". He added, "*I kind of learned on my own that Indian tacos aren't really traditional food. But, for me, tradition is when it brings everybody together.*" The other student described the special way his grandmother makes frybread and how he learns by watching. While he expressed that frybread isn't necessarily part of a traditional indigenous diet, he asserted "*I know some people would think that frybread is not a serious enough food, but I think it's become a staple of Native American culture. If you don't think so, go talk to my grandma.*"

CULTURAL PRIDE

Throughout the digital stories produced by the NYEP students, exploring the role of cultural traditional practices in their lives was a powerful means to identify and articulate a sense of cultural pride. As the narratives progressed in each story, the overwhelming messages communicated appreciation, gratitude, and optimism for their Native heritage, families, and communities despite challenges associated with historical trauma. One student began his story articulating a sense of burden for his role in his culture but by the end of his story he realized this responsibility is a "*gift.*" He explained that it is in being part of the whole, a culture and a family, that he is stronger than by being alone.

DISCUSSION

DS is not only an educational tool teaching relational, literacy, and technical skills, but also a process that responds to unique learning styles of Native students by incorporating kinesthetic learning, collaboration and culture. Through the process of DS, students are encouraged to actively engage in hands-on learning with story, relationship, and technology in a context of shared space and reflective participation. This allows students to critically reflect on their individual narratives and arrive at their own critical analysis while also participating in the collective process. Additionally, DS allows production of media for self-representation that combats negative stereotypes and discrimination while supporting important lessons on cultural identity that seem to bolster an increased sense of pride, agency, and strength, all of which have been correlated with positive academic outcomes.

This data is a small contribution to an emerging dialogue supporting the incorporation of educational practices that respond to the unique cultural experiences and needs of Native youth. There are some limitations to this particular data as it is a small sample and there is no way to measure direct

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links between DS and improved education outcomes. Future research that explores these direct links and monitors them longitudinally is necessary to truly make connections to the DS process and academic success. As educators and practitioners working with Native youth continue to incorporate DS and other forms of media that accommodate important aspects of traditional culture and modern technology, opportunities will clearly arise. Continued content analysis (including both analysis of narrative and visual images) on already produced and widely accessible digital stories would also contribute to the increasing knowledge base.

While we have found DS to be an empowering process for Native youth, there are some issues that require continued consideration for educators and scholars related to process as well as protection of confidentiality. The solitude of the scripting and assembling process is a potential challenge for participants, as it is in stark contrast to the story circle, and requires that the storytellers place their stories in a particular context and moment in time. The fluid nature of storytelling in indigenous communities is challenged by the fixed nature of a script; however, the use of sound/music and images allows storytellers to add complexity and nuance to their stories. Additionally, with the widespread and unbounded terrain of the web and social networking sites in particular, there are potential concerns for confidentiality. Though all participants and parents are informed and consent to participation and are also given control over the manner and extent to which their stories are shared, there are still many unknowns about access and dissemination through web-based platforms. As technology and web interfaces continue to develop and change, it is essential that educators, scholars, and communities participate in dialogue about the safekeeping of our stories.

Themes from the stories created by NYEP students demonstrate the power of narrative in articulating the importance of indigenous identity and culture within a context of historically situated colonization, ongoing discrimination, and ultimately transcendence through cultural pride and strength. Individually they tell heartfelt stories that act as colorful strands that together weave a collective tapestry of a greater indigenous narrative: one that is empowered and hopeful. As one student narrates while images of Puget Sound waters, Salish style canoes, and his grandparents fade in and out, "*Together we are a lot stronger than we are by ourselves . . . Now I know my culture is not my burden to carry but my greatest gift from my grandfather and grandmother, my path and my gift for future generations*."

NOTES

1. While the majority of the students participating in NYEP identified as American Indian and Alaska Native, there were several who identified as Hispanic with Indigenous heritage from Mexico or mixed-race including Indigenous from Africa. For the purposes of inclusive language, participants will be described either as "Native" or "Indigenous".

McCardle & Berninger 1st pages.indd 19 T&F Proofs: Not For Distribution 6/20/2014 3:24:02 PM

2. The NYEP was funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), NIH grant 5 RC1 MD 004387–02 to University of Washington, Indigenous Wellness Research Institute.
3. Tribal groups represented include Arapahoe, Blackfoot, Cherokee, Chippewa, Colville, Cowlitz, Haida, Tlingit, Kickapoo, Lakota Sioux, Lummi, Makah, Maya, Nisqually, Nu-Chui-Muth, Potowatomi, Pueblo, Shoshone-Bannock, Samish, Sioux, Tewa, Tlingit, Yakima, and Yurok. Note that some students had affiliation with more than one tribe, which is why there are more tribal groups than students.
4. In addition to being from mixed tribal backgrounds, many students indicated they were of mixed-race and tribal heritage. Multi-ethnic combinations included: AIAN and White; AIAN and African American; AIAN and Hispanic and White; and AIAN and African American and White. One student identified as Hispanic only.

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