

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Coming Full Circle: Reflections of an Alternative High School English Teacher

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Abstract

As a Native American graduate of an alternative high school program, my experiences in education may differ from my academic peers. Put simply, alternative high school education provides a non-traditional high school learning experience for its students, which varies by school. I have had a long journey that affects my personal approach in the classroom as a teacher. As an Alternative High School English Teacher, I teach reading and writing to 9-12 grade students in an alternative high school setting, and I meet each student where they are—adapting my lessons for each individual student as needed in order for them to be successful in school. In this paper, I cover my experiences as both a student and an educator in an alternative education classroom where I have found that my own experiences as a student in an alternative high school program help to influence the decisions I make now in my own classroom. This includes how I make connections with my students, and how I create a positive, welcoming classroom culture by utilizing our shared experiences.

Keywords experience, relationships, alternative education

My Journey: The Beginning

My story is unique, and I have come to know that my journey is quite different from my academic peers. If you didn't know me up close, you might not know that I come from a family who struggled with their educational journeys. With the exception of my mother (who has her high school diploma and later went on to get a bachelors in Elementary Education), my entire immediate family can be categorized as "high school dropouts." I am also part of this demographic. I was a second-generation high school dropout. Since I was a minor, my parents had to sign off on my paperwork to drop out of high school. They did what they thought was best for me, because they knew I was unhappy with attending a mainstream high school. As a parent myself now, I know that decision must not have been easy for them.

I didn't really enjoy mainstream high school education, even though I was successful as a honor student and labelled as "gifted and talented" at my high school. My parents agreed that I could drop out from school only if I had a plan on getting a diploma—it was either an alternative high school program or General Education

Development (GED) test. We already had some experience with the alternative high school program, since my brother had attempted it prior to getting his GED. I had remembered his experience and being told that the alternative high school program was an alternative route to a high school diploma for students who weren't successful in regular education schools for a variety of factors such as behavioral, medical, or educational reasons. At the time, I suffered from a panic disorder that was triggered by social anxiety and large crowds. The mainstream high school on the (Native American) reservation served more than 600 students, so my social anxiety increased. I couldn't express my own thoughts and opinions in a way that I felt comfortable with in the larger setting. In addition to this issue, some of my classes didn't challenge me, so I was bored and disinterested—which led me to believe alternative high school was the best option. I started the alternative high school program a short two weeks after dropping out of mainstream high school. None of my choices meant that I didn't want an education or that it wasn't valued by me or my family. We all wanted me to get my high school diploma, especially my dad who had first-hand knowledge of the real-world consequences of not having a high school diploma or GED. I hungered for education and this period gave me even more of drive to find answers. I'm an autonomous learner and if I don't understand something—I actively seek out the answers for myself. My experience at the alternative high school was non-traditional in the sense of delivery. I was housed in one room with one teacher for the entire course of my day. The elimination of transitions helped me to focus better and eased my social anxiety of

having to be in a jam-packed hallway with hundreds of people. Alternative high school allowed me to express myself in my own ways, work at my own pace and put me at ease which led me to graduate a year early from high school. I then went to college and was the first to attend graduate school in my family. Alternative education was where I found my “happy place” in my educational journey. I finally found a place where I felt like I belonged and that I could be successful—I could finally see a future.

When someone is curious about my educational journey as a Native American student, they sometimes ask “What makes alternative education so different from mainstream schools?” According to Borck (2019):

Despite persistent class and race inequalities in educational attainment and achievement in the U.S., hegemonic cultural ideologies and urban education politics and policies continue to proceed from an insistence that education is the great equalizer. These ideologies do not take into account the ways that normative school culture and pedagogical praxes take for granted middle-class, white-supremacist cultural assumptions that privilege student populations whose social locations already probabilize high rates of achievement and attainment (p.1).

I remember in school thinking “just because something works for the majority doesn't make it right.” This was my experience throughout my high school years and well into college. When a system is in place to fit the majority population, sometimes it can

Coming Full Circle

feel like that same system is working against you when you are from the minority population such as mine, being myself a Native American student. Alternative high school allowed me to look at a problem and look for real-world solutions to topics that I was passionate about exploring in the classroom. The teacher encouraged us to find our own answers, rather than telling us the answers. I had the ability to be more creative and make my own path, which made me more independent as a learner. It forced me to be more organized because I was more responsible for my own education. I was in control. It was why I was so successful and able to graduate an entire year earlier from high school. I was sacrificing my honor status at graduation to go this route, but it was more than just receiving honor cords for me. It was about doing what was right for me.

My Teaching Experience: Coming Full Circle

In the early stages of my career as an educator, I was intimidated in my own classroom. How do I connect with my students? How do I foster a love of learning in students? There were a handful of questions, and I didn't really feel like I had many of the answers. According to Parker Palmer (1998)

...the classroom is so lifeless or painful or confused—and I am so powerless to do anything about it—that my claim to be a teacher seems a transparent sham. Then the enemy is everywhere: in those students from some alien planet, in that subject I thought I knew, and in the personal pathology that keeps me earning my living this way. What a

fool I was to imagine that I had mastered this occult art—harder to divine than tea leaves and impossible for mortals to do even passably well! (p. 1).

When I first read this in one of my classes as a graduate student in education, it really made me feel like I wasn't alone in my feelings when approaching my first year of teaching. We go into our classrooms the first time thinking we are prepared, only to find out moments later that everything we had expected was nothing more than an illusion. It was trial and error at first trying to figure out what worked well, what needed tweaking, and what I never wanted to try again. I quickly adopted the mentality, "we don't all learn the same, so why should I teach the same?" I had to see what my students enjoyed and what they didn't enjoy doing. We were learning from each other.

This was also the attitude I had when I walked into the interview for my current job. I still remember being asked, "Why should we hire you?" There was only one answer that came to mind, "Because I'm just like the students you serve." Without any hesitation, I shared my learning experience and that I could connect with my students if I got the job at the alternative school. I strongly believed that students could learn from me, because I was a prime example of a student having success in alternative education.

After getting hired, I recall many people telling me about the stereotypes of students pursuing alternative high school education (stereotypes likely not within awareness of an alternative high school graduate). Students who attend alternative education programs are the "lost causes," "delinquents," or "too far gone to save."

These stereotypes couldn't be any further from the truth. My students can accomplish anything if given the right tools. Many of them are able to break a cycle of poverty, abuse, and/or addiction after completing, or through, their education. I couldn't be any prouder of my students overcoming the challenges presented to them—both academically and in their home life. They are students who need to be told they can accomplish their dreams if they are open to their education. My students are special—they're "at-risk" of never getting a diploma—but they take the risk to pursue an alternative route to a high school diploma. They work with us to achieve something they may not have without alternative education. I know deep down in my heart that I would likely not have a high school diploma myself if it hadn't been for an alternative high school education helping me pave the way to my future.

Throughout my experience as a teacher in alternative education, I have found that my personal journey (outlined below) and my ability to share that with my students is helpful and makes for a positive teacher-student relationship: "...cultural similarity between teachers and students produces interactional agreeability and ease because cultural norms, reference points, and interactional cues are easily perceived and understood" (Borck, 2019, p. 9). As an alternative high school student myself, I was able to see from my students' point of view, being in a similar school with similar needs, I can thus connect with my students to foster better relationships. Culturally responsive teaching is defined as using the cultural knowledge, previous experiences, and strengths of culturally diverse students as a basis for teaching those students more effectively (Gay, 2000). Using my

knowledge of what it was like progressing through an alternative program, allowed me to be more empathetic to my students and more willing to accommodate each of their individual needs to "meet a student where they are." Every student that comes through my classroom door has a story unique to them and it is my job to earn their trust to be told their story so that I can best serve them. One way that I establish trust with my students to hear their story is by sharing my own story and my own experiences, because sometimes that's all it takes for a student to know that I am here to help them.

Moving Forward: Becoming a Scholar

It wasn't until recently, when I graduated with my doctoral degree, that I realized that I have changed over the course of my journey. My doctoral journey has been somewhat rough to say the least, but I have had the opportunity to really grow. As a Native American and single parent of a special needs child, I was not only a minority but also a non-traditional student in higher education. It came with several challenges—the biggest being losing my father suddenly at the beginning of a semester. Native American students often have extended families, our views of family are strong. Losing my father was difficult, but I reminded myself of what he said when I was accepted into my program, "I'm so proud of you for becoming the first Ph.D. in the family, people can take a lot of things away from you, but your education is not one of them." It was the catalyst that kept pushing me forward—he knew what it was like not graduating school and he pushed for a different future for me. As I look back to the day when I had my dissertation defense, my uncle told me a story of my dad telling him that he would cry the day that I would

become the first doctor in the family and that's why it was raining that day. My dad was crying tears of joy from heaven, and he would forever be proud of me. Native Americans use storytelling as a learning device. Our stories have power. I truly believe my uncle's story was powerful because I found comfort in it. It's one of the reasons that I use storytelling today as a learning and motivational device in my own classroom.

I had to overcome my own obstacles throughout school as a minority and non-traditional student. It has shaped me personally and professionally. I look back at a recent conversation I had with one of my graduating students. They shared that a family member looked down on them for attending an alternative school which they saw as "taking the bare minimum." That family member didn't want them to go to a community college after graduation like the student had originally planned. Instead, they wanted my student to aim to attend a university setting. The student was caught between a rock and a hard place. I could see the confusion in their face as they struggled with how to move forward. After some deliberation, I asked them why their family member felt like they were "taking the bare minimum" and their plans for community college fell short of their expectations. The student shared that their family member saw their plan as an "easy way out" and if they didn't attend a university right after graduation, they wouldn't be able to be successful outside of alternative education.

When I learned the point of view of the family member, I shared my whole story with my student and how I had just defended my dissertation. I was now Dr. Johnson, a title that I don't think I could have ever accomplished without my own

educational experiences in alternative high school that helped to pave the way to academic success as a student of color. My student smiled and asked if they could share my story with their family member. She came back to report that my story of success after alternative education gave their family member hope—that we were more than just negative stereotypes as alternative high school students. It also wasn't the last time she came to me for help—sharing my story with her helped to establish trust between us. It turned me into a point of reference instead of a teacher who was standing in the way of her and a high school diploma.

Allowing myself to share stories about my own educational journey, I can reflect on how education can be approached through a different lens. It also allows me to acknowledge that my own students might feel "othered" in the classroom and address possible ways to address that issue.

Conclusions

When I first started teaching, I was living on my home reservation and working in the same school that I attended as a high school student. It was in my home school that I recall learning that 100% of our reservation students were deemed "at-risk" students who may fail or drop out of school. Native American students have a dropout rate that is twice the national average, which is more than any other ethnic or racial group in the United States. It forced me to reflect that at one time, I was part of this demographic. As a Native American student in an alternative high school classroom, I found success in academia through an alternative route to my education. I would have never found this success without having access to an alternative high school education.

Despite living off the reservation in an urban area now, many of my students are still similar to me in a lot of ways. Some, if not all, are at-risk students looking at alternative education as a last stop before giving up on high school entirely—many of them also students of color. Not every student learns the same, and there is no “one size fits all” approach to education. The educational system that is currently in place at the federal and state level was created to fit the majority of student needs, not the minority. Many minority students, like the students that I work with, are at a disadvantage when pursuing their education. We are treated like we can’t make it in a traditional school, or we are “lost causes” in education, but really, we just learn differently. We can do anything we put our minds to—but only if we are given the opportunities, atmospheres and tools suited to us to help get us there.

Author Details

Dr. Caitlin Johnson has been a secondary English school teacher for five years. She started her career in a regular education setting located on her home reservation of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians located in Belcourt, ND. As an alternative high school graduate herself, she made the transition to alternative education and has taught English for the past three years at an alternative high school in Fargo, ND where she is mentoring the next generation of alternative high school students. Email: johnsoc4@fargoschools.org

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