

Gadugi: Reclaiming Native American Education through a Culturally Reflective Pedagogy

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The history of American Indian education has been one of colonialism and cultural erasure. From the first missionary educators who first came to the Indigenous nations of the Americas well into the twentieth century, Native children have been subjected to physical, mental and emotional abuse. This paper examines one program's efforts at reclaiming the educational process for American Indian children and youth through an immersive, culturally relevant and reflective pedagogy. The Gadugi Partnership is a dual enrollment collaboration between Appalachian State University and Cherokee High School that endeavors to use traditional Cherokee values and practices within the classroom to promote Cherokee culture, history, and language. With particular focus on the ancient Cherokee ideal of gadugi—service—I argue that this model of education holds promise for making formal education responsive to the needs of Cherokee youth, as well as allowing them the chance to practice and promote this ideal within their community. The Cherokee people have always valued education; it is time education value the Cherokee people. I will argue that the methods and approach of the Gadugi Partnership is a step in that important direction.

Keywords: indigenous education, history, culturally responsive pedagogy, Cherokee education, Gadugi, Native Americans

Introduction

June 2, 2021, was a bright and warm day on the Qualla Boundary, the ancestral home of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) located among the picturesque Smoky Mountains in western North Carolina. The Tribal Council was running behind on the legislative agenda that day, and two Cherokee High School (CHS) students paced outside the chambers, waiting for their opportunity to make their presentation. The students were there for what was, in many ways, the culmination of what began as a service learning homework assignment in the college-level class they were taking. In many other, important ways, however, they were part of a much larger effort to make education among their EBCI community culturally respectful, relevant, and responsive. These two students, and the classmates they represented this afternoon, stood as examples of what indigenous education can be when it is thoughtful and intentional in its reflection of a Native community. Representing the Gadugi Partnership, these Native youth were shining a bright light on the potential for American Indian schooling to turn away from a brutal past and towards a hopeful and valuable future.

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Historical Overview of American Indian Education

For more than a century, the menacing cloud of colonialism and cultural genocide hung like a specter over Native American education. The Indigenous peoples of the Americas presented a unique challenge to the Europeans who arrived—a challenge of philosophy, morality, economy, theology, and more. Indigenous ways of life such as matrilineal cultures and communal property “ownership” all stood in stark contrast to the tenets of the Western paradigm. In 1849, an author for the *Baptist Missionary Herald* condemned the American Indian for having “no chambers of commerce, no insurance companies, no banks, [and] no joint stock associations,” while also calling Euro-Americans to the work of teaching the continent’s Indigenous peoples “civilization and religion...art and science...learning, prosperity, and usefulness” (Berkhofer, 1965, pp. 8-9). In 1885, Massachusetts Senator Henry Dawes said of the Cherokee people, “They have got as far as they can go, because they hold their land in common...there is no selfishness, which is at the bottom of civilization” (Conley, 2005, p. 193). Indigenous communities were also condemned for their languages and religions. For Europeans, remaking the Native peoples they encountered became integral to the success of their colonizing efforts and the efforts to establish themselves in their “new world.”

As early as 1606, Europeans realized the power of education to mold Native children and, through them, to remake Indigenous societies. That year, the first royal Charter for the Colony of Virginia “commended the founders for their ‘desires for the Furtherance of so noble a work...in propagating the Christian religion to such People, as yet live in Darkness and miserable Ignorance’” (Reyhner & Eder, 2004, p. 25). For the Europeans, Christianity and the education of Native children were, in the words of Robert F. Berkhofer, “inextricably combined” (Berkhofer, 1965, p. 6). Christian missionary educators were the vanguard of colonialism, bringing with them a pedagogy of divine certainty that saw all aspects of Native life and culture as uncivilized and unworthy of preservation. One of the first missionary educators to come to the Cherokee Nation was the Moravian John Gambold. He was perfectly clear about his goals and the objectives of the school he and his wife, Anna Rosina, operated at Springplace. “[I]t seems desirable that their Language, Customs, Manner of Thinking, etc. should be forgotten,” he wrote in 1809 (McLoughlin, 1995, p. 68). Another missionary, the irrepressible Gideon Blackburn, described his work with Native children in this way: “...the savage [is] taken from the filth of the smoky hut, from the naked and untamed state of the heathen, and from the idols of the pagan world, [and] is brought to the habits and manners of civilized life” (McLoughlin, 1995, p. 71).

The objectives of colonial education also included divorcing Indigenous children from their families, who were deemed bad influences and obstacles to civilization. William G. McLoughlin wrote, “What is most striking about the Indian missionary enterprise was its extremely divisive impact upon the Indian communities... It did not trouble them that they turned...mission students against their parents” (McLoughlin, 2008, p. 39). Cyrus Kingsbury, an early nineteenth century Protestant missionary among the Cherokee, noted that, “The children

should be removed as much as possible from the society of the natives and placed where they would have the influence of example as well as precept” (McLoughlin, 2008, p. 63). A Catholic educator working on the Tulalip Reservation wrote about Native students that, “[They] must become as orphans, that is they must forget their parents as far as possible in order to abandon the habits of the Indians with less difficulty” (Reyhner & Eder, 2004, p. 123). This consistently corrosive model of education devastated Indigenous families and, indeed, entire nations. This outcome was, of course, the point.

One of the primary and most effective tools of this cultural genocide was the institution of the boarding school. Removing children from their families and communities, as Kingsbury had noted, allowed the missionary educators unfettered access to Native children without worry that their work might be undone or undermined by their families and traditions. These boarding schools were “the institutional manifestation of the government’s determination to completely restructure the Indians’ minds and personalities” (Adams, 1995, p. 97) The result of schools built on such ethnocentrism was “an institutional setting hegemonically oppressive in many of its features” (Adams, 2006, p. 57). These schools came to embody Richard Henry Pratt’s injunctive to “Kill the Indian, Save the man.” Pratt, who founded the Carlisle Indian school in Pennsylvania, was a firm believer in the uses of formal education as a means for erasing Indigenous culture. Samuel Chapman Armstrong, himself the son of Christian missionaries who had proselytized the natives of Hawaii, founded the Hampton Institute in April 1868 with an equally brutal outlook. In the acculturation process, Armstrong said, “Many Indians might die, but the severe training of real life...would probably result in creating out of the residue a people who would assimilate” with White America (Lindsey, 1995, p. 111; McLoughlin, 2008, p. 75). We can see the horrific mental and emotional anguish brought on by this philosophy through a letter written to Pratt by one of his students in 1881. Nellie Robertson, a young Sioux, disclosed, “I write this letter with much sorrow to tell you that I have spoken one Indian word...before I knew what I was saying, I found that I had spoken one word, and I felt so sorry that I could not eat my supper, and I could not forget that Indian word, and while I was sitting at the table the tears rolled down my cheeks. I tried very hard to speak only English” (Adams, 1995, p. 141).

Robertson’s grief is unsurprising, given that one of the major goals of Indian education was to inculcate within the Indian child a deep feeling of shame at their culture and heritage. Faculty and administrators at these institutions often faulted Native children for what they saw as “an excessive and largely unwarranted amount of racial pride” (Lindsey, 1995, p. 111). Booker T. Washington, who taught at Hampton, referred to one of his Indian students as a, “weak, dirty, ignorant piece of humanity” who, after his Hampton transformation, had become, “a strong, decent, Christian *man*” (Lindsey, 1995, p. 96). Whites were often appalled that Native people did not share this dim view of their people and did not see themselves and their cultures as inferior. “Europeans,” wrote McLoughlin, “were astonished to discover that the Indians considered their way of life far superior to that of the whites” (McLoughlin, 2008, p. 15). One such example was the Cherokee headman, Yonaguska. An influential leader of the deeply conservative, traditionalist Cherokee

who lived in the Northern Valley Towns of the Nation, Yonaguska was given a copy of the Gospel of Matthew by missionaries seeking permission to distribute the text to his townspeople. When asked what he thought of the book, the aging chief replied, “It seems to be a good book; strange that the white people are not better having had it so long” (McLoughlin, 2008, p. 12). Such ethnic pride could not be countenanced in a culture built on the premise of exceptionalism, and formal education was seen as the most efficient means of removing it from Native minds.

Twentieth Century Indian Education

The abuse continued into the twentieth century. Prior to the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978, “up to one-third of Native American children were being taken from their homes by private and state agencies, including church-run programs, and placed with mostly white families or in boarding schools” (Associated Press, 2019). Often the foster care system was as brutal as the formal school institutions, with one horrific example of an American Indian child “sent to live in Indiana with a Mennonite family who put bleach on her skin to lighten it, told her to say she was Armenian and kept her from communicating with her family” (Associated Press, 2019). American Indian Movement founder Dennis Banks recalled mournfully “the terrible day when the yellow bus arrived” to take him to school (Banks, 2004, p. 23). Banks boarded the school bus believing he was being taken to a nearby town, but instead found “they were taking us to Pipestone, Minnesota, a full two hundred fifty miles away. More than eleven years would pass before I would see my relatives again” (Banks, 2004, p. 25). Indigenous author and poet Tim Giago wrote of “getting that queasy feeling in late summer. I knew soon my dad would be packing us up and driving us to the boarding school” (Giago, 2006, p. 23). Schools were known throughout Indian Country to be institutions of oppression, and Native children bore the scars of these institutions for the remainder of their lives. “One cannot severely abuse children,” Giago wrote, “and not expect that these children would take that form of abuse into their adult lives...I believe that there is not a single generation [of American Indians] since the late 1800s that has not experienced the legacy of violence as victims of the boarding school” (Giago, 2006, p. 5).

With the rise of an American Indian civil rights movement and the renewed push for recognition of American Indian sovereignty, however, there was slow and steady progress in Indian Country towards reclaiming the purposes of formal education and asserting control over Native schools. Szasz notes that, “between 1933 and 1941 the number of day schools jumped from 132 to 226 and enrollment almost tripled. With 15,789 children in day school in 1941, more [Indian] children were attending day school than boarding school” (Szasz, 1999, p. 61). This shift to day schools was inspired more by a belief that American Indian children did not require a rigorous curriculum or preparation for any form of higher education than any newfound respect for Indian families, however, with Commissioner of Indian Affairs Jones believing, “day schools should be established at convenient places where [Indians] may learn enough to transact the ordinary business of life. Beyond

this in the way of schools it is not necessary to go” (Cahill, 2011, p. 224). Still, for many Indian parents it meant being able to provide their children with some schooling without being forced to surrender their children to boarding schools. Many of the changes and reforms that occurred throughout the twentieth century were inspired by the work of Dr. Lewis Meriam of the Brookings Institution, whose report on Indian education (known popularly as the Meriam Report) called for a re-thinking of the ethnocentrism that had been the centerpiece of Native schools since their earliest inception. The report bluntly stated, “The most fundamental need in Indian education is a change in point of view.”¹ In a remarkable shift, the report called for “the use of classroom material from the ‘local Indian life, or at least [from] within the scope of the child’s experience” (Szasz, 1999, p. 23). In a further example of this radical departure, the report sought to end the view of Native parents and communities as obstacles to an Indigenous child’s education, noting that effective schooling for Native children would take, “...into consideration home and family life as an essential part of the process of educating the Indian.”² Throughout the tortured history of Indigenous education, Native parents and communities, “created or fought for a sense of self and community, often under tremendous duress” (Lowawaima & McCarty, 2006, p. 13). Following the Meriam Report, there was at least a modicum of cooperation in such self and community building from the federal government. Though the phrase was not yet in use, these changes suggested a need for culturally responsive education.

These small but important steps were built upon during the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt and, particularly, his Commissioner of Indian Affairs, John Collier. Collier had been a lobbyist on behalf of the American Indian Defense Association before taking his post in government and was in charge of the Bureau of Indian Affairs from 1933 to 1945. In this position, he oversaw the Indian New Deal, a series of policies that sought to reform the Indian service and make it more responsive to Indian Country (Taylor, 1980, p. 17). The purposes of day schools also changed under Collier. Under the Indian New Deal, the government “subsidized the creation of 100 community day schools on tribal lands,” with the schools seen as engines of community revitalization rather than the belief that Indigenous children needed only the skills to become laborers for western whites (Rhodes, 2015). In 1930, W. Carson Ryan became the Director of Indian Education in the federal government, a position once described as “the most challenging position in the American school field” (Szasz, 1999, p. 29). Reflecting the new direction the government was taking, Ryan remarked, “We make no secret of the fact that we hope to eliminate gradually practically all the Government boarding schools” (Szasz, 1999, p. 31).

The Post-World War Two era saw a resurgence in Indian pride, and in this time American Indians began to demand not merely a say, but genuine control over their own schools and the curricula that would impact and inform their

¹Meriam Report: The problem of Indian Administration (1928), p. 346. Available at: https://narrf.org/nill/documents/merriam/n_merriam_chapter9_part1_education.pdf.

²Meriam Report: The problem of Indian Administration (1928), p. 349. Available at: https://narrf.org/nill/documents/merriam/n_merriam_chapter9_part1_education.pdf.

children. The paternalism that had characterized so much of Indian education became unacceptable. Attitudes that permeated the federal government's approach to Indian children, parents and families found concerted pushback from the communities. The 1969 Subcommittee Report on Indian Education, also known as the Kennedy Report, called the federal government's Indian education policies, "a national tragedy and a national disgrace" (US Government Printing Office, 1969, p. x). Indian Country agreed, and a groundswell of protest and activism would begin to redefine Indian schools. Della Warrior noted that it was "grassroots people—people from local communities—[who] served as the catalysts for change" (Warrior, 2007, p. 291). Much of this change is reflected in a blizzard of federal legislation that loosened the government's control over Indian schools, including the "Indian Education Act, the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act, and the Tribally Controlled Community Colleges Act." In 1975, Santa Fe Indian School had become the first Indian contract school "...[and was] responsible to the All Indian Pueblo Council" (Szasz, 1999, p. 217). By 1987, "only ten percent of all Indian children in school were enrolled in BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs] schools" (Szasz, 1999, p. 214).

Education and Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Education

The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI), located on the Qualla Boundary in western North Carolina, were included in both the tragedy and the transformation of Indian education. The Qualla Indians, as the EBCI were originally known, were located in the far northern section of the Cherokee Nation, in a region known as the Valley Towns. Led by men like Yonaguska, Euchella, and Junaluska, the Qualla Cherokee were among the most isolated and the most conservative of the Cherokee, holding fast to traditional ways and being slow to adopt the ways of the English and, eventually, Americans, who increasingly surrounded them. These Cherokee avoided the loss of their homeland during the Removal era thanks in part to treaties with the United States negotiated in 1817 and 1819 and, mostly, due to their location within the North Carolina mountains and the notion that this land, unlike the fertile grounds of their brethren located in Georgia and Alabama, was virtually useless for development. They were reluctant to send their children to mission schools, though some of these Cherokee, such as Atsi (known to the whites as John Arch), would avail themselves of mission education. The mission schools that were established in this area of the Cherokee Nation were operated primarily by the Baptists, a Protestant denomination with a strong following in western North Carolina and east Tennessee. In 1821, the Reverend Henry Posey of Ashville, North Carolina, established a mission school in the Valley Towns. He was accompanied by Thomas Dawson, a Kentucky Baptist who was also a trained educator "well acquainted with the Lancastrian mode of instruction" (McLoughlin, 1990, pp. 21-23). By far the most effective and influential mission educator during this early stage of formal education among the Qualla Cherokee was Evan Jones, also a Baptist. Jones was a Welsh immigrant who came to America in 1821, just as the Baptist experiment with Cherokee

schools began. He threw himself into the work, learned the Cherokee language, and accompanied the Cherokee along the Trail of Tears. He reestablished schools in Indian Territory and continued his work there for another four decades before dying on August 18, 1872, and being “buried in the graveyard in Tahlequah near many of the Cherokees he had served for so long” (McLoughlin, 1990, p. 443).

Following Removal, the Cherokee who remained in the East were left in a vulnerable and undefined position. The state of North Carolina did not even recognize the EBCI as a distinct Indian community until July 27, 1868—three decades after Removal (Godbold & Russell, 1990, p. 135). The EBCI were also confronted with an educational vacuum. William Holland Thomas, the adopted son of Yonaguska, was concerned with the lack of available schools for the Cherokee. Thomas was a Democrat and a reformer who would serve in the North Carolina legislature from 1848 until the outbreak of the Civil War, and as Principal Chief of the Cherokee until 1867. As a legislator, Thomas “believed that a good system of public education was essential,” and he included the Cherokee in this formulation (Godbold & Russell, 1990, p. 69). John R. Finger wrote that Thomas, “diligently sought to establish schools among the Indians, but the best he could do was obtain the services of an occasional itinerant teacher who might stay for a few months” (Finger, 1984, p. 65). This situation remained for the Cherokee until the Quakers began a network of day schools in 1881—nearly half a century after Removal. During this era, day schools operated in the communities of Big Cove, Soco, Birdtown and Snowbird.³ Quaker Thomas C. Brown was named the first superintendent of this school system, setting the tone early by hiring “experienced teachers who...quickly proved their worth” in what was “the real beginning of educational progress” for the Qualla Cherokee (Finger, 1984, p. 138). That same year, in addition to the day schools, the Quakers opened a boarding school in the community of Yellow Hill. Known as the Cherokee Training School, the Quakers operated the school for its first twelve years through a contract with the Cherokee. In 1896, the school came under the supervision of the federal government (Newland, 2022). Of his time attending the school, Cherokee Beloved Man Jerry Wolfe recalled, “I went to Cherokee Boarding School when I was eight years old in 1932. I was always very uneasy and uncomfortable at school. It made me feel uneasy in my skin. There were always moves made and words said for no reason at all, except that we were American Indian. There was always a fright in your soul because you were afraid to defend yourself and your culture... You really got punished for speaking the Cherokee language... even being suspected of speaking Cherokee. You really got a whipping ... I felt tight in my shoulders for so many years (because of the experience). It was like walking on eggshells. I was a grown man before I let the tenseness go away, before I could open up” (McNeil, 2022).

In 1892 the federal government took over the operation of all Cherokee schools, a situation that would continue into the middle of the twentieth century. The new superintendent, Andrew Spencer of New York City, took charge, to be followed by Thomas W. Potter, Julian W. Haddon, and Joseph C. Hart (Finger, 1984, p.

³History of Cherokee Central Schools. Available at: https://www.ccs-nc.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=373900&type=d&pREC_ID=851868.

162). The objectives of each of these superintendents was, “to maintain and improve the Indian schools, and to serve as symbols of federal authority over the” North Carolina Cherokee (Finger, 1984, p. 162). This relationship between the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and the federal government continued into midcentury, when the era of Termination began first under the Truman administration and then continued with the Eisenhower administration. The boarding school closed in June, 1954, sending EBCI children into the midst of a new round of political fighting and maneuvering. Though the remaining day schools and their small facilities were considered as insufficient for the education of the community’s young, the question of where they might attend school was a difficult one, with “considerable opposition to accepting phenotypical Cherokees in [area white] schools because of past frictions, the Band’s tax immunity, and resentment over the recent landmark supreme court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*” (Finger, 1991, pp. 130-131). For the next eight years EBCI schools were underfunded and EBCI parents were forced to send their children to the off-Boundary public schools when they could. Finally, in 1962, the day schools were closed and a central elementary school was opened on the Boundary. Thirteen years later, in August 1975, a new high school opened for EBCI youth.

Public Law 100-297 and Beyond

The true sea change for the education of EBCI children came in the early 1990s. In the spring of 1988, the US Congress passed Public Law 100-297. This legislation reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary School Act, but it also provided local schools—including tribal schools—a degree of autonomy that would have been unthinkable in Indian Country a mere generation before. The law allowed Native school systems to apply for grants from the federal government that they, in turn, used to operate their own schools. The law removed much of the control and power from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, a government entity “perceived by Indians and non-Indians alike as an inefficient, overly bureaucratized, paternalistic organization,” according to Snyder-Joy (1994, pp. 20-34). In 1990, Cherokee Central Schools was led by the indomitable Joyce Conseen Dugan, a strong advocate for Indian educational reform and for tribal sovereignty over what and how Indigenous students were taught. Under her visionary leadership, “On August 1, 1990, Cherokee Central Schools became a tribally operated school.”⁴ Echoing Snyder-Joy, Dugan later remarked that the EBCI community, “took over the school system as a tribe...because the [federal] government just shouldn’t run schools” (Bryant & Bryant, 2013). On September 7, 1995, Dugan was elected the first female Principal Chief of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians after her transformative stint as director of Cherokee schools. Education remained a high priority for her time as Principal Chief, and she remarked that she carried, “a strong desire to ‘put culture back into the Cherokee school system’” (Carney, 2005,

⁴History of Cherokee Central Schools. Available at: https://www.ccs-nc.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=373900&type=d&pREC_ID=851868.

p. 148). Indeed, Dugan called this goal “one of her primary incentives for running” for the position of Principal Chief (Carney, 2005, p. 148).

The Gadugi Partnership

The Gadugi Partnership launched in the fall of 2013 as a dual enrollment program between Cherokee High School (CHS) and Appalachian State University (ASU), a four-year institution located in Boone, North Carolina. This beginning was preceded by more than 6 years of community involvement, meetings, and listening sessions that were undertaken throughout the EBCI community and with numerous stakeholders and groups to insure that Gadugi would be founded upon, “a pedagogy...forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed...in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity” (Freire, 2000, p. 48). Cherokee Central Schools school board voted to approve the partnership on April 8, 2013, and the first cohort of 11 students were enrolled in August of that year, with 6 more students enrolling in the spring class (Bryant, 2014, p. 4). There are three courses taught through the program: *Education and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians*, which is taught each fall; *Cherokee Culture and Leadership*, which is taught each spring, and *The Cherokee Nation in the Era of Removal*, a course taught during the summer. Each of the programs’ courses is offered to juniors and seniors at CHS and is taught through a hybrid of online and in-person instruction at CHS. Each course provides three hours of college credit that may transfer to any university or college. Each of these classes was designed specifically for CHS students, with the purpose of augmenting the work already being done at the high school to preserve and promote EBCI heritage, history and culture. An overarching goal for the program and for each class and every assignment is to provide for the CHS students involved a genuinely culturally responsive classroom experience. For the partnership’s purposes, we may think of culturally responsive teaching as, “using students’ customs, characteristics, experience, and perspectives as tools for better classroom instruction” (Will & Najarro, 2022). Gadugi seeks “to meet the educational needs of culturally diverse students by recognizing that their cultural knowledge is worthwhile” (Garcia & Ahler, 1988, p. 20). As discussed earlier, too often American Indian education has been little more than cultural genocide, and even when educators and policy makers have had the best of intentions, too often teachers “have undervalued the potential for academic success among students of color, setting low expectations for them and thinking of cultural differences as barriers rather than assets to learning” (Will & Najarro, 2022). Reclaiming the classroom for EBCI youth is part of the mission of the Gadugi Partnership, and best practices within the program recognizes that integrating a culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy and curriculum can have long lasting effects, including, “strengthening students’ sense of identity, promoting equity and inclusivity in the classroom, engaging students in the course material, [and] supporting critical thinking” (Burnham, 2020). Reclaiming the classroom will also lead to revolutionizing the educational system in which Native children learn. American Indian youth “have some of the worst educational outcomes of any marginalized group in the U.S.,” a

situation compounded and caused by the chasm between the community and the classroom (Schwartz, 2016).

The partnership's mission statement says in part that the program, "strives to prepare, support and sustain the future leaders of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians through coursework, service, and cultural immersion."⁵ The name for the partnership—*Gadugi*—was chosen in consultation with students, tribal community members, and EBCI elders and stakeholders. The word *gadugi* means a, "community service organization...or free labor company, whose origins go back to aboriginal times. Among the Eastern Band, the *gadugi* was a group of people from a community who organized communal labor, mostly relating to the cooperative planting and harvesting of every family's crops and assisting people during times of illness or death" (Neely, 1991, p. 35). It was this ethos of service that the partnership has always sought to emulate and encourage. A review of the program's first year noted, "Our goal here at Appalachian State will be to do everything within our power to provide [CHS students] the opportunities and tools to grow and learn so that, like the *gadugi*, our Cherokee graduates can return to their community to make a difference in the lives of family, friends, and, indeed, their nation" (Bryant, 2014, p. 8).

Cherokee Culture and Leadership

This ethos is best captured in the *Cherokee Culture and Leadership* class offered each spring at CHS. The course description sums up the class in the following way: "This course will examine the ideal of leadership within the Cherokee Nation and the many different forms it has taken. Through in-depth analysis of biographies of leading Cherokee men and women as well as through the study of cultural norms and standards, students will examine what it means to be a Cherokee leader. The class will examine issues in Cherokee history and how the people responded, as well as current issues and trends and how they may be called upon to lead. The course will include a service project that will be student-directed and implemented with help from the instructor as well as other community stakeholders" (Bryant, 2021). The enumerated goals for the course are to "Understand the struggle for tribal sovereignty [and] survival...Become familiar with the men and women who have contributed to the progress of the Cherokee Nation...Examine what it means to be a leader within Cherokee society, both from a historical and a sociological perspective...Develop an understanding of their own leadership strengths and weaknesses as well as a plan for growth in this area," and, most importantly for this paper, students are asked to, "Identify an area of need; design and implement a viable service project to address this need/issue" (Bryant, 2021).

In keeping with the ideals and spirit of *gadugi*, the capstone for the class is this service learning project. The project is student-driven; the students select the service area and the approach with support from the instructor. This element of the

⁵Gadugi Partnership mission statement, 2022.

project is of the utmost importance because, as Cummins has written, “Students can become empowered only when education becomes a true community enterprise” (Cummins, 1988, p. 7). The service project itself is heavily influenced by the reflective practice of Paulo Freire, who argued for a pedagogy “that favors the autonomy of the students” and that takes into careful consideration the life experiences of the students and their community (Freire, 1998, p. 21). The service project is introduced to the students on the first day of class.

In Spring semester 2021 (January-May), there were six CHS students enrolled in the *Cherokee Culture and Leadership* class. The first two weeks of the class were spent discussing the meaning and examples of culture, including syncretism and cultural conflicts across the world. These discussions were followed by an introductory lesson on the role and transformation of Cherokee culture over the centuries, including the colonial education efforts to eradicate elements of Cherokee culture that were deemed “uncivilized” or “heathen” by Europeans. The students were then reminded of the role of gadugi in traditional Cherokee culture and its place in modern EBCI communities. The lesson before beginning the service project is devoted to the discussion of the concept of gadugi that took place at the Research Foundation for Governance in India in August, 2010. There, a public debate took place centered around “Gandhi and Gadugi: Traditional Indigenous Views on Service and Community” (Research Foundation for Governance in India, 2010).

At this symposium, Professor Michael Morris of the University of New Mexico taught Indian scholars about gadugi and defined it as, “to work together to solve common problems in society” (Research Foundation for Governance in India, 2010). In particular, Professor Morris noted, “some of the current leaders of the Cherokee, particularly the Cherokee youth and gave an example of ‘gadugi’ in practice; that to provide a community with clean water a pipeline was planned, but instead of just building it through already existing villages without their permission, the families all worked together on their respective parts of the line” (Research Foundation for Governance in India, 2010). Students were informed that, though more than 8,000 miles separate the Qualla Boundary from India, scholars there argued that the ancient Cherokee ideal of gadugi could be used to rescue and reinforce the meaning of Gandhian philosophy for Indian youth. The purpose of this discussion is to remind these EBCI youth that the ideal of gadugi, while traditional in every sense of the word, has power and meaning in the twenty-first century. This approach echoes Dewey, who wrote, “A knowledge of the past and its heritage is of great significance when it enters into the present, but not otherwise” (Dewey, 1916, p. 75). Thus reminded that Cherokee principles are studied by and inspiring to different nations and cultures around the world, students are asked to begin preparing for their own practice of gadugi.

The Blue Light Initiative

The students in the class identified the illicit use of illegal drugs within their community as a pressing area of need and one to which they wanted to dedicate their service work and project. The Qualla Boundary is not the only Indigenous

community struggling against drug abuse. Statistics show that, “While Native Americans account for only a small part of the U.S. population, these people experience much higher rates of substance abuse compared to other racial and ethnic groups,” including having, “the highest methamphetamine abuse rates, including past month use at more than 3 times the rate of than any other group. They are also more likely to report drug abuse in the past month (17.4%) or year (28.5%) than any other ethnic group” (American Addiction Centers, 2022). In 2016, a Boundary resident told the *Cherokee One Feather*, “On a weekly basis, I find numerous needles on Old No. 4 Road...It’s disgusting. I don’t even allow my kids to play in the front yard in fear of them, or my dog, stepping on a dirty drug needle. Our community needs help” (Mckie, 2016). In 2019, EBCI leaders installed 17 kiosks around the Boundary for the disposal of used syringes in the hopes of keeping them from public areas, including areas such as playgrounds frequented by EBCI children and youth. The EBCI Secretary of Public Health and Human Services assured residents that the kiosks, “don’t have cameras in them. You’re not going to be prosecuted if you’re seen using them” (Mckie, 2019). The rising drug use and the concurrent rise in hepatitis C infections led the EBCI to create the Tsalagi Public Health Syringe Services Program in 2017—a needle exchange program offering “a variety of public health services, resources, and supplies to participants” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). When the program was approved by Tribal Council, Painttown Rep. Tommye Saunooke remarked, “Everyone in here is going to be affected by someone or somebody that you know that’s an addict. So, we need to accept that and help them all that we can” (Mckie, 2017).

With this crisis as the backdrop, Gadugi students chose to focus on another aspect of the drug issue—the use of illegal drugs in public spaces across the Boundary. One of the CHS seniors enrolled in the class took the initiative and educated her peers on the use of “blue lights” in public spaces around the country that worked to “mask the blue-tinted lines of veins—making it harder for intravenous drug users to find a vein” and, therefore, harder to inject the drug (Winberg, 2019). The class agreed that their project would involve researching the use of blue lights, including positive and negative data on the efficacy of their use, costs of installation and maintenance of blue lights, and the experiences of other communities who had installed blue lights. After the completion of the research, and if the data proved to be promising, the class wanted to prepare a presentation on the use of blue lights and, if possible, present the information to community stakeholders. Students spent months looking into the different companies that manufactured the lights, finding anecdotal and statistical data on the light’s effectiveness, and preparing their presentations. They prepared price comparisons and compiled news reports from communities that had experimented with the use of the lights in public spaces. Each student in the class prepared his or her own presentation for the class, and, later, the information from each was synthesized into one presentation.

On May 17, 2021, the students made their presentation to Mr. Bo Crowe, an EBCI Tribal Council representative for the community of Wolftown/Big Y. Councilman Crowe was duly impressed with the students’ work, and with their

passion for and commitment to their community. After their presentation, Councilman Crowe contacted the EBCI Attorney General and provided the students with assistance in turning their service project presentation into actual legislation for consideration by Tribal Council. The class spent an afternoon working with tribal attorneys to craft appropriate language for a resolution asking Council to implement their recommendations. For these six students, the project progressed from homework to proposed law in a matter of hours.

After the proposal was completed and written in the proper form for Council's consideration, Councilman Crowe placed the newly-dubbed Blue Light Initiative on the official agenda for Tribal Council's June 2 meeting. Two of the students presented the proposal to Council. The legislation was first read to council, and this was followed by a question and answer period. The students deftly and thoroughly answered all the questions. Both young women were well prepared and articulated both the need for the initiative and their hopes for its success. Council members congratulated both students on their work and the thoughtfulness of their presentation. Prior to taking a vote the resolution was amended to expand the lights into more public areas of the Boundary than the class had originally proposed. After a brief discussion, EBCI Tribal Council voted unanimously to fund the project.

Conclusion

The Gadugi Partnership was founded on the notion that it was both possible and imperative to reclaim formal education for EBCI children and youth. Too often, formal schooling has been used as a weapon of colonization against the Indigenous peoples within the United States. Though the tools of education have been employed to bludgeon the culture of American Indians, education itself remains a necessary requirement for modern life. In the words of noted Crow Nation leader Plenty Coups, "Education is your most powerful weapon. With education you are the white man's equal; without education you are his victim" (Garcia and Ahler, 1988, p. 15). The education offered, however, is most effective, is most powerful, is, indeed, most *moral*, when it reflects and respects the values of the community in which it is offered. American Indian educators and schools must, "represent the cultural values, experiences, and aspirations of the populations being served" (Garcia and Ahler, 1988, p. 23). In the words of W.E.B. DuBois, education should be "a drawing out of human powers," not merely the transmission or insertion of the values of the majority, mainstream society (DuBois, 1973, p. 9).

The program is best encapsulated by the service project that is part of the curriculum in the *Cherokee Culture and Leadership* course offered each spring semester. The 2021 project, the Blue Light Initiative, saw Cherokee High School students confront a daunting challenge facing the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians community. The 6 students immersed themselves in research about drug dependency and proven ways to confront and combat this issue. Rather than becoming overwhelmed by the scope and size of the problem, these EBCI youth took a strategy for fighting back to their elected tribal government and successfully

made an impact for their people. Freire reminds us that “cynicism is not the weapon that will rebuild the world,” and these Cherokee young people refused to give in to cynicism but, rather, worked to improve the lot of their brothers and sisters (Freire, 1996, p. 161). To assure that formal education may be an engine for the renewal of Indigenous cultures and communities, the classroom must reflect the collected wisdom, traditions, and accomplishments of Indigenous people. The Gadugi Partnership, and the Blue Light Initiative which it spawned, strives to do just that.

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