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Interview

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Interview

A Native Insight into Giftedness: An Interview with Dr. Charmaine L. Shutiva

Charmaine L. Shutiva, Ph.D.
Interviewed by Tracy L. Cross, Ph.D. 

In the summer of 2021, Tracy L. Cross invited Dr. Charmaine L. Shutiva to share her most unique experience of advocacy in our field. After serving for many years with Dr. Shutiva on the Council for Exceptional Children – The Association for the Gifted (CEC-TAG), Dr. Cross knew others could learn from her experience. In describing how she came to develop a gifted and talented program on a Pueblo in New Mexico, Dr. Shutiva offers insight into how the psychology of giftedness may be different in a Native American population.



Dr. Charmaine L. Shutiva

My First Day of School

She said we could go. I interpreted it to mean we could go home. So, I walked up to my empty house that was just up the hill from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) school, McCarty's Day School, that was on the Acoma Pueblo reservation. What Ms. Oleman meant was for us kindergarteners to go outside and play.

When I got home, I changed from my school clothes to my play clothes. I peeped through the curtains and wondered why the other kids were not going home. I heard the hand bell ring and all the kids went back inside the classroom. Ms. Oleman must have realized I was not in my seat, so she sent Uncle Tom, our bus driver and maintenance man, to come get me. My mother told me never to open the door. He called for me to come out. No way. He walked back down to the school and soon I saw Grandma Juana, our janitor and educational assistant, come to get me. No way. My mother said not to open the door. She too walked down the hill to the school without me. Through the curtains I could see Ms. Oleman not walking, but storming, up the hill in her button-up shoes, bun on top of her head, and her skirt swaying back and forth. I could tell by her manner she was *mad*. My mother had told me I *had* to listen to Ms. Oleman. She was my teacher and also the principal of the school. So, when she knocked on the door I opened it. She grabbed me by my arm and marched me back to school. I wanted to change back into my school clothes, but she just grabbed me and took me down the hill to the three-room K-6th grade school. All the children laughed at me when I walked into the classroom in my play clothes. I cried. I told Ms. Oleman as she was walking me down to the school that I thought she meant, "go home" when she said, "go." It

was around 10:00 in the morning. This was my first day of school, the beginning of my education.

I spent one week in kindergarten, then I was promoted to first grade because I could speak and read English better than my classmates. My Anglo father did not allow our tribal language, Keres, to be spoken in the household. My classmates were punished if they spoke Acoma on the school grounds. Ms. Oleman would swat my classmates with a big paddle that had holes in it if they were caught speaking Keres. Sometimes after they got swatted, they got a bar of soap put in their mouths. Out of the hearing range of Ms. Oleman, Uncle Tom and Grandma Juana would plead with my friends, in Keres, not to speak our language. I'm sure it was hard for Uncle Tom and Grandma Juana to inflict this punishment. I, too, would beg my friends not to speak Keres so they wouldn't get the soap in their mouths and/or get swatted. Many of my classmates spoke limited English. I would try to help my girlfriends during recess to improve in speaking English, even though the older kids made fun of me because I did not speak much Keres.

After my fifth-grade year, the BIA closed McCarty's Day School, and we were all bused off the reservation to Grants or Cubero. This was the first time I interacted with non-Acomas or non-Indians other than going to do laundry or to go grocery shopping in Grants. I excelled in school. "How could an Indian be so smart?" I'd hear them saying.

I did well, academically, in junior high and high school. I also did well socially, as I was a member of Student Council, Future Teachers of America, and Honor Society. It was not until I attended Wellesley College that I met with prejudice and disrespect for being Native American.

Too Embarrassed

"I was too embarrassed to walk out of the room" is what my mother told me after she got home from a national conference on tribal programs that she was attending my senior year in high school. My mother had accidentally walked into the wrong room. In this room was a woman, Ms. Marilyn Kimble, who was a recruiter for the "Seven Sister Colleges." My mother spoke to her about having a daughter who was a senior. The next day my mother and

I drove back to Albuquerque from Acoma to meet with Ms. Kimble in her hotel room where she interviewed me and helped me complete an application to Wellesley College. Neither my mother nor I had ever heard of Wellesley College. I applied and I was accepted.

Wellesley Experience

I attended Wellesley College for three years. During my junior year I transferred to New Mexico State University for my mental and emotional stability. There were three other Native American girls at Wellesley when I first started. Two of us graduated. I returned to Wellesley my senior year and graduated in 1976 with a stronger, more acute desire to work with Native communities.

The experiences attending Wellesley College and my later internships at the summer camps for gifted children that TAMU held in Galveston, Texas were challenging, but helped me to define who I was and what was important to me. In both of these experiences, I saw or heard the mostly Euro-Americans displaying a privileged attitude that was difficult for me to understand, but also strengthened my Native beliefs and values that are community-based and emphasize sharing and giving.

Gifted Education and Me

I was working as a Special Education Coordinator/Counselor at Canoncito Community School (now To'hajiilee Community School) in 1983-85. It is located on the Navajo nation. My principal had heard that the Bureau of Indian Affairs (now Bureau of Indian Education) was providing funding to help identify and educate gifted and talented Native American children. He asked me to begin a gifted and talented program. My response was, "What is a gifted and talented program?" He did not know. I did not know. I decided I needed to investigate and learn what a gifted and talented program entailed so I could develop one. I went to the University of New Mexico library and started researching gifted education.

As I was researching gifted education, Texas A & M University (TAMU) kept coming up in my searches. I told my principal I could not develop a program I knew nothing about. I decided to go to TAMU to learn more about gifted education.

I learned about gifted education and in doing so I also earned a doctorate degree in Educational Psychology from TAMU. My dissertation was titled, "Creativity Differences Between Reservation and non-Reservation Native Americans." I loved working on my dissertation, but it was also frustrating, as there was limited—and I mean limited—information about Alaskan Native, Hawaiian Native, and Native American gifted children. One might almost say it was nonexistent in 1986.

Go Teach Them

In learning about gifted education at TAMU I always had an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach about the word, "gifted" and identifying a person as "gifted." I had to do a lot of "soul searching" to help to understand why I was feeling so uncomfortable and almost resistant to using the word, "gifted." I had some "interesting" discussions in my initial classes at TAMU.

I was torn. I was confused. I eventually concluded that the perplexity and resistance I was feeling was because I was only learning the "White man's" definition of giftedness. I interpreted this definition as being "superior," "individualistic," or "better than thou."

To survive, I had to reorganize my thinking. I had to create my own definition of giftedness from my Native perspective. To be able to do this I had to re-center myself.

I don't know how often I found myself making the 16-hour drive from College Station to my mother's home at Acoma to regain balance and harmony. I needed to find my balance.

I had to have a cleansing ceremony performed for me as I "was losing my way" or "getting out of balance" and I was becoming sick in mind, body, and spirit. Having and maintaining harmony and balance is so important in our Pueblo culture. My classmates at TAMU could not understand why I would make the 16-hour drive on the weekends just to be home for only a few hours and then have to drive right back to College Station. I had to do this, or I probably would have dropped out of college. At times, the heavy discussions in my classes in which I felt I was defending my Native perspective of giftedness, were difficult and definitely lonely. There were no other Native Americans in the doctoral programs at TAMU who I could talk to about my frustrations. As far as I knew, there was no other Native American studying gifted education at the doctoral level anywhere.

On one of my visits home, I was visiting with my mother in her kitchen and was sharing with her my frustrations. She said, "Go teach them. Teach them about who we are." I needed to hear that. Her words helped to affirm I was in the right place and doing the right thing to help Native children.

After graduating from TAMU, I went back to To'hajiilee Community School all excited and ready to develop the gifted and talented program. There was a new principal. I told him with enthusiasm and excitement in my voice that I returned to work there to establish the *best* gifted program. His response (I'll never forget) was, "You are overqualified." He would not hire me. I was crushed. I drove away from the school, parked at the trading post, and cried.

With a crushed heart and needing a job to pay for my student loans, I applied for a counseling position at a brand new elementary and junior high school in Rio Rancho. I

was hired. It was a great job. I loved counseling, but my desire to develop a gifted program was still there in the back of my mind.

In 1992, I received a phone call from a woman, Barbara DeLoch, who in 1985 was the Director of Special Education for the Navajo Nation. She was the person who made sure I complied with federal Special Education rules and guidelines when I worked at To'hajiilee Community School. She had heard I was back from TAMU and asked me if I would like to develop a gifted program for Isleta Elementary School. "Would I? Would I?" My prayers were answered. In the middle of the school year, I left Enchanted Hills Elementary School in Rio Rancho to develop a gifted program for Isleta Pueblo children.

Development of the Creativity Abounds Program

I am Water Clan

In the development of the gifted program, I knew that I could not call it "the gifted program." My Native American value discourages individualism and bringing attention to oneself. Acoma is a maternal society. My grandmother was Water Clan. My mother was Water Clan. I am Water Clan. My daughter is Water Clan. My husband, Ron, is Sun Clan, because his grandmother and mother were Sun Clan. Knowing your clan is important in the Pueblo culture, as well as in my Navajo culture. Navajo children are traditionally taught when they introduce themselves that they identify first their maternal grandparents' clans and then their fraternal grandparents' clans, as in most Native tribes we identify ourselves by both of our parents' clans. I am Water Clan and am baby Eagle Clan from my grandfather. Having this strong kinship beyond the family helps teach and reinforce our cultural values and beliefs.

I share this information about my clanship because in teaching Native American gifted children, the family identifications can become confusing to a non-Native teacher. They may identify their "cousin" as brother or sister when introducing them, as this is the way they were taught in the home.

Giving and Sharing

Our Native value of sharing and giving is important. Throughout our existence, Native tribes have had individuals who could be identified as "gifted." For example, arrowhead makers, pottery makers, song composers, drum makers, drummers, herbalists, healers, animal trackers, moccasin maker, and story tellers. These individuals who have these "gifts" have always been recognized, highly valued, and appreciated. They often freely share their skills, talents, and knowledge for the betterment and survival of the tribe.

In my Pueblo culture we express the importance of giving and sharing by having social and religious activities

that involve sharing our harvests, food, and water. My non-Native friends were always surprised at how I would bring food (e.g., donuts, cookies, biscuits) to class, to meetings, to most social gatherings. It is important to share. In the classroom, even though boxes of crayons and other supplies were distributed to individual students, it is not uncommon for Native children to share their assigned scissors, pencils, crayons, and the like.

During my years teaching gifted Native children I tried to create opportunities for my scholars to share their gifts and talents. I frequently had parents and grandparents into my classroom to see what their children were doing and to share their knowledge of a certain topic. I had my artistically gifted students enter state and regional art shows as often as possible. I received grants to have my scholars interact with the elderly program. One grant involved studying the impact of the railroad through the reservation by interviewing elders. Another grant was studying the architecture of Pueblo houses. With the elders, we took a field trip to Chaco Canyon.

Thus, with clanship, giving and sharing, and the multitude of various Native gifts and talents to be creating the gifted program at Isleta Elementary School, I called it the Creativity Abounds Program (CAP). I felt this title helped to encourage diversity of gifts and talents: Creativity = original ideas, all talents, Native or non-Native; Abounds = plentiful, supporting our Native value of sharing and giving.

What I Learned in Developing a Gifted Program for Native Pueblo Children

First, I had to learn the BIA gifted and talented guidelines in order for the school to receive funds to support the development of a gifted program.

Second, I had to know what kind of gifted program the people of Isleta Pueblo and the staff of Isleta Elementary School wanted. Thus, I developed a survey to identify what areas of interests and skills the community of Isleta would like to have emphasized and integrated as major components of the gifted program. For example...Native music/dance? Native history and government? Native cultural arts like pottery making, kilt making, jewelry making? Environmental issues / science? Fine arts—painting, drawing, sculpture? Technology/computers? Storytelling? Native Literature? Reading? Math?

Third, just like me when my principal at To'hajiilee asked me to develop a gifted program and I did not know what it was, I had to educate the community and staff of Isleta Elementary School about what gifted education is and how, using the BIA gifted and talented guidelines, we could identify and serve these special individuals. I presented information about gifted education at staff meetings. I wrote articles about gifted education in the community newsletter. I presented at school board meetings. I sent out flyers about gifted education.

Fourth, according to the BIA gifted and talented guidelines, I had to have a Board of Directors to oversee my program and help to identify the children to be served by the gifted program. Besides my principal, I recruited three teachers to be on this board.

How did it go?

Much to my surprise, the survey indicated the number one interest was technology. From the results and comments on the survey, it was clear the community wanted their identified gifted children to be able to compete with the non-native world in technology and usage of computers. They felt that it was the families who should teach culture-related skills and interests.

After technology, the next important emphasis was reading. Based upon these survey results, I used the gifted funds to purchase computers and printers for the gifted classroom. Later, I purchased laptops that my scholars were able to take home. I also bought books with Native American themes for the classrooms and library.

Using Native American Values in the Gifted Classroom

Cooperation. As my gifted students learned a skill in the gifted classroom, it was a requirement that they go back to their classroom and teach one or two other scholars what they learned. As much as possible, I had multi-grade level scholars in my gifted classroom at the same time, so the older scholars could teach the younger children. As the years went on, my teacher colleagues would ask for some of the gifted scholars to help with some math or reading lessons in their classrooms. Also, my advanced readers would go to the younger grades to read stories.

Gratitude. After every presentation, my gifted scholars would design and write thank you cards to the presenters. As they were drawing, I would play our Pueblo songs and would explain to my scholars that the songs are prayers asking for rain, for moisture, for the continuance of life.

Family Oriented. Many of my scholars came from homes in which they still lived with their grandparents. In our Native communities we take care of our elders. Our school recognized and valued including the grandparents in our school events and activities. I had bumper stickers made that read, "I am a proud grandmother. My grandchild attends IES."

Fortunately, the Elderly Center was next door to the school, so once a week my gifted scholars and I would go have lunch with them. The elders would tell stories of what it was like when they were growing up.

Humor. Humor is important in our Pueblo culture. Clowns are an intricate part of some of our religious and social dances. These are sacred roles in our communities. Not just anyone can be a clown. Their role is to remind of us the importance of laughter and lightness in the activities of

our daily lives. As often as possible, I tried to bring humor into my lessons. I would read coyote trickster stories. My scholars would write jokes or limericks that could be read during the school's morning announcements.

Giving/sharing. In our Pueblo culture and in most Native tribes we have ceremonies that evolve around giving and sharing. During our social (open to the public) ceremonies we invite people to our homes to eat. On Governor's Feast Day, relatives and friends of the newly appointed officials throw food (fruits, vegetables, boxed items) to the people to show honor and respect to the position and to the individual holding the appointed positions.

Giving/Sharing in the gifted program was emphasized and important. I continually stressed to my gifted scholars the importance of sharing their knowledge and talents. The gifted scholars designed and put on plays. We not only performed the plays for the parents and grandparents, but we also put on performances at other local schools and at the National Indian Education Conference in Albuquerque.

The artistically gifted scholars did paintings that were hung at the Elderly Center and a grocery store in Albuquerque. Some scholars also painted a mural at the Elderly Center; others did clay tiles that became part of a mural at the Recreation Center and another mural along a boulevard in Albuquerque.

Leadership. After I had surveyed the community and using the BIA gifted guidelines, I started to identify gifted and talented students at Isleta Elementary School. One of the criteria areas of the BIA gifted guidelines is "Leadership." I developed a leadership checklist by which staff and students were able to identify students in each classroom who they felt possessed leadership skills (e.g., excellent problem solver, good speaking skills, good communicator or listener, a good mediator, involved in community activities). The leadership checklist results and interviews with students were then presented and reviewed by the CAP Board of Directors. The selections were made.

Recognizing our Native American value of cooperation, and to further develop the gifted scholars' leadership skills, I bought a karaoke machine and together we would sing songs. This helped to develop their speaking skills, self-confidence, and reading ability. It was always a great delight when a once-quiet scholar would ask to sing a song by him or herself.

I provided opportunities as often as possible for my upper grade gifted scholars to assist the kindergarten or first grade teachers. They were instructed in assisting teachers in fire drills and other emergency drills.

I took my gifted scholars on field trips to the Governor's office to meet the tribal leaders. The Governors always took time to meet with the scholars and share with them what qualities it takes to be a Pueblo leader.

Going to the Mat—And Winning

One of the hazards of being a teacher is you are at the mercy of whomever is your principal or administrator. In the 17 years I worked at Isleta Elementary I worked with 19 different principals or acting principals. A few were outstanding administrators and with others I had to fight for my gifted program funds and/or my program activities or events.

I had one principal who wanted to use a large portion of the g/t funds to purchase physical education equipment and a small bus. As the coordinator/teacher of the gifted program, it was also my responsibility to maintain a record of the gifted program finances. I went to my CAP (Creativity Abounds Program) Board of Directors (minus my principal) and they gave me permission to go to the school board to inform them of what he was trying to do. He wrote me up for "going over his head" and my colleagues on the CAP Board of Directors got reprimanded. I stopped him from misappropriating the funds, however, and after that I refused to meet with him without my union representative.

Going to the Mat—No Mat

One Acting Principal, during the summer, changed all the teaching positions. We returned to school to find we had new teaching positions. For example, the 6th grade teacher was moved to kindergarten, the kindergarten teacher to 2nd grade, and so forth. She moved me to 2nd grade! I was required to dismantle the CAP. She had the maintenance staff distribute the CAP computers to the other classrooms. All materials/workbooks/art supplies were also redistributed. I had no say. We all took it to the school board and it took the whole year and her being removed and replaced to get the CAP program back. Sadly, though, I was never able to relocate some of the CAP computers and equipment.

Several years later, they hired a new principal who did not believe in gifted education. I don't know if the school board knew that when they hired him. So, I ended my teaching experience at Isleta Elementary in the 5th grade classroom. Little did the school board or my scholars know that I was still implementing my gifted teaching strategies as I challenged my students to do and be their best. Every day, after the Pledge of Allegiance, we recited my class motto and pledge, which promotes community excellence:

Good, Better, Best, Never Let It Rest,
Till the Good is Better and the Better is Best (community excellence);
I pledge to do my best at all times, and to act in a way that I will be proud of myself and others will be proud of me too.

What an Honor

If you are fortunate to work for a Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) school you will be working exclusively with Native American, Alaskan Native, or Hawaiian Native children. What an honor! What a privilege!

What you will soon learn is family, for a Native American child, includes not only their immediate biological family, but includes uncles being referred to as grandpas, aunts as grandmas, cousins as brothers and sisters. It can also include calling clanship relatives as moms, dads, grandpas, grandmas, sisters, and brothers.

You will learn traditional ceremonies of passages of life, ceremonies for healing/curing and well-being will often take priority in your Native scholar's education and may be causes for absenteeism from the classroom. It is not that the family does not value "White man's" education, it is for the continuance of culture.

You will learn all tribes are different and have different ceremonies and in some cases, languages, and that it is important to know the differences. A Navajo is very different from a Sioux or a Pauite or a Pueblo.

You will learn that some Native children have never grown up on a reservation and there are others who have never left the reservation. But regardless of their chosen residence, most Native American gifted children will be proud of their tribal identity.

You will learn that some Native American gifted children will not want to be identified as gifted, as this will bring attention to them and separate them from the others, which could cause disharmony or discord as it comes in conflict with their Native cultural value of group or community cohesiveness.

What I Wish I Had Known When I First Started Teaching Gifted Native American Children

I wish I had known ...

...that there were principals and administrators who did not believe in gifted education. I thought principals were taught to meet the needs of all their students.

...that there was such a thing as "being overqualified."

...that preparation for standardized testing that emphasizes reading and math takes top priority over science, social studies, and art. I often felt like I had to "sneak" these subjects into my lessons.

...that many more Native children than I realized move from household to household during the week. I found this to be especially true on the Navajo reservation. This movement often resulted in lost books and homework assignments. You have to be patient and accommodating.

...that once my g/t scholars transferred to a New Mexico public school, they would not be considered "gifted" any longer because the BIA gifted guidelines did not require an IQ test to qualify for gifted unless the student was being referred for intellectually gifted.

Sadly, there are very few children of color identified as gifted in the state of New Mexico. I was invited to be part of a New Mexico State Task Force on Gifted Education in 2005 to make revisions to the New Mexico gifted guidelines. I fought for an identification process that would be less contingent on an IQ measure and be more inclusive. I felt my words fell on deaf ears. I felt like I was back at Wellesley College. I was the only Native American on this committee and, from what I remember, the only person of color.

The definition has undergone several revisions, but in the state of New Mexico, a gifted child is still defined as a school-age person whose intellectual ability paired with subject matter aptitude/achievement, creativity/divergent thinking, or problem-solving/critical thinking meets the eligibility criteria. Applying this definition requires culturally diverse students to get "additional documentation" if the "multidisciplinary team" (which

is often made up of non-Native American educators) believes a student's intellectual ability (IQ) test score was depressed due to cultural or linguistic differences, disadvantaged socioeconomic status, or handicapping conditions. Personally, I feel the New Mexico gifted identification process is racially discriminatory. It's like saying, "Oh, poor Indian kid, he didn't score well because he lives on the reservation with his grandparents. Let's give him more Anglo-developed tests."

One last thing I wish I had known is that you have to be willing to fight for your gifted Native American students to be 1) identified and 2) provided a quality gifted education that gives due respect and dignity to their Native American culture. Sometimes I am in total awe and amazement that our tribes still exist. We are a strong, powerful, proud people.

Charmaine L. Shutiva is a proud Native American woman from Acoma Pueblo, New Mexico. She earned her BA from Wellesley College, her MA from New Mexico State University, and her Ph.D. from Texas A&M University. Her dissertation was titled, "Creativity Differences Between Reservation and Non-reservation Native American Students."

Dr. Shutiva taught gifted education courses at Oklahoma City University and Northern Arizona University. She has 32 years of experience teaching and/or counseling Native American scholars at Sky City Community School on the Acoma Pueblo reservation, Isleta Elementary School on the Isleta Pueblo reservation and To'Hajiilee Community School on the To'Hajiilee Navajo reservation.

She is married to Ron D. Shutiva, former Governor of Acoma Pueblo, and has one daughter, Anatheia L. Chino.