

Jana Philippi Professional Development
EDUC 661

School as Community: Chahta-Ima Indian Powwows

I was curious as to the history of my new school and its name. So, over my summer break, I read a book about a rich culture that existed in Lacombe, Louisiana, the

exact site of my school, Chahta-Ima Elementary. The historical story includes a man named Adrien Rouquette whom the Indians later named "Chahta-Ima" which means Choctaw-like. His story takes place in the 1850s in Lacombe, Louisiana, where Adrien

was born, lived in the woods as a child and became the first Catholic priest. His descendants still live in the area. However, many young families living there and some

older families really do not know the history of the area in which they live. The setting is

beautiful, Lacombe, Louisiana, an area located between the cities of Slidell and Mandeville, situated on the scenic Bayou Lacombe. My new school has been there for many years. It is old! It used to be the High School, but now, kindergarten through third

grade students attend school at Chahta-Ima.

During my first year at Chahta-Ima, I asked my principal what she thought about teaching the rich heritage to the children. I knew I would have to convince the entire

school staff to get on board with this "Indian Culture Idea" or it would never work. It

was important to me to do it and have FUN while learning, giving children and people,

Lacombe's story, rich in context and culture and one that may be theirs. Who knows? I believe that possibilities are endless and telling children a real live story in the

form of FUN helps them develop in a positive way. They might relate to the story, maybe begin to develop a new sense of belonging with the community or pride for their

city, Lacombe or at the least plant the seed of belonging to a group that loves them, their

school, their teachers and principal, and especially their school counselor..

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I thought about the many ways of incorporating the Indian theme into our school community and into my work as a school counselor. As a member of the Positive Behavior Support Program (PBS), I wrote a comprehensive Positive Behavior Support Program that started small, while adding each month, another Indian element to what was

then, a proposal for monthly powwows as a reward for those students who had positive

behavior that month. I thought that this could be the first monthly reward. For example,

teach the children the story of Chahta-Ima, while they sat in a circle with their Indian

headbands on with lots of feathers and designs. Then, the next month develop a song,

and then a play, all to teach the story, have some fun and build community and self esteem.

I thought about different types of games that we could add as we went along perfecting our Powwows while teaching the story of Adrien Rouquette, the historical account and the culture of Lacombe.

As my imagination went wild with this notion, I reflected on my youth and the many summers at summer camp with all the experiences based on competition and the Indian theme. We had folklore and lots of competition with summer games and sports

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like swimming, tennis, horse back riding, horse shoes, and making ice cream. Every activity had a certain weight, so that data and numbers could be obtained and calculated for the competition. The excitement grew and everyone couldn't wait until Friday's Powwow, so they could see which group had the lead, the Chippewas or the Pawnees. It was great fun. We always left with a big grin on our face.

How perfect! I looked at the population of the kids at our school, my students, whom I felt would benefit from such an idea as well as the entire community. As the school counselor, we are taught to try to pull the community and school together while

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supporting the emotional growth and stability of each child. I believed that through the Powwows we could open the door for a lot of children and begin to reach them, through what they think is play.

The Indian village was on its way to becoming a reality; still, mostly in my mind, but I had permission to begin the project. On my free time, usually the weekends, I would go up to school and begin to work on the project which was to transform a concrete slab area into what is now our Indian village whose name is Bushawa. Things progressed quickly after this and the first powwow was conducted. The entire PBS is based on the Indian theme which was a surprise and delight! The seed that was planted had now sprouted.

After I stained the cement and began to build the Indian hut, I met an elderly gentleman who had a mission to pass on the story of Chahta-Ima and Lacombe. The history is rich. There were many cultural affairs to tend to, and my new friend, Tom, organized a group of people in the community to help his cause. He was so pleased to hear that through the Positive Support Committee we would use the Chahta-Ima Indian theme.

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