

## Stories on Vision: “Why Is this Family So Satisfied, and Why Is this Teacher So Angry?”

In the 1800s and early 1900s, the United States established “reservations” for a number of Native American tribes—land where surviving members of native tribes were moved and have quasi-sovereign governance. Teach For America places teachers on several reservations in the United States.

Last spring, I had the opportunity to drive around the Navajo Nation in the southwestern states of Arizona and New Mexico, visiting students, families, teachers, communities and schools. I was studying patterns of transformational learning and leadership as part of an ongoing overhaul of the “teaching as leadership” model. I had a couple of experiences on that trip that I am continuing to process and fully understand.

### Dinner with a Navajo Family

The first was a dinner conversation with three generations of Navajo—a grandmother, and her daughter and two grandsons (ages 10 and 8). A Teach For America teacher (of the one of the boys) was hosting and facilitating our conversation.

That afternoon, I had visited the boys’ elementary school—a school that is overseen by the US federal government. I had found the visit profoundly sad and frustrating. The children were far, far behind in their reading and writing and math skills. The school was not a warm and welcoming learning environment, children were not at all engaged or challenged in class, and I saw many adults (including some TFA teachers) acting and speaking as if everything was fine.

After a half-hour of small-talk about our own families and their lives and my work, I asked the Mom and Grandmother about the school. It turns out both of them had attended the same school the boys now attend. These two women raved about the school. They told me what a wonderful place it was, how great it was, and how lucky they are to send their boys there. I was surprised and concerned, but unsure of what I should say. I asked more and more specific questions. Are the children learning how to read? Are the teachers helping children think about their assets and futures? Is school leading them toward the future that you want for them? The two adults answered every question with an even more rosy description of the school. The people are so nice. The kids love to be with their friends. The school provides meals for kids who can’t afford them.

When I asked if they would want to be able to choose among several schools to find the best fit for their boys, they said “No—we would never want a different school. We love this school.”

*I felt uncomfortable saying what I was really thinking: that this school is profoundly underserving their children, that they deserve something better, and that something different is in fact possible. I left wondering what “leadership” means in that moment, wondering what to do when the very same systemic injustices that we want to change may be dramatically limiting our students’ and families’ perspectives on what’s possible.*

## A Challenge from a Navajo Teacher

The second experience happened two days later. I was visiting another Navajo school where TFA has teachers. I observed a strong classroom taught by a TFA teacher who herself had grown up on the reservation, and then I sat down with the teacher and principal (also Navajo) to talk about the aims, challenges, progress with their students.

After sharing some of my positive impressions of the class, I asked about whether the children were on a path to college. Both women, especially the teacher, said that question/assumption made them angry. Here's an attempt at re-constructing that conversation:

—The teacher: “You know, Mr. Farr, when you and TFA come in talking about college, you are disrespecting us, the Navajo.

—Me: “I certainly mean no disrespect. It's just that we know that in the United States a college degree is one of the most powerful ways to broaden one's opportunities in life. And I know that the Navajo nation faces incredible challenges—the poverty levels are among the highest in the country, alcoholism is a huge problem, most residents of the reservation are unemployed. Yesterday I attended a “Gourd Dance” ceremony that was celebrating 7-, 8- and 9-year-olds' commitment to join the US military. I ask about college because I want all children to have the broadest array of choices and options in life that they can, and I see those being so limited for so many of the Navajo children.”

—The teacher: “I don't expect you to understand, but your assumptions about what is good for us are offensive. My grandfather, who recently died, was a sheep herder, Mr. Farr—and he was more wise, more happy, more fulfilled than anyone I have ever known who went to college. Your assumption that we need college is disrespectful to him, and to my people. Do you know the history of our culture? Do you know that we were a vibrant culture for 100 times longer than the United States even existed, and that white Europeans killed millions and millions and millions of us? And then told us we needed an education and put us in schools that were at first explicitly and today implicitly about oppressing our language, culture, history and identity? I don't expect you to understand, but college is not for my people. Encouraging them to leave this community is part of a long and consistent campaign to tear us apart. And Teach For America is part of that. We are weakened, but we are proud. And our culture will survive, but only if we build on our own values—community values, not individual values. The truth is, Mr. Farr, I would rather my students stay in this community and face the challenges we have, than leave and live an assimilated life that is not true to their Navajo values.”

She was growing more and more angry as she spoke. I was growing more and more unsure of what to say. I apologized for offending her, said again I meant no disrespect, and asked her more questions about whether she really would limit her students' options and choices to keep them in a community beset by poverty.

—The teacher: “Definitely. That is who we are, and being someone else is a false autonomy and choice.”

I said that I assumed she had gone to college, and now had a position of influence that she could not have gotten without doing so, and asked what she made of what felt like a tension there.

—She said: “I did go to college. And that's why I know more than most people that college is not for my people. College was a place of individual competition, not of collaboration and community. I went to college for the purpose of coming back and serving in my community—and some people will need to do that. Have you ever even heard of Dine College, Mr. Farr? It is a Navajo college. My students should go there if they want, but they should not leave their community. And I think Teach For America needs to stop encouraging them to. It's disrespectful of our strengths as a people.”

*Again, I felt unsure of myself, and uncomfortable saying what I was thinking. What is leadership in this moment? I want to be fully respectful of Navajo history and culture. I also am coming to the table (without saying so, I realize) most deeply valuing students' individual autonomy and choice. Is that valid to share, or push in a conversation like this? I can understand how imposing my values on someone else could be disrespectful, but has my lack of explicitness about what values I am bringing to the conversation been just as disrespectful? Do I really know what those values are?*