

Schools can learn to embrace students of all backgrounds, professor says

[Jerry Large / Columnist](#) Updated October 20, 2016 at 6:37 am

Social psychologist Stephanie Fryberg, a Native American, says school systems need to adjust to the needs of students of diverse backgrounds to help them succeed in the way she did.

[Stephanie Fryberg](#) has a big mission: to make the invisible visible. She wants Americans to be able to really see each other and to see the hidden assumptions and structures that shape lives for good or ill.

Fryberg is a social psychologist and says she is the first person in her family to go to college and the first person from her tribe, [Tulalip](#), to earn a Ph.D. She earned hers from Stanford University, and now she is back in Tulalip, living where she grew up and trying to make it so more children there and across the country can have the kind of success she is having.

You may remember stories last week about high-school [graduation rates](#) going up in the U.S. They went up for every ethnic group, but gaps between groups and the essential order remained the same: Asian, white, Latino, black, Native American. Fryberg has some ideas about how to close those gaps. Her solutions have to do with seeing the unseen norms and rules that advantage some and disadvantage others.

She says educational institutions can change to be open to cultural differences in ways that encourage achievement for more students. Fryberg, an associate professor of American Indian studies and psychology at the University of Washington, told me how she came to her insights.

She said her mother worked for the Marysville School District as a Native

American liaison and would take her to board meetings. “Every time the discussion of Native students came up, it was about attendance, poor attendance and academic performance. It was never about what teachers or schools or classrooms do ...”

Why, she asks, was what she heard about Native people growing up always so negative? “It made me feel a sense of shame — that we were not good enough.”

In college, as she learned about the social sciences, she began to realize much of the story about what was happening with those students was being missed.

Her work moves the focus from the individual to the situation and the institution. How does the institution affect different individuals? How can the institution do a better job of serving all students?

Changing institutions is critical, maybe especially in education.

People who don’t finish high school, Fryberg said, “are much more likely to get involved with drugs and alcohol, they’re much more likely to be involved with the legal system and to have children early.”

She and her colleagues are working for systemic change. One of the ways they’re trying is to focus on motivation. School culture values individual independence, which comes naturally to people raised in most middle-class, white families, and especially to males.

Native students tend to be more concerned about family and community, which is common for most cultures around the world. But institutions tell students what they can accomplish for themselves by achieving in school. In real-life [experiments](#) with college students, Fryberg tweaked that message to include mentions of the benefits to family and community. The result was higher academic performance from students whose values were more oriented toward interdependence. The improvement was not just among

Native students but included other students who were the first in their families to attend college.

Stereotypes also affect how students see themselves and how educators view them.

Fryberg has been working on ways to help teachers feel more comfortable talking about race, sex and class, so that they can see their institutions' invisible culture and also learn about cultures they didn't grow up in.

"Teachers fear being called racist or culturally insensitive," she said, "so they adopt an attitude of [colorblindness](#)." But that means not really seeing or understanding many of their students.

In a diverse society like ours, no one knows everything, and everyone makes mistakes, Fryberg said. It's important, she said, to give people who are struggling to learn some space to grow. Punishing people for making a mistake doesn't help.

What helps is encouraging a deeper understanding of the culturally shaped environment we live in and how each of us is shaped by it. It helps to see what has been invisible for too long.