Preserving the Past or Preventing the Future: Native American Parents' Perceptions of School Efficacy

International Council

ICPEL

of Professors of Educational Leadership

Angela S. Farmer
Mississippi State University

Native American students currently enrolled in K-12 schools across the United States face a variety of challenges unique to their ethnicity and often silenced by a majority culture which fails to recognize key, intrinsic factors critical for the students' success in academic settings. Evidences of said challenges include disciplinary statistics, attendance and assessment data, and graduation rates. In order to realize quantifiable gains in measurable objectives, it is critical that educational institutions recognize the value and necessity to respect and maintain the students' language and culture in order to preserve the tribal sovereignty while expanding the students' 21st century knowledge base. This research provides historical context as well as present day case study evidence to personalize the sentiments of Native American parents within a tribal community in the southeastern United States. Their detail and impressions and historical context provide the reader with a powerful glimpse into the world of institutionalized education from a rarely captured paradigm.

Understanding how another individual interprets information is a complex proposition even when both parties can frame their perceptions based on similar demographic, cultural, and linguistic experiences. Accurately translating one's perceptions when his experiences emanate from a divergent culture whose foundation was developed using alternative approaches to language, familial supports, and demographic identity offers a challenge unlikely to be appreciated without allowing the pure expressions of the specific population to be heard. In this research, Native American parents whose children attend a tribal school setting in the Southeastern United States were interviewed to assess their perceptions of the challenges faced by their children in school today.

Validating students' loss of inclusion with the majority group's consciousness is the loss of the Native American students' language, cultural norms, and sovereignty. Guised as a support for enhanced educational opportunity, the goal of the Federal Indian policy was never to enhance the native culture and blend it with English literacy but rather to save the Native Americans from their troubled lifestyle (Stewart, 2012). These priorities included a focus on reading, writing, and speaking English; encouraging one's individual identity versus that of the tribal identity; and teaching Christianity. During early Indian education integration, the overwhelming interpretation was that educators should work to completely eradicate native languages (Meza, 2015). However, after generations of suppressing the Native languages, the Native American Languages Act now exists as an effort to support the survival of these estimated, remaining 209 indigenous languages spoken within 562 sovereign tribal nations (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008).

In order to minimize the cultural discontinuity, which may contribute to a set of circumstances involving conflicts, inability to connect with the setting, and eventual truancy or total disconnection from school, many leaders advocate integrating traditional Native American cultural practices and relevant history into the general curriculum (Wilcox, 2015). Perhaps this cultural symbiosis best articulated by Audra Sherwood, Education Director for the Grand Ronde tribes, when she shared, "So much of it (attendance) was showing the families that they mattered, that their part in education mattered" (Blad, 2017, p. 6).

To fully appreciate the justification for the research, the statistics regarding the disproportionate implementation of disciplinary strategies toward Native American students is presented. Further, the struggles that Native American students face in attempting to acclimate to a majority population whose language and cultural norms challenge their tribal sovereignty is detailed. Attendance and assessment data which leads to enunciate the specificity of learning styles of Native students is also explored. Collectively, these facets identify a demography of students whose opportunity for maximized academic efficacy is rarely realized, resulting in exceptionally weak graduation rates.

Disciplinary data

Data from an extensive 2010 study of Native American students showed this subgroup to be dramatically overrepresented in instances of disciplinary infractions, losing over four times as many days as White students with similar behaviors. The Native American students were systematically sent to alternative settings for trivial offenses with significantly higher frequency than their non-Native peers (Sprague, Vincent, Tobin, & Pavel, 2013). There is also extensive evidence to suggest that Native youth regularly experience microaggression in schools to the point that they go unnoticed (Johnston-Goodstar & Roholt, 2017).

Furthermore, these instances of aggression can be subdivided into assault, insult, and invalidation. Microassaults are considered "explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim" (Sue, et al., 2007, p. 4). They are typically intentional and considered as old-fashioned racism; examples can be found on social media, in extracurricular activities and even in disciplinary patterns (Johnston-Goodstar & Roholt, 2017). Such evidence of disproportionate disciplinary instances are detailed by research which finds Native American students to be disciplined more frequently and more severely in educational settings (Gregory, Skiba, & Roguera, 2010).

Compared to a microassault, a microinsult presents as less overt. It presents as an implied impression of one's deficiency or invisibility, with such omnipresence that it can often eventually lead to a situation of benign neglect (Johnston-Goodstar & Roholt, 2017). Further, the researchers detail microinvalidation as unique as its density is related to communications that tend to isolate or remove one's feelings and history from inclusion in the group consciousness.

Attendance data

While notable improvements have been made with respect to the preservation of Indian culture, even the structure of today's, traditional classroom settings in the United States appear to interfere with the way in which Native American children best learn, allowing them to work collaboratively with holistic assessment (Morgan, 2009). Evidenced by national attendance data, these students' attendance is a key concern in states like Oregon where 33% of the Native American children missed at least 10% of the school days in 2015-2016 (Blad, 2017). Attempting to reverse the trend, one district developed a school model specifically for Native populations to ensure that students have a plan for graduation that does not come at the expense of their culture. When attendance days have been missed, rather than having a backlog of homework, they simply begin where they left off (Wilcox, 2015). According to Hedy Chang, Executive Director of Attendance Works, "There's now a growing level of evidence that proves what we know from common sense, which is that if kids aren't in the classroom, they can't benefit" (Blad, 2017, p. 5).

Assessment data

One of the most notable challenges for Native American students lies in their presentation of English as an English Language Learner rather than as an organic, learner with English as their primary language. While this student population was shown to drop out of the secondary educational system at a rate of over 50% (Buly, 2005), recent data indicates a modest improvement with nearly 70% of Native American students graduating from public high schools across the nation (Olife, 2017). Primary weaknesses were found to be academic reading deficiencies whereby the the dropout population averaged six grade levels below their same aged peers. Furthermore, limited evidence demonstrating pre-requisite knowledge and skills fundamental for meeting the national standards was found in the background of these Native American youth (Washington Commission on State Learning, 1988).

Additional research offered an even further disparate lens as National Status Completion Rates (2009) reported an average public school graduation rate of 78% for all students, 83% for White students, and only 69% for Native American students. This lens becomes even more

transparent when one limits the graduation analysis to the nation's 48,000 Native American students attending tribal schools where graduation rates stagnate around 53% (Olife, 2017).

Cultural focus

Giving respect to Native American culture and learning, there were seven interviews selected to align with the Seven Philosophies for the Native American Man (Spirit Gathering, 2011). With the exception of the First Philosophy, to "treat women in a sacred manner," the remaining philosophies focus on the family and cultural unit. It is, however, noteworthy that the tenets of the First Philosophy specifically mention women with a focus on the support to be given to them as well as an emphasis placed on the treatment of women with dignity and respect (Seven Philosophies for a Native American Man, 2018). Its placement as the premier tenet, during a time which clearly predestined any type of women's equality, speaks volumes to the culture's value of both women as well as the sovereignty of the family unit. The Second Philosophy is to "teach my children learn my Native language." The Third Philosophy is to "see that the community Elders play a significant role in the education of my children." The Fourth Philosophy is to "give back to my community by donating my time and talents." The Fifth Philosophy is to "ensure the land, water, and air will be intact for my children and my children's children – unborn." The Sixth Philosophy is to "commit to walk the spiritual way called in my own culture." The final, Seventh Philosophy is to "maintain the knowledge of cultures, ceremonies, and songs, and so that I may pass these on to the future generations." While these tenets present an emphasis on the male gender, it is both implied and omnipresent within their culture that males are both responsible to and empowered by the leadership of the tribe. This does not diminish the value of the female perspective within the 21st century setting, it does, however, serve to support the tone of the Seven Philosophies, as presented.

In order to better appreciate the challenges faced by Native American students, one must understand the significance of these philosophies to the culture of this Native American community. This research offers a glimpse into the challenges faced by today's Native American families as they struggle to maintain their attachment to the past while attempting to grasp at the future. Ironically, it is these same honorable tenets which 21st century educators often find challenging as they labor to find a balance to afford Native American students with a contemporary education while providing homage to their cultural ancestry.

Methods

Interviews were conducted with seven parents or parent groups who volunteered to engage in dialog regarding their perceptions of effectiveness and quality of the school programming in their children's Native American tribal school setting in Mississippi. All children educated in this school district are of sufficient Native American heritage to qualify for attendance. Educators are composed of a composite of White, Black, and Native American ethnicities.

The conversational nature of the interviews was considered key in order to engage the parents in manner in which they were likely to be the most comfortable. It was suspected that Likert scale surveys or short answer questions would hinder response density as well as hamper the quality and depth of the responses garnered. The conversations were scripted for review. All names were omitted, in order to protect the privacy of the participants.

The seven interviews were compiled and analyzed individually as the specific responses to questions varied by participant. While the questions focused on their perceptions of school effectiveness in delivering the educational programming and quality of the programming offered when compared to other educational settings, interviewees often digressed into tangent topics which they felt warranted further dialog. The results are detailed per interview for each of the seven participants. Following the narratives, a collective discussion will be provided to compare and contrast the interviewee responses, focusing on areas of overlapping concern.

Results

Interview 1

Interview 1 was conducted with a mother of three who did not graduate from high school. Addressing the effectiveness of the school, she commented on how discipline used to be "more structured than today." Remembering her own experiences, she articulated that she was always afraid to get into trouble at school based on what would, then, happen at home. "If I got out of line for a split second, the teacher ask me 'You don't want me to go speak with your mother do you?'" She also had frustrations with what she considered an inconsistent disciplinary policy stating that "Students come in whenever they want, they drag in after 9 a.m. and go to class as if there is nothing wrong with coming in late….some even show up as late as 11 a.m. I've noticed some students even show up as late as they want and nobody says anything. Why don't they tell them parents they can't come in after 8:30 a.m. or something to this effect? Maybe even lock the gates at 9:00 a.m. or something? The school administration is the problem. They just ignore it."

This interviewee also spoke at length about the quality of academics, stating that "Academic expectations have improved, but not much." She further discussed how she wished "the administration would focus on students' academic achievement rather than so much on sports."

Interview 2

Interview 2 was conducted with a parent of the tribal school who did not graduate from high school but who did complete her General Education Diploma (G.E.D.). She had a different experience set as she, as a student had attended both a traditional, public school and then transitioned to the tribal school later in her career. She indicated that the public school had her further ahead of her peers at the tribal school. However, she found herself bored at the tribal school where she felt it was worksheet driven, leading to her eventual disinterest and dropping out for a G.E.D. Her current perceptions of the tribal school, however, painted a more positive image about the school's effectiveness and quality. "Teachers are more involved with the students, and they seem to care more about their achievement. I have also noticed that there are more options available to students today than when I was in school. There are more advanced classes offered, the Mississippi Scholars program is implemented more now, and a new virtual learning school is in progress. The virtual learning school would have been a great option for me if they had this when I was in school because I would have been able to take courses online as opposed to going the G.E.D. route."

When the interviewee finished discussing her, personal experiences, she shared some insight about her two children in the tribal school. "Teachers are teaching and making sure that

my child is learning at his potential. I have noticed a difference with my nephew as well. The teachers told my sister that my nephew as a little loud and had a tendency of causing problems, so they had him tested for ADHD and even gave him medicine. However, his grades started to drop. After several assessments, they took him off the medication and his grades came back up. My nephew was told (that) he could do some drawings after he completed his work early. The teacher realized he didn't have ADHD, he was just bored and wanted something to do. Her assessment and care for my nephew is what shows me the teachers are trying their best to make sure the students are learning to their potential."

Regarding overall efficacy of the school setting, her main concern was the implementation of discipline which she felt should be child specific and not procedural. She indicated that her son who is curious "wanted to touch things all the time. He would be told not to touch something and would end up doing it anyway. The teacher ended up sending him to the office. The teacher should have handled the situation herself in the classroom and not sent him to the principal." She had suggestions for such in class remediation like taking away privileges versus sending him to the office. She did not seem to want to make home setting changes to change his overall behavior pattern, however.

Interview 3

Interview 3 was conducted with a parent who was able to offer a concomitant view as a non-certified school employee. She immediately began addressing school attendance as a major concern which impacts the quality of a program that can be offered as well as the program's effectiveness. She referred to a significant population of students at the high school who were consistently tardy and disrespectful to both teachers and administrators, stating, "I see students come to school and when they come in tardy, they do not care whether they have 20 tardies; they just don't care. I also see how some students talk back to teachers and administrators and have no care in the world what their consequence will be. There is definitely a lack of respect for self and others."

"I see how students try to manipulate the system with their attendance. They understand that they can miss up 10, consecutive days before they are dropped from the roll. They will miss 9 days and show up on the 10th day, with no consequences." She faults the overall system leadership indicating, "I hear, 'Well at least his is here.' That's only thing that's said about the student absences."

When asked about how these issues could be addressed, she indicated that the "administrators need to be strong enough to care about the students' success." She shared how the tribal school's chain-of-command differs from a traditional school setting in that the teachers are at the bottom, followed by the principals and superintendent. The top of the pyramid is the education department director (a councilman), with the acme position held by the tribal chief. In this system she explained how teachers can become intimidated by the students. She shared the example that if a parent complains about a teacher to the administrator, there should be a meeting with the involved parties to rectify the situation. However, "most of the time the principal doesn't take the necessary steps and just lets things to directly to the council. Usually, the tribal council will come to the school to reprimand the teacher without even understanding what is happening. Teachers have a tendency of getting scared to do their job when they hear the word 'council' mentioned, so students will throw it around a lot to try to scare their teachers."

Interview 4

Interview 4 was conducted with a mother of three who graduated from a neighboring, public high school but sends her children to the tribal school. When asked to discuss the quality of the programs at the tribal school as well as to detail how effective they are, she provided the following on this band of Native American's perceived social hierarchy. "Native students who attend the neighboring, public high school are looked at as 'better' than those who attend the tribal school. She indicated that her daughter struggled with this perception as she had transferred to the tribal school."

When delving into the impact that the discipline may on mitigating these stereotypes, she indicated, "There is none. I see (procedures) written down, but it is not effective. Nothing is done most of the time. Students sometimes just walk off campus. Something needs to be done so that students are monitored and kept on campus."

Redirecting her to discuss the quality of the tribal school, she presented with strong opinions regarding the need to focus more on academic pursuits and less on athletics stating, "The school's focus needs to be on academics. It's not getting done at home and this needs to be taught at home; however, since it isn't getting done at home, the teachers and administrators must give students this motivation to be better in academics. Since most parents haven't attended college, or even graduated from high school, they do not understand how to communicate the benefit of academics…the teachers here have a bigger task than in pubic schools."

Interview 5

Interview 5 was conducted with a parent who is also a tribal district employee whose position requires her to work throughout the district. This parent has seven children and appears to be entrenched in both the community as well as tribal school setting. When asked about the quality of the system she shared the following, she indicated that there were some, subtle variances between schools but that overall, the majority of the students attending the elementary schools were "wild." When asked to elaborate she stated that the students tend "to get away with thing," and indicated that the principal allowed the students to talk back to the teachers without consequences. She was disinclined to give the system high marks for quality or program efficacy as she indicated that most teachers give parents good reports to avoid dealing with them.

Interview 6

Interview 6 was conducted with a parent who has two sons at the tribal high school. When asked about the quality of the tribal school system, she said that she had to send them to the tribal school because she could not afford to give them things needed for public school attendance like school supplies and that they have better chances to participate in extracurricular activities at the tribal school. She did not really know about the quality of the programming or how effective it was, she stated that she, "just hopes they are properly educated and that they go on and finish college. She cries as she explains that she cannot afford to give them what they want.

When prompted as to the overall programming of the school, independent of academics as she was unable to speak to curricular pursuits, she indicated that she was not really familiar with much but knew that most students basically get a "pat on the back" for whatever they do

and wished that the principal would make better decisions and use better judgment when he disciplines students. She indicated that she learns most of what she knows about her sons' school from her extended family.

Interview 7

Interview 7 was conducted with a set of parents whose four children attend the tribal schools. When asked about the quality of the programming at the school, they indicated that they really weren't sure about the curriculum or exactly what is taught. They only knew what was there when they attended. They did go to college from the tribal school system and just hope it's still as good as it was, which, to them indicated that the quality at least used to be good enough. When asked about other school programs like discipline, they shared the following, "it seems like nothing has ever changed. There is always a teenage girl who gets pregnant; there's always fights; there's always cigarette smokers and class skippers." They shared that the school discipline problems come from kids of parents who, themselves, had discipline issues.

Redirecting them to discuss how effective the overall education appears to be at the tribal school system, the parents indicated that they felt that extracurricular activities were important in order for their kids to be more outgoing and "fit in better when they go to college." While they gave the schools credit for its technology, but offered concern as "the majority of teachers are white." The parents were encouraged that many students were getting up to a 20 on their ACT and felt that this data made "the tribal community look good."

Discussion

While none of the parents interviewed shared consistently, positive feedback on their school's academic quality or efficacy, consistent areas of concern were cited among all participants with regard to school discipline. From reiterated to disregard for timeliness, to chronic truancy, to chronic absenteeism, to severe disrespect for educators, this critical factor appeared to offer a paramount concern for all parents. However, none of the parents interviewed seemed inclined to challenge the status quo or to elevate the concern to the parties with the power to implement change, specifically the tribal council. Using a critical, external lens, it would appear that the culture indoctrinated the citizens with sense of learned helplessness where, although they witnessed noteworthy mismanagement, they were disinclined to offer a voice against their establishment, perpetuating what appeared to be a multigenerational issue as well as a systemic problem within the institution. Certainly, in order to reverse the existing trend, it appeared that a cultural shift in leadership and or protocol would be required.

Given that the philosophies are found in a community whose members are expected to defer to the Elders (Spirit Gathering, 2011), it is reasonable to appreciate how present day Native American parents feel disabled to catalyze change. Given the Seventh Philosophy (Spirit Gathering, 2011), where the citizens developmental learning reinforced a need to maintain the culture, finding the power to suggest a change could be aligned with the dominant's culture's idea of treason. Certainly, such voices would be not only disavowed but could, potentially, be shunned from the community.

School quality programming and effective implementation of the programming were breached in a number of manners. Of the interviewed parents, most recognized a lack of substantial change within the curriculum, with the exception of technological advances;

however, many clung to a culture of hope that it was good enough to get their kids into college, or at least as good as it was when they were there. To analyze this microcosm of culture within the larger context of the United States where academic merit is analyzed, tracked, and categorized to the most, minute detail at every grade level, major subject level, and ability level, there is clearly an intense cultural divide between the majority culture's public school student experiences and that of the tribal school's students. While clinging to hopes and allowing others to dictate cultural norms, the parents all presented with a veil of frustration. However, it did not appear that any parents saw themselves as change agents, empowered to demand a better life for their children a better future.

Conclusions

The qualitative analysis of a tribal school system in the southeastern United States using case study interviews of parents representing seven family units within the Native American tribal population offered a depth of insight into both the school system's current strengths and weaknesses. While the cultural design of the system limits diversity to only those students identified as genetically aligned with attendance, it reinforces its legacy and traditions and values. However, in establishing a microcosm of values and protocols, it also serves as an impediment for change, limiting its student population from having access to a variety of the contemporary schools of thought to encourage positive discourse.

The citizens of this band of Native Americans were clear in their passion for their children and their hope for their advancement. However, in this digital age of advancing knowledge, global information sharing, and intense competition for resources to provide the pathway to power, the current Native American culture within this sampled demography, appear to be immobilized by their cultural identity. Seemingly more deferential to the past than proactive toward the future, many within this population analyzed could be considered to be aligned with those individuals characterized by Plato's Allegory of the Cave where he claimed that knowledge gained by one's senses was simply one's opinion, and in order to have real knowledge one must step beyond the borders of his surroundings and find truth (Cohen, 2006).

Future Research

Future research using similar questioning and sampling techniques with Native American populations represented by other tribal associations could enhance the lens of understanding as to the motivations for current change levels supported within tribal educational communities. Additionally, advancing the research to target populations of Native American college students who have successfully matriculated from their tribal settings to find a post-secondary success would likely serve to offer a powerful matrix for future generations to use as a template for academic advancement. Given that only 13% of Native American students who begin post-secondary pursuits, actually finish college compared to 28% of the entire student population (Olife, 2017), there is much discourse yet to be examined regarding access, understandings, and preparedness for Native American youth.

References

Alliance for Excellent Education. (2008). *American Indian and Alaska Native students and U.S. high schools.* Retrieved from http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/american-indian-and-alaska-native-student-and-u-s-a-high-schools

Blad, E. (2017, October 18). Schools fight back against chronic absenteeism: Districts work to enure students are in school. *Education Week*, *37*(9). 4-8.

Buly, M. R. (2005). Leaving no American Indian/Alaskan Native behind: Identifying real strategies and needs. *Journal of American Indian Education, (44)*(1).

Center on standards and assessment implementation: National status completion rate (2009). WestEd. Retrieved from: csai-online.org

Chavers, D. Locke, P. (1989). The effects of testing on American Indians. National Committee on Testing and Public Policy.

Cohen, M. (2006). *The Allegory of the Cave*. Retrieved from https://faculty.washington.edu

Gregory, A., Skiba, R., & Roguera, P. (2010). The achievement gap and the discipline gap: Two sides of the same coin? *Educational Researcher*, 59-68.

Johnston-Goodstar, K., & Roholt, R. V. (2017). Our kids aren't dropping out: They're being pushed out: Native American students and racial microaggression in schools. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, *26*(1-2) 30-47.

Olife, H. (2017, May 16). Graduation Rates & American Indian Education. *Partnership with Native Americans.* Retrieved from http://www.blog.nativepartnership.org

Meza, N. (2015). Indian education: Maintaining tribal sovereignty through Native American culture and language preservation. *Brigham Young Education & Law Journal*, *(2015)*(1), 353-366.

Morgan, H. (2009). Teaching Native American students: what every teacher should know. *Multicultural Education*, *(16)*(4),10-12.

Seven Philosophies for a Native American Man. (2018, February 15). *Native American Nation.* Retrieved from http://www.nativenationamerica.us

Spirit Gathering. (2011). *Seven Philosophies for the Native American Man*. Retrieved from www.native-americans-online.com: www.native-americans-online.com

Sprague, J. R., Vincent, C. G., Tobin, T. J., & Pavel, M. (2013). Preventing disciplinary exclusions of students from American Indian/Alaska Native backgrounds. *Family Court Review, 51(3)*, 452-459.

Stewart, A. J. (2012). Acting for the left behind: How the Native Class Act could close the gaps in American Indian education. *American Indian*, *(36)*(2-3), 347.

Sue, D. W., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, *(62)*(4), 278-286. doi:10.1037/0003-66x.62.4.271

Washington Commission on State Learning (1988). Understanding the new 4th and 7th grade test: A guide for parents. Olympia: Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Wilcox, K. C. (2015). Not at the expense of their culture: Graduating Native American youth from high school. *The High School Journal*, 337-352. doi:10.1353/hsj.2015.0011