

Life on the Reservation: Cross-cultural Field Experiences and Student Learning

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Abstract

Twenty-first century classrooms are filled with increasingly diverse student populations. Effective teacher preparation programs must include explicit course work in culturally responsive pedagogies and field experiences that place educators in new sociocultural contexts. Field experiences in cross-cultural, place-based settings have the potential to help educators recognize injustice and develop empowering practices (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007; Greenwood, 2008; Smith, 2007; Smith & Sobel, 2010). In this article, we describe our recent collaboration with Oglala Lakota College (OLC) and the Center for American Indian Research and Native Studies (CAIRNS) to provide both undergraduate teacher candidates and graduate students with rich, field-based cross-cultural experiences. We discuss the research and theories shaping this collaboration and describe the formation of these partnerships. Student learning in both the undergraduate and graduate field experiences indicates how spending intensive time in a unique cultural setting can promote critical thinking about the self, the world, and the role of educators in creating change.

***Keywords:* cross-cultural, field experience, teacher candidate, Lakota, social change**

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Professional schools housed within liberal arts institutions are faced with the challenge of bridging the gap between a liberal and professional education. For schools of education, this task involves balancing between preparing students for standardized accreditation benchmarks and preparing them to be critical, dynamic thinkers with a broad knowledge base and an understanding that thinking and learning are essential to living a fulfilling life. Our institution embraces a liberal arts tradition steeped in social justice. We strive to prepare students who understand “the interconnectedness of all life and human solidarity across ethnic and social divisions” (“The University’s Mission,” n.d., para. 5) and can act as change agents for social justice. As part of this mission, our university has worked to establish a strong international program and more than 35% of our students participate in an international experience during their tenure. Our mission is consistent with the goal of preparing teachers to work in diverse schools and, as Villegas (2007) asserts, who “are resolved to teach their students equitably [and] understand existing barriers to learning that children and youth from low-income and racial/ethnic minority backgrounds consistently encounter in school” (p. 372). Achieving this goal requires that teacher preparation programs design explicit course work in culturally responsive pedagogies as well as field experiences that place educators in new sociocultural contexts. Field experiences in diverse, cross-cultural, place-based settings have the potential to help educators recognize injustice and develop empowering practices (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007; Greenwood, 2008). When these field experience are situated in ecologically and culturally distinct contexts, students are able to see the interconnectedness of education and place—what Smith and Sobel (2010) describe as “the human and more-than-human” (p. 21) elements needed to create socially just societies.

In this article, we describe our recent collaboration with Oglala Lakota College (OLC) and the Center for American Indian Research and Native Studies (CAIRNS) in order to provide both undergraduate teacher candidates and graduate students with rich, field-based cross-cultural experiences. We begin by discussing

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the research and theories shaping this collaboration, then describe the steps we took to create these partnerships. Following this, we describe the unique goals, contexts, and student learning in both the undergraduate and graduate field experiences. We conclude the article by discussing the continued evolution of these partnerships and the significance of our students' learning.

Culturally Responsive Practice and Cross-Cultural Experiences

The decades-old drive for multicultural education that focused on recognition and inclusion has shifted to a more intentional paradigm of culturally responsive pedagogy that relies on educators connecting to students' backgrounds, building on students' home dialects and languages, planning for dialogic instruction, attending to classroom discourse, and maintaining a rigorous curriculum (McIntyre, Hulan, & Layne, 2010). Sleeter's (2001) review of research examining preservice teachers' preparation to work in culturally diverse schools emphasized White teachers' deficit of cross-cultural knowledge despite recognizing the likelihood of teaching diverse students. Culturally responsive pedagogy requires that educators understand the cultural practices and backgrounds of diverse students (Gay, 2002). Gay (2002) and others (Reyhner, Lee, & Gabbard, 1993; Sleeter, 2001) assert that this understanding should not only include factual information about different racial/ethnic groups, but also expand sociocultural and historical knowledge as well. Cultural and historical understandings rooted in place-based contexts can help students recognize the assets and strengths of communities and counteract deficit perspectives focused on weaknesses. For Native American students, who already experience a dissonance as they move from school to home, a capabilities perspective is particularly important (Thornton & Sanchez, 2010). Reyhner et al. (1993) recognized that without a common cultural understanding, non-Native teachers in American Indian schools would struggle to create a context for learning and potentially place students in a no-win situation where they may have to choose between home and school cultures.

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Knowledge of cultural backgrounds and practices includes developing a keen awareness and critical examination of how different diverse populations are represented in pop culture and mass media (Gay, 2002). The social wallpaper of today's technology-driven world communicates questionable value-laden images and messages about diverse students that have the potential to feed preconceived notions and stereotypes to teacher candidates (Baldwin et al., 2007; Gay, 2002). Educators must be able to recognize and deconstruct these damaging messages if they are to move beyond a deficit perspective and recognize the funds of knowledge their students create and utilize. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) define funds of knowledge as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills" (p.133) essential for individuals and communities to thrive. Recognizing that every student enters the classroom with a body of knowledge derived from cultural and familial roots is essential to culturally responsive pedagogy and teaching for social justice.

Cross-cultural field experiences, when created in partnership with communities they serve, have the potential to help educators develop a deeper understanding of diverse students, recognize their own preconceived notions, and engage in socially just practices (Baldwin et al., 2007; Stachowski & Mahan, 1998). Research has been conducted with both service learning projects where students work with out-of-school tutoring and intervention programs (Baldwin et al., 2007) and student teaching in reservation-based boarding schools (Stachowski & Mahan, 1998). Baldwin et al.'s research found that tutors challenged their beliefs about the capabilities of diverse students and reported learning as much from their pupils as their pupils learned from them. Stachowski and Mahan (1998) found that teacher candidates gained a broader world-view and reported similar reciprocal learning between teacher candidates and students. Both cross-cultural experiences fostered community involvement where the teacher candidates interacted with a variety of community members within and beyond school walls. In one study (Stachowski & Mahan, 1998), this community immersion enabled teacher candidates to deepen their cultural understanding

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and glean knowledge and insight from non-educators—an experience outside the realm of traditional student teachers and one highly valued by cross-cultural candidates. Further, both of these studies reflected what Wade (2000) recommends for collaboratively-created service learning experiences: projects must be mutually beneficial and equitably framed where both educator and the community share common goals. This permeable relationship between school learning and place-based learning approaches the process Gruenwald (2003) and Smith (2007) call decolonization, through which educators challenge their own assumptions about power and education within particular communities.

In creating the cross-cultural experiences for our students, we hoped to address the call of these scholars by deepening our teacher candidates' and graduate students' understanding of diverse populations through intensive experiences rooted in the particular culture of Lakota peoples in South Dakota. For our teacher candidates, we wanted to create a cross-cultural student teaching experience. For our graduate students, all enrolled in a Ph.D. program focused on education and social change, we wanted to create a cross-cultural experience examining the manifestations of culture, poverty, and social change in a unique local context. Our undergraduate candidates tend to believe that poverty only occurs across oceans and in remote places in the world; they have limited to no experience with poverty inside our country. Further, they are often unaware of the multi-faceted and diverse subcultures within American society. Our Ph.D. students are well aware of social injustice and challenges facing individuals living in poverty, but they tend to approach these issues from a myopic perspective that diminishes culture as an asset. Specifically, we hoped to develop both undergraduate and graduate students' knowledge of American Indian reservations, foster an understanding of the poverty and barriers to education these students and community members face, enable recognition of the cultural and community attributes that empower individuals, and move students beyond problem recognition to embrace socially just pedagogies and practice. In addition to cultivating culturally responsive practices in our students, we sought partnerships that

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embodied reciprocity—partnerships where our students’ involvement would benefit the local community as much as the local community would teach our students. The following section describes how these partnerships were formed.

Forming the Partnerships

First, we sought out a partnership with a tribal university housed inside an American Indian reservation with the goal of establishing student teaching placements for our undergraduate teacher candidates. Through research, Oglala Lakota College (OLC) in Kyle, South Dakota on the Pine Ridge Reservation was identified as a possible partner. OLC is a four-year institution with an existing Department of Education preparing initial certification candidates. OLC was established in 1974 through charter by The Oglala Sioux Tribal Council. Appealing most to our faculty was the Vision Statement of OLC: *Rebuilding the Lakota Nation through Education* (“Statement of Vision,” n.d., para. 1). The first author contacted the dean at OLC and determined they would be open to creating a partnership and facilitating placement of student teachers on Pine Ridge Reservation. Through OLC, we obtained placements for two student teaching candidates at the reservation’s Little Wound School. Upon hearing about graduate students interested in studying issues of equity and social change in South Dakota, the dean of OLC suggested the second author contact the Center for American Indian Research and Native Studies (CAIRNS). CAIRNS, located in Martin, South Dakota and equidistant from the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations, is an “Indian-controlled, nonprofit research and education center that is committed to advancing knowledge and understanding of American Indian communities and issues important to them” (Center for American Indian Research and Native Studies, 2012, para. 1). The director of CAIRNS was interested in the graduate student experience and wanted to help students distinguish between the culture of poverty and Lakota culture as well as introduce students to social change initiatives on both the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations. The director worked with the second author to create an experience

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where graduate students built an understanding of Lakota history and culture, then engaged in field-based inquiry examining how community members on both reservations have acted to initiate and sustain positive social change.

Two Reservations

These new partnerships enabled our undergraduate teacher candidates and our graduate students to temporarily immerse themselves in culturally and historically rich contexts steeped in the challenges of poverty. Both groups of students had never spent any time on American Indian reservations and, for the majority of these students, this experience was their first time west of the Mississippi.

Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is located in the southwest corner of South Dakota and is the second largest reservation in the United States, incorporating 2,800,000 acres or 11,000 square miles. The unemployment rate on Pine Ridge is approximately 89% and about 97% of the population lives below federal poverty levels (US Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Tribal Services, 2005). Pine Ridge Reservation schools have been in the bottom 10% of school funding, teacher turnover has been reported as high as 800% that of the U.S. national average, and the dropout rate among K-12 students is around 70% (Schwartz, 2002). According to the 2010 census, 42.4% of the population on Pine Ridge is under the age of twenty, emphasizing the dire need for effective educational practices that foster student success (U.S. Census Bureau).

Rosebud Reservation consists of twenty communities with a tribal enrollment of 24,217. It incorporates 883,874 acres or 1,381 square miles, which represents 15% of the Great Plains ("Rosebud Agency," n.d., para. 1). The American Indian Relief Council reports that residents experience an unemployment rate upwards of 80%, one out of three are homeless, and as many as six out of ten residents on Rosebud Reservation live in substandard housing ("South Dakota: Rosebud Reservation," n.d., para.). There is one hospital with thirty-five beds. Mission, South Dakota is within

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Rosebud and is home to Sinte Gleska University. Like Pine Ridge, the 2010 census reported 43.6% of the population on Rosebud is under the age of twenty (U.S. Census Bureau). Together, Pine Ridge and Rosebud have the highest concentration of Teach for America teachers in the United States.

Undergraduate Experience and Student Learning

In August 2013, two teacher candidates arrived in Kyle, South Dakota with the first author, who acted as their university supervisor. The students were placed with two general education elementary teachers at Little Wound School for a ten-week student teaching experience. Little Wound is a tribal school on Pine Ridge Reservation with grades from kindergarten through twelfth housed in one location. The school educates approximately 600 students. One candidate was in a kindergarten classroom and the other was in a third grade classroom. The students were provided with faculty housing by Little Wound, which consisted of a two-bedroom house located in close proximity to the school. The university supervisor from OLC arranged for furniture to be loaned to the students for their stay. The first author stayed for an initial four-day set up period and then returned two more times for three-day visits during the placement.

Students kept journals throughout their time at Little Wound and reflected on their experiences upon returning. Their reflections reveal both personal and professional growth as educators as well as a deepened understanding of the experiences and needs of Lakota students and their community. When discussing what the experience on Pine Ridge meant to them as teachers, they reported, “I remembered why I wanted to be a teacher,” and “I brought all of what I learned into the classroom.” They expressed that they were able to connect with the classroom and students in a very “deep way.” When discussing the children they met, one stated, “The kids, they just LOVE so much, they want all of you every day.” One also noted that for many children on Pine Ridge “school is an escape” and “provides a safe place.” When asked about the community of people on Pine Ridge, one stated, “Their (Lakota)

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struggle isn't over, nobody talks about it anymore but it is real." Both students expressed shock about the overt racism they experienced when they visited the surrounding areas to Pine Ridge. When visiting areas off the reservation, there were times when non-native people made disparaging remarks about Pine Ridge residents upon hearing why these candidates were in South Dakota. One student stated, "I just had to leave the store, the things she was saying were so rude, I just walked out." She went on to say, "It's like they live right there beside the reservation and they don't even see that there are *people* in there."

Learning outcomes for the pilot of this program evolved throughout the experience. Our initial goal of creating a cross-cultural experience within American soil was successfully accomplished. The candidates developed a greater awareness of and appreciation for diversity within America. They reported that they had the opportunity to "apply previous learning, see a school where the testing is not the main focus, and have a real impact." One of them stated that the best thing she learned was, "Not all school problems are equal." She said that typical classroom issues in the schools of her home community no longer seemed to be a "big deal." The other student stated that she was confident that she could handle unexpected student needs as a result of her experiences on Pine Ridge. One went on to say, "Social justice requires active involvement because there really are people suffering in America." Most significant to one student was gaining an awareness that people do not simply choose to live in impoverished circumstances. She stated, "this is just all they know, all they have lived and I understand that the Lakota are connected to the land and each other."

Graduate Experience and Student Learning

While the undergraduate field experience focused on student teaching, the graduate experience used an inquiry approach where students immersed themselves in Lakota culture to better understand the manifestations of culture, poverty, and social change on the Rosebud and Pine Ridge reservations. Four graduate students arrived in Martin, South Dakota at the end of June 2013 and began

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a 14-day experience that consisted of two phases. First, students participated in an intensive four-day seminar in Lakota culture to begin to understand the Lakota relationships with each other, the land, spirituality, and history. This seminar included intensive course readings, lectures, and discussions designed to give students a context for their field experiences. The second phase consisted of six days of field-based meetings with a variety of community members on both reservations: educational leaders, business developers, healthcare workers, small business owners, court advocates, and housing assistance supervisors. The purpose of these meetings was to help students investigate the relationships between culture, social structures, and social change initiatives in the realms of healthcare; financial development and support systems; housing resources; and early childhood, K–12, and higher education. The students also spent four days visiting several significant sites in the Badlands and the Black Hills to further understand the Lakota connection to the land and history. Students approached their field-based experiences by examining how particular agents of change experienced the intersections of history, community, culture, and social justice. Students sought to understand not only the tension between social change initiated from outside of the community and social change as organic to the community, but also to draw distinctions between Lakota culture and the trappings of poverty.

Students took an ethnographic approach to their fieldwork by maintaining a digital field journal of their observations and conversations with change agents. While in the field, students used notebooks to record observations and snippets of speech captured from conversations with the different community members they met. Each day they returned from the field to write up their notes, debrief their learning with the CAIRNS director and staff, and collaborate to make sense of their discoveries. They used a digital medium of their choice (i.e. blogs, Google docs, etc.) to write up their field notes and share their thinking with each other. Sharing their thinking enabled students to check each other's accuracy and build understanding through collaboration. This digital text along with their rough field notes, readings, and lectures acted as the raw

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material for final papers and presentations sharing the summary and findings of their experience.

Graduate student learning reflected three central themes: 1) an increased awareness of Lakota and American Indian history, 2) a critical eye towards representation of American Indians, and 3) new perspectives on the relationships of social change within particular cultural contexts. The first two themes developed simultaneously as students learned about Lakota origin stories, treaties, battles for land and religious freedoms, and the fraught history of education policies. As students learned about Lakota culture, they began to make connections between culture, representation, and social power.

Learning about Lakota history and culture provided a powerful framework for students to recognize what one student explained as “how many of the things we hear/see/learn about Native Americans tend to be oversimplified” and the damage created through this false understanding. Students also realized how the Lakota perspective is frequently missing from area visitor centers and museums. One student wrote, “Few museums capture the historical perspective of the Lakota people in an intentional and impactful way.” Another student connected this lack of representation to disempowerment: “It is interesting how this [Martin Heritage] Center was based on one people’s point of view. It is a little more meaningful than this because I believe oppressed people are left out of many stories.” Another student hypothesized that the challenge of portraying a complex culture may foster reductive perspectives: “Perhaps it is not possible to capture a culture in a museum as it is the stories, people, and landmarks that bring the true story to life.” Developing a keener awareness of how culture is communicated led students to question not only local representations of Lakota culture, but how American Indians are represented in popular culture. Students happened to be in South Dakota during the release of the most recent film version of the Lone Ranger. The presence of movie posters featuring Johnny Depp as Tonto prompted one student to write, “I was struck by the inappropriateness and fledgling attempts of this film to say it was created with ‘fun’ in mind. The lack of authenticity and poking fun of cultural

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traditions perpetuates stereotypes and undermines the culture.” For these students, knowledge of Lakota history and culture fostered a more critical awareness of inclusion and representation.

The first two themes became a catalyst that pushed students to question the potentially narrow role of change agents in particular cultural settings. Students discussed the nature of a deficit perspective so frequently adopted by individuals who hope to work for social good; a singular focus on challenge and lack of resource can blind one to the power of culture. As one student explained:

Driving through a local reservation, which contains within its boundaries one of the ten poorest counties in the United States, I saw the crumbling structures amid the empty, rusty carnage of old appliances and automobiles, evidence of the abject poverty in the way I, as a white, middle class American, would have judged had the cultural immersion course not created a new awareness in me. The Lakota have a history, a holistic view of the world, kinship values and a spirituality that links them inextricably together.

Another student reflected similarly by asserting that working for social change requires change agents who take time to pay attention to how “equity, values of culture, and impacting change in an appropriate manner” converge. This student recognized that without attention to culture, “one may be so focused on changing to make things better that he or she fails to celebrate and come to understand what is valuable in a culture.” Without cultural awareness, change agents may work under “assumptions that the Lakota Indians need to be saved from impoverished circumstances. This trip has underscored the importance of not enmeshing culture and poverty. This enmeshment develops dangerous assumptions and denigrates culture.” Social change, according to these students, must include “striving to develop a knowledge base and taking time to meet and listen to people from the culture” if it is to take root and sustain itself.

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Conclusion

Our students returned from South Dakota with a deeper cultural knowledge and appreciation for the complex relationship between social justice and educational practice. Their awareness of Native American culture was broadened and their beliefs about equity and historical perspective have been shifted away from simply what they learned in history class. Our students met a proud people with a proud heritage and came back with an understanding that Native American culture is not a culture of poverty. Poverty is a cyclical circumstance in which the Lakota were placed and held for one hundred and fifty years. Knowledge about and understanding of the true situation is what creates cross-cultural learning rather than volunteerism experiences. As the world becomes smaller and educators are asked to expand their knowledge base to work with diverse students, cross-cultural field experiences have the potential to act as powerful catalysts for learning in this deep and meaningful way. Our students demonstrated how spending intensive time in a unique cultural setting promotes critical thinking about the self and the role of educators in creating change.

We intend to continue American cross-cultural experiences for both undergraduate teacher candidates and Ph.D. students. For our teacher candidates, we plan to expand this opportunity to all initial certification candidates from twelve undergraduate initial certification programs and eleven graduate Master of Arts in Teaching programs. The assignments on Pine Ridge will also be expanded to last an entire semester and incorporate placements in special education settings as well as regular education settings for dual certified candidates. For our Ph.D. students, the second author has worked with the director at CAIRNS to increase the number of students visiting South Dakota, expand field experiences, and support students who wish to conduct formal research on the reservations. Both partnerships are still in their early stages and both authors look forward to their continued development.

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