

**Enhancing Success in American Indian Students: Participatory  
Research at Akwesasne as Part of the Development of a Culturally  
Relevant Curriculum.**

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Efforts to improve schooling under the banner of raising standards are taking hold throughout New York State. The emphasis on standards means that all students must meet a range of expectations held by the standards designers. But is there a chance that the rhetoric about standards can improve the education of American Indian children? Given the enormous disparities in the cultural conditions of Aboriginal students, the attainment of standards suggests necessary structural changes in the curriculum, instructional methods and materials, and the standards used to judge performance. This paper looks more closely at the utilization of participatory research in a curriculum development and teaching project that addresses the intercultural or interethnic needs of American Indian students. The paper addresses itself to examining the crisis of the education of Aboriginal children and to developing a new school orientation that sees Aboriginal educational endeavors in a new light. The contexts and arguments suggest that whereas Aboriginal perspective to learning is useful in redefining old problems and proposing fresh alternatives, there are some grounds for careful optimism about what might be possible.

In his book, *Two-way Aboriginal schooling: Education and cultural survival*, Harris (1990) clearly discusses the Aboriginal struggle against cultural assimilation, their aspiration to live in two worlds, and their felt need of a two-way school that is rooted in

Aboriginal culture. Harris contends “Aboriginal schools, in spite of much genuine effort, are generally failing to produce students competent in the level of Year 10 high school and beyond” (p. 1-2). Earlier, Hawthorne (1967), and more recently, Paquette (1991), Kawagley (1993), and Hampton (1995) posit the failure of Aboriginal children at school in the lack of the school's recognition of Aboriginal culture. This paper is about an initiative taken by the Mohawk Education Project to afford a rare opportunity for university personnel, teachers and Aboriginal people to explore how Mohawk students acquire their attitudes, values and behavior patterns and how to translate these into strategies for learning more effectively. The paper reviews various interpretations of success and failure of American Indian students and discusses changes taking place in an American Indian community as a part of an ongoing need for American Indians to begin to perceive the education of their children in new terms and to explore ways and means of making education more meaningful to their children.

### **The Mohawk Education Project**

The Mohawk Education Project, sponsored by the New York State Department of Education, is a formal partnership between the State University of New York (SUNY) at Potsdam and the Salmon River Central School District. The main objective of the project is for SUNY Potsdam to collaborate with public school teachers and community members to construct a culturally relevant standards-based curriculum supported by current research that would address problems of high drop out rates and underachievement of Mohawk students. The partnership is, therefore, to provide an anchor for thinking about improving education for American Indian students at the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation. While working collectively to enhance success among American Indian students, the evolving

partnership also provides pre-service teacher education candidates with meaningful field experience with minority groups. Some of the threads that run through this partnership attach to meanings of participatory research and professional development schools. To date, the partnership has developed culturally relevant curriculum units in Social Studies, English Language Arts, and an Interdisciplinary Science by using specific Mohawk Culture standards as the basis for the units. It is the various interpretations of success and failure of American Indian children in school and the impact of participatory research in developing the Mohawk Culture standards for the Salmon River Central School District that I wish to discuss in this paper.

### The Mohawk Culture Standards

The central concern of the Mohawk Culture Standards team is to consider carefully how Mohawk students acquire their attitudes, values and behavior patterns and how to translate these into strategies that would enable the Mohawk student to learn more effectively. Culture plays a crucial role in determining what meanings Aboriginal students assign to their experiences, the content of what they learn and how learning occurs (Harris, 1990). It is important to understand what meanings Mohawk students give to their perceptual experiences and in turn how these experiences affect their styles of thinking. The Culture Standards team designed the standards to provide the kinds of learning environments to which Mohawk children have been accustomed. The goals are twofold: 1) to enable students to learn successfully, and 2) to minimize the negative impacts of cultural discontinuities (Nieto, 1996). Whereas traditional curriculum processes represent a top-to-bottom approach, the Mohawk Culture Standards Project, on the other hand, utilized the

quality circles concept (Barra, 1983; Harris & Sherblom, 1999) to generate, select, evaluate, and share vast amounts of information for a culturally relevant curriculum. As Barra (1983) writes, "The quality circles view can be adapted to any culture, since its roots are fundamentally based on satisfying the psychological needs of human beings" (p. 46).

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study is theoretically grounded in psychological anthropology and multicultural education. Psychological anthropology views culture as having a cause-effect relationship with personality and human learning (Pai & Adler, 1997). Psychological anthropologists believe that human knowledge and learning is a complex system rooted at two levels, the level of psychology, and the level of culture. As Spindler & Spindler (1994) write: "Psychological anthropologists are not left in a chartless swamp of cultural particulars for they have encountered the human psyche, as well as culture, and the interactions and combinations of both become their subject matter" (p. 4). In the context of this study, I have formulated a simple definition of psychological anthropology as concerning how the norms and structure of society may affect student learning. To help students from ethnic minority backgrounds to learn effectively, teachers must be aware of the cultural and value differences and linguistic variables that are likely to affect the teaching-learning processes. Education is the process by which individuals learn the culture of a society and become its members (Pai & Adler, 1997). Culture and the context of the learning process are crucial to the educational achievement of students from ethnic groups (Agbo, 1996). The premise of our project was, therefore, to examine how the powerful communal bonds of aboriginal

identities, shaped by communal language, ethnicity, and culture affect knowledge and learning rather than educational standards imposed by the European-American system and status identities created by class or profession. In contrast to the stupendous and complex educational content that reduces the Mohawk student to conditions of abstraction and anonymity, we embarked on a cultural model viewed as the repository of cherished knowledge that places culture as the nexus in the education of the Mohawk child. To demonstrate the intersection between culture and academic performance, I briefly examine the literature on the role of culture in education and educational attainment.

### Role of Culture in Education Among Ethnic Groups

There have been studies that have supported cultural education that symbolizes interests and values of dominant and subordinate groups of society (Agbo, 1996; Andereck, 1992; LeVine & White, 1986; Pai & Adler, 1997). Giroux & Freire (1987), stress the urgency to reconstruct a cultural literacy for each and every individual as part of the democratic idea of citizenship. Giroux and Freire's notion of citizenship attempts to promote and critically engage the different opinions of students from both predominant and minority groups in ways that support them to interpret schools as part of their communities and neighborhoods. Speaking to the promotion of heritage languages in Canadian schools, Cummins & Danesi (1990) contend that a child's general educational achievement is closely associated with the child's development in his or her culture. They assert that the intimate conceptual foundations that children develop in their culture and language make it necessary for them to develop a sense of confidence that enhances their cognitive growth and leads to their success in acquiring additional languages. It is therefore important to

ground children's development in the knowledge and appreciation of their culture and traditions.

In a study of Irish immigrants in the United States, Anderock (1992) found ethnic groups do not easily replace their ethnic cultures with a dominant culture. According to Anderock, "Every ethnic group has boundary rules to maintain ethnicity" (p. 3). She asserts that ethnic groups may choose to do one of three things. First, they may choose to totally absorb (or assimilate) the culture of the dominant group. Secondly, they may choose to gradually move toward totally absorbing (or acculturate) the dominant culture and finally, they may choose to maintain their homogeneity (accommodate) by modifying any attitudes or values of the dominant group using boundary rules that may minimize the possibility of assimilation or acculturation.

Similarly, LeVine & White (1986) and Thies (1987) found that although agrarian ethnic groups may acquire Western education, they may often stick to their traditional objectives and may prefer to mesh the latter with new mixture of inherent and alien interpretations. Thies' (1987) study on the Aborigines of the East Kimberley region of Australia found Aborigines to view education as a process whereby the student learned the lifestyles necessary for survival in the society and that to be full and competent, young persons in their community should acquire both traditional and Western education. LeVine & White (1986) assert that agrarian societies systematize the knowledge considered necessary for their social, historical, and political circumstances and interpret the reality of foreign cultures within their own frames of cultural references. It is, therefore, important for policy-makers to take into consideration the historical, social and political contexts in designing policy for ethnic societies. As LeVine & White put it: "Cultural, historical and

psychological understanding is a practical necessity for the policy-maker, but it has not yet found a secure place in the analysis of educational policy and practice” (p. 13).

According to Paquette (1991) “public systems seeking to assimilate minorities by replacing their cultures and languages have a very poor track record internationally of adequately preparing minorities for full participation in their host societies and economies” (p. 124). However, it is not to assert that foreign domination has not disrupted indigenous cultures. Aboriginal people throughout the world have encountered diverse degrees of disruption or loss with regard to their traditional life styles and worldviews. This disruption has contributed to the many psychological and social dislocations that are prevalent in contemporary Native societies (Kawagley (1993; Lomawaima, 1994).

### **Interpretations of Educational Attainment of Aboriginal Students**

The transmission of knowledge to ethnic minority students and the structure of their education systems in the industrialized world have traditionally aimed at adequately systematizing the knowledge which the dominant group considers necessary for reproducing citizens within the dominant group’s historical, social and political circumstances (Nieto, 1996, p. 2-4). According to Harris (1990), the hidden curriculum has been a systematic structure of socializing Aboriginal students into the European-American frames of cultural reference. Harris recounts that the hidden curriculum, that is, the way teachers present subject matter and the classroom atmosphere they establish has been one way by which Western education has promoted implicit values and behaviors that are harmful to Aboriginal students. Typically, thinking of education in the intercultural and interethnic context focuses on the relative accessibility of different groups. One of the

engines which has driven educational policy mostly focuses on who gets how much of the standardized education pie. That is to say, educational analysts have been more concerned with such things as equality of access, equality of survival, equality of output and equality of outcome (Farrell, 1992) without much regard to the equally important issue of the role of education in the formation of ethnic identity. As few researchers give credence to the virtual cultural matrix of learning, that is, the cultural details of how learning proceeds in different cultures (Pai & Adler, 1997; Nieto, 1996), the quality of education is measured by the gauge of the European-American society and is analyzed in the units of its standards, hence the growing disjunction between academic achievements of American Indian students and their European-American counterparts (Hampton, 1995).

The most frequent theoretical explanation that past researchers attributed to the low academic standards of Aboriginal students centered on cultural differences between Aboriginal and mainstream societies (Atleo, 1990; Ogbu, 1987; Erickson, 1987). Hawthorn (1967) recounted that during the 1950s, because White researchers perceived a cultural superiority of White cultures over Aboriginal culture, White people did not anticipate that Aboriginal children in general could achieve success in school along the same course as White children. There was also the notion that since minority cultures were impoverished, concomitantly, minority groups were genetically inferior and they were bound to be maladapted and fail at school (see Nieto 1996). Nieto (1996) writes to dismiss this notion of genetic inferiority: "School failure is believed to be the fault of either the students themselves, who are genetically inferior, or of other social characteristics of their communities...The first of this explanation has been widely discredited as both ethnocentric and scientifically unfounded" (p. 229). Whereas we would want to know

whether personality traits produce achievement in any learning situation, this extremely complex problem is one that I have been obliged by limit of space to ignore completely. One would assert that even if there were a genetic potential common to nearly all members of the human race, this would be realized in varying degrees depending on the life experience and learning environments of different individuals or subcultures and therefore the realization of the high achievement potential in students involves a learning process.

In the 1960s, researchers dispel this notion of cultural impoverishment and minority group genetic inferiority that allegedly led to the lack of academic achievement of Aboriginal people at school. Hawthorn (1967), Gue (1974), Ogbu (1987), Christie (1988), Hampton (1995), and More (1986), for example, believe that low level of academic standards of Aboriginal students at school is neither due to cultural impoverishment nor genetic inferiority, but rather, it is due to cultural discontinuity. In fact, the Hawthorn report (1967) asserts that Aboriginal children fail in school because the rich experiences they acquire in their own culture and language do not prepare them for the boring routines and activities of the school. According to the Hawthorn report, the school's concept of time and space, discrepancies in the curriculum, and, the incongruity of Aboriginal worldview to the discipline system of the school have all contributed to the low educational attainment of the Aboriginal child. As Hawthorne reports:

It is difficult to imagine how an Indian child attending an ordinary public school could develop anything but a negative self-image. First, there is nothing from his culture represented in the school or valued by it. Second, the Indian child often gains the impression that nothing he or other Indians do is right when compared to what non-Indian children are doing. Third, in both segregated and integrated schools, one of the main aims of teachers expressed with reference to Indians is to 'to help them improve their standards of living, or their general lot, or themselves' which is another way of saying that what they are and have now is not good enough, they must do and be other things (p. 142).

In the 1970s, the concept of cultural deprivation became common in the explanation of failure of Aboriginal students to attain higher academic levels at school (Atleo, 1990). Atleo (1990) modifies the notion of cultural deprivation in terms of what he calls "significant discontinuities" (p. 7), (see also Nieto, 1996) whereas Hampton (1995) explains it in terms of disrespect of, and lack of recognition of Aboriginal ways of life by non-Aboriginal educators. Gue (1974) also explains cultural discontinuity in terms of value differences. Atleo (1990) asserts that while Aboriginal people's culture may place a significant value upon group goals, the White group may place a higher value upon individual goals. Such differences, he says, may constitute a significant discontinuity for the Aboriginal child at school.

More (1986) characterizes cultural discontinuity in terms of differences in learning styles of Aboriginal children. According to More, as learning styles are culturally determined, Aboriginal children experiencing a strange learning style in school may suffer cultural discontinuity. DeFaveri (1984) supports More's (1986) argument by asserting that while the Aboriginal worldview espouses that all things are integrated and united in some way, the White worldview maintains that reality does not necessarily constitute related or connected components.

A relevant question may arise here as to why American Indian students attain low standards in school while students from other minority groups with similar handicaps as American Indian students succeed in school (Ogbu, 1987). Atleo (1990) views the low standards of American Indian students from what he terms a theory of context. According to Atleo, this theory assumes that there is a connection between an individual and the

society in which that individual lives. This means that individuals fail when society views them as failures.

Ogbu (1987) distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary minorities and asserts that voluntary minorities are more successful in school than involuntary minorities. According to Ogbu, American Indians are involuntary minorities in that unlike immigrants in the North American society, American Indians were colonized and have not had any other choice but to live with the colonization. For example, Ogbu (1987) found that while the Buraku, a minority group in Japan, fail in school in their homeland, they tend to succeed when they immigrate into the United States. Similarly, Mexicans born in the United States fail in school while other Mexicans who immigrate into the United States succeed in school. Accordingly, Ogbu's (1987) findings tend to support Atleo's (1990) theory of context that offers explanation of school failure among American Indian children.

Hampton (1995) strongly believes that one can explain school failure of American Indian students in terms of the malevolence of Western education in its structure, curriculum, context and personnel. He asserts that Western education is a political, social and cultural institution that represents and conveys European-American values, knowledge and behaviors, and demands higher European-American standards. Hampton (1995) argues that because White education does not give American Indian children any avenue to dignity, honor and pride nor does it ensure their mutual interest, American Indian children are bound to fail in school. His provocative pronouncement about Western education can be explained, for the want of a better term, as cultural holocaust. He argues that because Western education is in content and structure antagonistic to Aboriginal people and seeks to indoctrinate them by substituting non-

Aboriginal for Aboriginal knowledge, values, and identity, the low academic achievement of Aboriginal children is a manifestation of resistance to non-Aboriginal domination and an assertion of Aboriginal integrity. So, according to Hampton, rather than simply admit failure, one must recognize the fact that White educational systems and procedures have not been competent in educating American Indian children who struggle against an atypical system endemic to the larger society in which they live. Until American Indian children stop the daily struggles of attacks on their ways of life, their identity, their intelligence, and their essential worth, they could not attain success in education.

Paquette (1986b) attributes the inability of Aboriginal students to measure up to their European-American counterparts in educational achievement to what he terms a hierarchy of domination and justification. Paquette asserts that dominant cultures expect ethnic minority groups to blend and assimilate because it is the best thing for them and for society at large. He contends that the rejection to assimilation labels them as failures and the consequence is to try to immerse them even more in the values, beliefs, and languages of the majority. Therefore, as minority groups become powerless to alter either their state of affairs or the form and type of the education provided to them, the dominant group then views this powerlessness in society as appropriate and fair. Paquette further asserts that as minority children are unable to adjust well into the majority language and culture, the majority sees the cause to lie in their inability to learn “even though given the ‘same educational opportunities’ as their majority-culture counterparts” (p. 56).

The phenomenon I have just described is the relationship between the American Indian student and educational standards. What then are the prospects for success under these inauspicious circumstances? Although it may seem that many researchers accept

the low academic standards attained by Aboriginal students as an unfortunate heritage (Barman, et al., 1987), there are current changes taking place in Native communities that may improve education in the future.

### **Defining Participatory Research as Curriculum Development Methodology**

Participatory research might seem an odd, even awkward or pretentious expression—signifying exactly what? Whatever answers are given to that question, the approach and contexts of participatory research suggest that it is useful in helping dominated, exploited, and minority groups to redefine old problems, propose fresh alternatives and take action in solving the problems (Kemmis, 1991; Participatory Research Network, 1982; Maguire 1987). Hall (1981) defines participatory research as a social action process that meshes the activities of research, education and action. Therefore, participatory research provides an arena for collective empowerment that helps to deepen knowledge about social problems and helps to formulate possible actions for their solution. Participatory research is increasingly tied to and powerfully influenced by the concern with power and democracy and provides important social learning networks that are critical to issues of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical and mental abilities, and other social factors. Cultural theorists and researchers of ethnic groups have found participatory research as a backbone of helping ethnic groups to overcome some of their problems (Maguire, 1987; Kemmis, 1991; Hall, 1975). Kemmis (1991) studied Aboriginal and teacher education in the Northern Territory of Australia and found that participatory research with Aboriginal people resulted to some innovations that led them to maintain a central role in their own development.

Similarly, Maguire (1987) studied battered families in Gallup, New Mexico and found women's participation in participatory research projects boosted self-esteem as well as the control and organizational power of women's groups.

The participatory research at Akwesasne concerned forms of educational theory and research aimed at transforming the works of Mohawk schools--"forms of research whose aim is not to interpret the world but to change it" (Kemmis, 1991, p. 102) or "to transform the social environment through the process of critical inquiry—to act on the world rather than being acted on" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 9). The design for this project drew on an alternative research paradigm approach, the method of critical education research described by Kemmis (1991) and Miles & Huberman, (1994) and the method of participatory research described by Hall (1975, 1981). The methods we chose for this project were a function of the purpose of the project and to a large extent depended on the assumptions underlying the project. The main assumption underlying the project was that the failure of American Indian children to attain high standards in education was, partly, due to the failure to structure education content within a framework that fully interprets American Indian perspectives about schooling (Spring, 1998). Therefore, unlike previous educational ventures that failed to include Aboriginal people in the process (see Agbo, 1996), this project is designed to work collaboratively with the Mohawk people. From our perspective then, our analysis and action must focus on the realities that make up a culturally relevant curriculum and the corresponding learning needs. Inherent in the Culture Standards project was thus the need to learn how to generate, evaluate, select and share vast amounts of relevant information at all social levels, from the Mohawk community member to the university faculty member. Our key word for the project was "relevant", as

we needed to learn how to disseminate our culturally relevant curriculum in a way that makes sense to the end-users. Thus we needed to go beyond curriculum development in any traditional sense to participatory research as an intrinsically multi-layered process of knowledge creation and sharing. Maguire (1987) asserts that participatory research goes beyond merely interpreting and describing social phenomenon. Accordingly, the most peculiar aspect of participatory research is the direct link between research and action (Maguire, 1987; Hall, 1981). Thus, in this project, we did not merely describe social reality, but radically tried to change it by combining the creation of knowledge about social reality with actual action in that reality. Therefore, our objective of this project was to collectively build a group ownership of information as we moved from being objects of research to subjects of our own research process (Maguire, 1987). By using an alternative social science framework, we employed data collection processes that combined the activities of research, education, and action (Hall, 1981; Maguire, 1987; Kemmis, 1991). As an educational process, the project educated us by engaging in the analysis of structural causes of selected problems through collaborative discussion and interaction. As an action process, the project enabled the participants to take collaborative action for radical social change in both the short and the long run. The common ethos of the project consists of an emphasis on cultural education and the desire for an assertion of cultural knowledge in matters of educational concern.

So, unlike a study using an externalist position, this project did not intend merely to produce information about American Indian education and remain on the shelves. Moreover, the project was also unlike more latent interpretive forms of critical theory. Our method was to apply thinking processes related mainly to the development of strategies for

problem solving and decision-making. These strategies laid special emphasis on the learning of all the activities, institutions, social groups and networks that American Indians have progressively developed over the years (Kemmis 1991).

### **Procedures**

The purpose and objectives of the Mohawk Education Project determined the choice of procedures we employed in data collection and analysis. Participatory research literature has always not been explicit about the problem of methods (Hall, 1975). There seems to be no methodologically sanctioned approaches to follow since the most important factors in participatory research are the origins of the issues and the roles that those concerned with the issues play in the process (Hall, 1981; Maguire, 1987). Thus, the precept is that participatory research is context-bound and the procedures employed should emanate from both researcher and participants. However, the Participatory Research Network (1982) documents various approaches to participatory research. These include group discussions, public meetings, research teams, open-ended surveys, community seminars, fact-finding tours, collective production of audio-visual materials, theatre, education camps, and many more. For the purpose of this project, we drew on data collected through workshops based on group discussions, meetings, fact-finding tours, informal interviews and document analysis. The data are the results of two phases of work in the summers of 1998 and 1999.

### Profile of School District and Research Participants

The Salmon River Central School District is situated in Franklin County in Northern New York State within the Mohawk Nation of Akwesasne. Located at the banks of the Saint Lawrence Seaway, Akwesasne is literally divided by the Canada-United States border.

The Salmon River Central School District, lies within the United States portion of Akwesasne. With a population of about 8,000, and an unemployment rate of about 50 percent, Akwesasne, once a predominantly rural community has grown into a retail and service economy that attracts businesses and tourism.

The first language spoken in Akwesasne is Mohawk with English being a second language. While many people between the ages of 5 and 50 speak good English some older people speak very little and a few others do not speak English. There is a significant level of awareness of past traditions among elders of the community. Younger people in general are not knowledgeable on matters concerning past traditional beliefs and cultural patterns. Nevertheless, there seems to be a comprehensive pool of information on local traditions that the old can pass onto the young.

The Salmon River School District comprises the two state-run public schools of the Saint Regis Mohawk Reservation—the Salmon River Central School and the Saint Regis Mohawk School. The total student population is about 2100 with about 200 regular and special education teachers. All of the 500 students of the Saint Regis Mohawk Pre K-6 School are Mohawk whereas most of the school's 24 regular teachers and 20 special education teachers are of non-Aboriginal ancestry. Of the 1600 students of the Salmon River Central K-12 School, about 60 percent are of Aboriginal ancestry whereas about 90 percent of the school's 148 certified teachers are European-Americans.

During the first phase of the Mohawk Education Project in the summer of 1998, a

group of 8 people constituted the Mohawk culture team of the Mohawk Education Project. The group met to assess the language needs of teachers, students, parents, administrators, and support staff of the Mohawk schools in Akwesasne. The group was to provide Mohawk culture standards that would constitute the content of other subject areas such as science, social studies, math, and language arts for students in Pre-K to 12 by sharing experiences, information and support. The team targeted a diverse group of people made up of Mohawk language (American Indian) teachers, community members, a SUNY Potsdam faculty member and an American Indian graduate student. The group constituted a research team that worked together on discussing issues and finding solutions for them.

#### Workshops Based on Discussion Groups

In inaugurating our research project, we had to negotiate a starting point and direction for our work. We arrived at a consensus that the core of Mohawk ideals that the curriculum is supposed to promote focuses on ancestral continuity, idealized human relationships, and a sense of personal and collective dignity. In order to accomplish our project objective, we needed to develop a methodology of participatory research that would work for our purpose. According to the Participatory Research Network (1982), "Group discussions are probably the most widely used method in participatory research. They occur throughout the process, and are often used together with other methods" (p. 6).

Prior to the workshops, as a first step toward participation in the solution of the problems, the participants in the project were engaged in a problem identification exercise in which they were to submit lists of problems that they felt affected language and culture in

the school. The purpose of the problem identification exercise was to identify problems that existed in both the school and community and demonstrate that the situation was different from the expectations of the community members, and that the problem identification process would show the differences. In other words, participants at the workshops attempted to describe the existing condition in the school and planned for a more desirable condition in the future.

The workshops concerned an investigation of elements that might contribute to, or hinder the development and achievement of adequate academic standards. We employed a functional approach by which we encouraged participants to present and talk about their own ideas especially about what changes they required to enhance the development of the Mohawk language and culture needs of the schools systems. The team utilized a process of deliberation, first, drawing on the existing knowledge about the problems facing student learning in the school and, second, planning for an appropriate strategy for their solution. This means that we posed problems, identified causes, discussed possible solutions and evaluated actions. The forums were relaxed and participants felt free to speak. The team used group discussions to build a sense of trust, support and cooperation among themselves by sharing same ideas or problems. As one of our strategies was to maximize the use of the abundant local resources to broaden and enrich our notion of the American Indian culture, the Mohawk participants maintained periodic consultation with community elders whenever we were in situations where facts were uncertain, opinions divided or values were in dispute.

On the whole, the arrangement worked effectively as participants indicated that they found the exercise very interesting and educating. Sometimes, disagreements

resulted in arguments and it made it necessary for participants to take votes on issues. If participants agreed, the discussions were documented by a secretary and tape recorded to ensure that important remarks were not overlooked. This project offered a way to openly demonstrate solidarity among a diverse group of people and allowed participants to recognize many forms of knowledge by insisting on an alternative position regarding the purpose of knowledge creation. The project development strategy combined a high degree of social problem exploration and a high degree of proposed solutions to the problems.

### **Data Analysis**

As the data for this study came from the notes I took throughout the phases of the research process, submissions of participants, and the transcribed tape recorded discussions, I felt I had to analyze the data using qualitative approaches to research. However, Lather (1992) contends that data analysis of alternative research paradigms transcends the ordinary application of qualitative approaches. As Lather writes:

Rooted in the research traditions of interpretive sociology and anthropology, alternative practices of educational research go well beyond the mere use of qualitative methods. Their focus is the overriding importance of meaning making and context in human experiencing (p. 91).

Similarly, Miles and Huberman (1994) assert that because participatory research aims at changing the social environment through a method of critical inquiry by acting on the world, data analysis should concentrate on descriptions in the initial stages, and go through to the search for underlying concepts or ideals (see p. 9). Therefore the data analysis of this study essentially utilized qualitative procedures with a focus on

generating meaning within a particular setting (Lather, 1992). There were two major phases of data analysis in this study: 1) the collection phase, and 2) the analysis phase.

During the collection phase, I continuously referred to, and reflected on the data being collected and compiled some systematic field notes that might be useful to the study. As group discussions constituted a valuable source of data for this study, I prepared guidelines for discussions and took notes that included observations about individual interactions, and group dynamics, comments by participants about culture and overall reflections. After each day's discussions, I first listened to each audiotape and made detailed notes or transcription of the discussions. I then categorized each of the issues according to common patterns, themes or ideas that fit into the research agenda. After typing the discussion summaries I took the summaries back to participants who were free to draw my attention to any issues that were missing in the report. We reviewed them and made necessary modifications at the beginning of each day's session.

The analysis period entailed classifications, the formation and testing of ideas, making connections among ideas, and relating concepts to the literature review (Miles & Huberman, 1994). At the end of the data collection, I employed a descriptive analysis (see Miles & Huberman, 1994) that gave a feeling for the views of the participants and included the search for patterns, repeated themes or views that conform to categories such as the clan system, ceremonies, school-community relations, medicines, parent-teacher relationships, and systems of government. As the analysis continued, I recorded theoretical memos about what the patterns possibly meant, and drew from the analytic insights and interpretations that emerged during the discussions (see Miles &

Huberman, 1994). I then assigned the emerging ideas and patterns to categories. For example, I assigned pieces of information relating to dances, societies, processes and duties of becoming clan-mother or chief to the category of ceremonies. To view a perception as a factor, a majority of participants would have had to refer to it as an issue, and, therefore, deserving to be considered in the analysis and presentation of the results of this study.

Given the researcher's and participants' commitment to the development of a contextually relevant curriculum, the researcher did not intend to present the results of the study with the purpose of making them more reliable and valid than those of dominant research paradigms. However, to ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the data, the design of this research utilized Lather's (1986) face validity and catalytic validity approaches. Face validity occurs by "recycling categories, emerging analysis, back through at least a subsample of respondents" (Lather, 1986, p. 78). In this study, after typing the discussion summaries for example, I took the summaries back to participants in order for participants and researcher to review them and make necessary modifications. Catalytic validity follows when there is "some documentation that the research process has led to insight and, ideally, activism on the part of the respondents" (Lather, 1986 p. 78). Catalytic validity should be crucial to this study, as its main purpose was to promote participants' understanding of their own capabilities and right to control decisions affecting them. The development of the culturally relevant curriculum addresses the concern for catalytic validity in that it is at present being used by the teachers in the schools.

## **Results**

There were two main perspectives that emerged from our project: 1) ethnic content education and 2) bi-cultural education. The first, ethnic content education is education that allows children to learn their language and culture as a way of preserving their identity as Mohawks. The second, bi-cultural education signifies education that allows Mohawk children to acquire the same skills as those in the mainstream American society by aiming at a two-way approach or bicultural education (see Harris, 1990). Altogether the general perspective that emerged in the discussions was that we should develop a curriculum that reflects far beyond the conventional curriculum. This means a rejection of the learning content imposed by the European-American group and standards molded by Western concepts in favor of the far more potent ethnic concepts that would foster self-identity, pride and self-confidence in the Mohawk child. Our curriculum calls for a cross-fertilization of Native American and the dominant American cultures.

### Ethnic Content Education

Participants observed that the disintegration of ethnic values in the Mohawk community is a major cause for low educational attainment and persistence of students. We believed that the psychological wounds of assimilation of Americans Indians into the dominant culture have combined with the Western model of education to the disintegration of traditional beliefs and the lack of identity and self esteem in young people. In contrast to a cultural model of education that stresses communal bonds of primordial identities, shaped by a common language and ethnicity, we observed that contemporary models of education tend to underscore the primacy of community and fraternity. Since education as well as tradition is the passing of beliefs or customs from

one generation to another, effective transmission of knowledge to the American Indian child can be seen in the light of how traditional content can reshape the coding of academic information. Therefore, in order for children to develop self-esteem, they need to identify themselves with traditional values of American Indians. The view that it is critical for children to identify themselves with local traditions, customs and values, and teachers to understand more fully American Indians' lifestyles was evident in the discussions. Participants strongly believe that because they occupy a position of trust, teachers' understanding of the Mohawk culture and way of life is crucial. Therefore, teachers' perceptions of Mohawk culture may need to be reshaped as well as the learning context. As one of the participants from the community stated:

The teachers should know our way of life and should appreciate that we are different in the way we do things. If they're going to stay in our community and work with us then they should know something about our tradition, customs and values. For a long time nobody has respected our own way of life and because of this our children don't want to identify themselves with our lifestyle. If teachers respect our way of life, then our children will also begin to identify themselves with our traditions and customs. It is necessary that all teachers who come here to work should know our lifestyle and should be prepared to accept, and respect the way we do things.

Since the Mohawk community at large faces a growing conflict between the traditional and modern ways of life, involving the whole school system in what, for the lack of better terminology, we termed a cultural revival, would depend on creating essential linkages between the school and the community. These linkages can best be understood by what we term the "pluralization of the curriculum". We view pluralization primarily in terms of increasing the understanding of our curriculum among numerous groups such as non American Indian teachers, administrators, and parents in a way that we would pool all talents and resources together and allocate these talents and

resources efficiently. Therefore, participants suggested that strategies for developing our culture standards curriculum should reflect the needs of students, teachers, in-school administrators and parents. As a flattening of the pyramid process of mobilization of indigenous resources in the production of knowledge, the core ideals of our curriculum should focus on the achievement of the most deeply cherished American Indian values. We stressed the value of giving virtually everybody involved in the children's schooling some avenue to the power of knowledge production and use that would create a reliable crucial thought about the realities of a cultural curriculum.

#### A Bi-Cultural or Two-Way Approach to Education

Another perspective that emerged from our discussions was that the school should aim at a two-way approach or bi-cultural education. We should create a frontier of learning where there is the need to go beyond the Mohawk traditions and culture and to encourage a cross-fertilization of insights, practices and mental prototypes of different cultures. This viewpoint on schooling should not be surprising since the erosion of the American Indian social and economic tradition of hunting, trapping and gathering by a modern, industrial society has left most American Indian reserves susceptible both economically and politically. Therefore, American Indians have to seek survival and advancement through the mainstream American economy. We saw American Indian students' survival and growth in a modern industrialized world lies in equipping them with the technological skills required to survive and flourish in the mainstream American society. So, for us, it seems apparently important for the children to acquire the language and technology necessary to compete in the industrial economy. Whereas we

viewed proficiency in the basics important, participants indicated that a crucial instrument for acquiring the skills that would be useful in the dominant culture lies in some of the ideals of the indigenous culture. We clearly saw the need for the children to obtain the same skills as in mainstream schooling. Participants therefore suggested that in order for American Indian students to advance harmoniously and steadily in the modern world, they should clearly identify themselves with their cultural heritage while they also gain proficiency in the basics of reading, writing, math and science. A two-way approach to schooling should then involve the reinforcement of the children's cultural identity. We felt that confronting two cultures, children need a level of proficiency in each culture in order to make a living in present-day American society.

Successful implementation of a two-way approach to education would depend on teachers' understanding of the Mohawk worldview, their recognition of ethnic content education and their ability to adapt teaching programs to suit the special conditions of the children. Participants suggested that in order for the school to reinforce traditional values, the Mohawk culture, rather than the dominant culture should provide the arena for a concurrent process for a school-wide curriculum development. The curriculum in all subject areas including math, language arts, social studies and science should be increasingly tied to and essentially influenced by the Mohawk culture. The Mohawk culture should provide important learning networks that are critical to comprehending the content of conventional subjects such as math, language arts, social studies and science. This means that the Mohawk culture standards are to provide a type of anchor that brings subject areas together on the basis of their common material.

Fundamental strategy suggested to deal with the curriculum.

Participants at the workshops arrived at a consensus that there was the need for the understanding and implementation of our culture standards at all levels of the educational system. By adopting the concept of pluralization, we expected the curriculum standards to apply to Mohawk language and culture teachers, regular classroom teachers, students, parents and school administrators. The standards should provide a consistent means of identifying the students with their language and culture and act as an important element in raising their self-esteem and self-identity. In order to raise academic standards of students in all areas of schoolwork, we found it important for teachers, parents and administrators to use the core of Mohawk ideals that traditional knowledge is supposed to promote to sustain a culturally oriented education. We believed that education that focuses on ancestral continuity, idealized human relations and a sense of personal and collective dignity would boost students' self-esteem and self-confidence and raise their academic standards.

We arrived at a consensus that to work effectively with Mohawk students and to enable them to achieve the desirable standards, there is the need for interdependence anchored in mutual trust and respect among all the stakeholders in the school system. In what follows, I delineate the content of the curriculum based on the premise that language and culture influence the educational achievement of the Mohawk student. The next section reflects the culture and language needs of the Akwesasne schools systems. These are divided into five parts to mirror the roles of students, teachers, parents, and administrators as assumed by our concept of curriculum pluralization. These parts are:

## The language and culture needs of the Mohawk student

In developing the culture standards, we have been sensitive to the degree of conflict the Mohawk child may be experiencing in relating to the cultures of the mainstream society and the Akwesasne community. We have been aware that some children within the school systems in Akwesasne may be living in families that have been almost completely assimilated to the norms of the dominant culture, while others come from traditional families in which their own ethnic ways are strictly practiced. Students from the traditional families deal with contradictory worldviews as they literally have to live in two distinct worlds. As we provide standards for the Mohawk culture, we also take cognizant of the basic characteristics of the mainstream American culture. The main theme that runs across these standards is the crucial role of language and culture in boosting the self-esteem and self-identity of the Mohawk child.

Levels of performance. We described twenty topics to represent the range of performance expected of all Mohawk students by the end of grade 12. The twenty topics described for language and culture reflect the range of performance students demonstrate in language/culture learning and are sufficiently specific for teachers to use to describe students' achievement in all subject areas throughout their progression from pre-K to grade 12. The culture standards are organized into four levels namely, (a) Introductory—Pre-K to grade 1, (b) Level 1—grade 2 to 4, (c) Level 2—grade 5 to 8; and, (d) Level 3—grade 9 to 12. This grouping is designed to engender continuity and progression, and to encourage the integration of instruction, activity, and evaluation in pragmatic situations. In order to maintain the Mohawk language and culture as an

integrated unit, students will learn each aspect of the twenty topics at each level with different degrees of emphases and depth. The introductory level and level 1 represent the stages through which the Mohawk student may start learning the fundamentals of the Mohawk Language and culture and levels 2 and 3 describe performance that is beyond the Mohawk community. In the next section, I expound the general descriptors of our culture standards and expand some of the elements of the Mohawk culture that participants believed to be pertinent and should form standards of the curriculum of the Mohawk student.

General descriptors. We suggested the following topics for teaching in all subject areas throughout all the levels:

- |   |                           |                                      |
|---|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. The Clan System                          | 8. Medicines              | 15. Story-Telling and Drama          |
| 2. Ceremonies of the year                   | 9. The Study of Akwesasne | 16. Native Games and Sports          |
| 3. Thanksgiving                             | 10. Songs and Dances      | 17. Communication and Transportation |
| 4. The Iroquois Confederacy                 | 11. Food                  | 18. Art forms and Media              |
| 5. Cycle of Life and the Traditional Circle | 12. Clothing              | 19. Environmental Awareness          |
| 6. Roles of the Family                      | 13. Traditional Homes     | 20. Systems of Government            |
| 7. Spiritual Cleansing and Healing          | 14. Survival Skills       |                                      |

The transformation of learning for Mohawk students can be seen in the light of how, for example, our first descriptor, the clan system reshapes the culturally defined medium of learning. At the introductory level (Pre-K to grade 1), students will be introduced to the Mohawk clan system, identify their own clans and learn the Mohawk names of the

clans—bear, turtle and wolf. At the first level (grade 2 to 4), students will learn the traditional full terms of the Mohawk clan names, the origins and importance of the clans in Mohawk society and their relationships to marriage, birth, death, seating arrangements in the longhouse, identity and matrilineal lineage. At the second level (grade 5 to 8), students will explore the relationships of the clans to self-identity and build on their significance to marriage, birth, death and seating arrangements in the longhouse. Students will also be introduced to the characteristics of clans and their relationships to past and present courtship. At the final level (grade 9 to 12), students will become aware of the processes involved in becoming a member of the Akwesasne Reservation, that is, how to secure identification cards and registration. They will be exposed to the relationships between Mohawk names and clans, the importance of the Mohawk matrilineal system and its relationship to clan membership. Students will also investigate the differences between clan membership and other tribal affiliations. They will then explore courtship, marriage and family, and their relationships to the clan system.

Before proceeding to show how the school system as a whole can be involved in cultural learning, at least two more examples of how cultural features can form an integral part of the learning process may be relevant. In thinking of ceremonies, for example, a remarkable feature of Mohawk culture is the importance attached to ceremonies. The value of unity and harmony and the promotion of a sense of personal and collective dignity in the Mohawk society are embodied in the concept of ceremonies. Students will be introduced to ceremonies at the first level by learning the meaning and importance of ceremonies, different kinds of rituals such as midwinter,

strawberry, harvest, maple/syrup, thunder dance, seed, planting, string-bean and green corn. They will also be introduced to ceremonial dances and the nature of plants and their place in ceremonies. At the second level, students will begin to explore deeper into the meaning of ceremonies and how the moon and stars influence them. They will also examine the different social groups within ceremonies and look into ceremonies such as “Kariwio” (The Code Handsome Lake), and “Atowi” (Medicine Mask Society). At the third level students will investigate the process of becoming a tribal chief, clan-mother, or faith-keeper and explore the duties that go with these leadership roles. They will also examine the origins of the Code Handsome Lake, the Great Law and the cycle of ceremonies.

As a major landmark in history, and as a repository of cherished historical memories of American Indians, the Iroquois Confederacy can be taught in all subject areas at all levels in different forms. At the introductory level students will be introduced to the Mohawk Nation “Kastowa” with three feathers and the positions of the three feathers on the “Kastowa”. At the first level, students will explore the five “Kastowas” and the positions of the feathers, the “Kastowas” of the Iroquois Confederacy and the positions of the nations within the Confederacy—the Flag of the Covenant Chain. They will also explore languages of the different nations, and map the locations of the Six Nations within the Confederacy. They will then be introduced to the migration of the Mohawks. The third level will comprise the democracy of the Six Nations and a comparison of the Iroquois Confederacy with local systems of government. Student will also learn about the Mohawk Nation—its migration, government, occupations, health, education and welfare. They will be conversant with the roles of different systems of government at this

level. At the third level, students will become familiar with life before the coming of Europeans and the uniqueness of the Iroquois. They will study the Mohawk Trail (migration of the Mohawks), Iroquois secret societies and the relationships among the Iroquois nations. They will then examine Iroquois traditional education and compare the Iroquois nations with other aboriginal peoples of the world.

It is apparent from these examples that the Mohawk culture standards are embodied in ethnic content reflecting the inevitable cultural meaning of learning and the importance of “context” or “setting” in determining both the selection of goals and objectives of education. In its comprehensive form, the culture standards curriculum covers a range of areas such as the legends of ancestors, the myths of creation, social mores and norms, family and tribal history, and the legendary traditions that embody the spiritual relationship of the Native American to various elements of the cosmos. Students may, therefore, use the culture standards to: (a) identify clearly what kind of performance they should be striving for in their culture, (b) avail themselves with the opportunity of knowing more about their past and present; and, (c) view the overall components of the culture program and how they contribute to their preparation for life in the Mohawk community and the outside world.

#### Dissemination and Pluralization of the Culture Standards Curriculum

While we use the terms ‘dissemination’ and ‘pluralization’ interdependently, dissemination primarily means increasing the understanding of our curriculum among numerous groups and its subsequent implementation by groups such as non-Native teachers, administrators, and parents. Pluralization on the other hand strictly means

encouraging various ideas and grafting them into our cultural standards in a way that pools all talents and resources together and allocates these talents and resources efficiently.

One of the challenges of developing an adaptable curriculum is how to foster a common purpose among the various policy actors of the school. A strategy of implementing a culturally relevant curriculum would have to begin with a renewed sense of commitment on the part of teachers, parents and administrators and a realization that all stakeholders of the school system should be involved in its implementation. The curriculum should be conceived, above all, as embracing rather than exclusive responsibilities of students or teachers.

#### Mohawk Language and culture teachers

A culturally relevant curriculum is meaningless without its promotion by language and culture teachers. Mohawk language and culture teachers may use the culture standards to (a) teach students more effectively at all grade levels by focusing on all aspects of the Mohawk culture that utilize different styles and genres of language uses; (b) teach students how the general traits of worldviews, values, learning, identity, cognitive and communication styles are manifested in the Mohawk culture; (c) help students to identify themselves with their culture and discover how the norms and structure of the society in which they live affect their hopes, fears and attitudes, and (d) help the children to grow intellectually, socially, and morally by giving meanings to personal experiences through the use of language and culture that represents their environment.

## The Language and Culture Needs of the Classroom Teacher

To whatever conceptual boundary we press for our interest in a cultural curriculum, we must always think about the classroom teacher and the cultural curriculum interdependently. It is the classroom teachers that are concerned with the generation, storage, processing and dissemination of knowledge and information to students. The culture standards provide the means of raising students' self-esteem, self-confidence and performance in the achievement of educational outcomes. We based the standards on the understanding that all students can be successful at some aspects of learning, and that they can become more successful if teachers are able to relate to them culturally. The standards can assist teachers to identify the main variables that influence student understanding of their teaching. We identified three main variables that influence student performance: (a) those related to the student, (b) the support provided by the teacher, and (c) the content. The student's attitudes, experiences, knowledge, skills, and engagement in learning are dependent on the types of meaning students assign to their perceptual experiences and how they perceive things around them. Thus, the teacher of the American Indian child must have reliable knowledge on the roles of ethnic, language and value differences on student achievement. The following are some of the strategies that may help teachers of Mohawk children to relate better to their students and raise their self-esteem and self-confidence in learning. Teachers need to: (a) know the Mohawk alphabet and sounds in order to properly pronounce children's names and address students by their given Mohawk names; (b) respect the quietness and shyness of the Native child—being quiet does not mean not paying attention or listening; (c) allow students to observe before

pushing for action; (d) use the clan system to promote peace, power, righteousness and incorporate the clan system into daily activities; (e) promote the national development and contributions of the Native peoples; (f) understand and respect the needs for ceremonies and encourage student attendance at Native ceremonies and festivities; (g) recognize the Thanksgiving address which espouses the appreciation of the surroundings and environment; and (h) respect and honor symbols in the Native culture—Native symbolism.

#### Language and Culture Standards for Parents/Guardians

We suggested that to help improve the self-esteem and self-confidence in learning, parents should participate in their children's education. They should involve in the affairs of the school by setting goals for the schooling of their children. Parents should join committees such as the Mohawk Education Committee and the local Parent -Teacher Association. It should be an integral duty of the school to help parents to know their rights in the education of their children by increasing parental awareness through the media—newsletters, papers, and radio. The school should also help grandparents to play active roles in the educational lives of their grandchildren by reinforcing such activities as “grandparents visiting day.”

#### Parent-Teacher Communication:

Parent-Teacher communication is crucial to the educational achievement of students. There is the need for classroom teachers, support staff and administrators to

develop positive communication with parents. The following are means for maintaining effective communication with parents.

1. Teachers should send “good-news, bad-news” notes home weekly. This means that teachers should continually apprise parents with how their children are doing generally. Teachers should invite parents to the school when students have done some good things, not for only the bad things.
2. Parents and teachers should socialize in activities such as parent/teacher potlucks that provide opportunities for informal interaction. Teachers of younger children should begin to invite grandparents for potlucks and cooking activities.
3. Teachers and parents should engage in workshops that will enable them to learn how to interact informally and to learn how to increase the children’s self-confidence. Parents should be aware of the school’s disciplinary programs and involve in the formulation of discipline policy, and teachers, parents and grandparents should work together towards athletic and extra-curricular activities. Teachers should encourage parents and grandparents to come to the school and help with students’ projects.
4. Parents should help teachers to understand the culture of the community and should provide opportunity for teachers to become aware of students’ living conditions in order to alleviate stereotyping and misconceptions.

### Cultural Needs and Responsibilities of Administrators

We suggested that it is the responsibility of the administrator, particularly the principal to place the educational welfare of his/her students as top priority. The administrator should create an environment that optimizes learning for students and

teachers. Among other things that we documented, we noted that administrators should know and understand the culture of the community and be sensitive to the wishes, hopes, and fears of the Mohawk community members. They should provide continual cultural orientations in locations that have cultural significance for new and experienced teachers (cultural orientation to continue throughout the year) and during these orientations teachers should be exposed to sacred and significant locations in the community. They should respect Mohawk ceremonies and lead the school---students and staff to respect the needs for attending the ceremonies and administrators should encourage students to attend community ceremonies. They should understand and appreciate the Mohawk worldview of time, space, and patience and also understand and espouse Mohawk values of group harmony, respect for nature, respect for the elderly, and sharing. They should be aware that Mohawk identity is manifested by membership in a group and group derived motivation and should learn to correctly call students by their Mohawk names (especially if the names are their given names). For a cultural program to thrive, administrators should espouse the ideals of a community school by encouraging social activities that will bridge the gap between the community and the school. They should develop a positive image of the school by marketing the school to the community and the outside world. They should advertise and promote the good works of the school to the community and the outside world through the TV, radio, newspapers, journals, magazines, and so on.

To promote a positive teaching and learning environment, it is the administrators' responsibility to frequently acknowledge the good work of the staff - teachers, support staff, janitorial (i.e., through minor gestures such as notes or verbal compliments). They

should understand the Mohawk cognitive style of global and overall approach to conceptual thinking and that Mohawk children learn better through story-telling and the use of legends and cooperative work and should understand and respect the Mohawk communication style of verbal and non-verbal behavior. Administrators should also serve as a focus of discussion of the child's progress in Mohawk language and culture with the child and with the teacher. The administrator should become familiar with the language and culture needs of Mohawk children, observe their development in the Mohawk language and culture in order to support their learning at home.

Finally, administrators should support the school program by developing plans to implement a program that is culturally relevant to students and supporting the funding of community resource persons invited to lead cultural activities in the school.

### **Conclusions**

The perceived crisis of low academic standards of American Indian students has been expressed in vastly changed and still changing concepts about education and culture. The critique of low attainment of students has in an extreme form been formulated in the concept of cultural impoverishment or cultural deprivation. More acceptable has seemed the idea of significant discontinuities expressed in different forms by Hawthorn (1967), Atleo (1990), Hampton (1995), Gue (1974), More (1986) and DeFaveri (1984). The ready-made system of education transplanted from the European-American culture and its deification as the ultimate source of all knowledge and the increasing authority and legitimacy wielded by the European-American group have been significant in accelerating the process of low academic achievement levels of Aboriginal

and students of other minority groups (see Hampton, 1995; Spring, 1998; Lomawaima, 1994). The negligence of educational policy analysts to obtain grassroots understanding of American Indian education from local perspectives can be seen in the light of how the education of the American Indian child has been applied to the medium of the European-American culture alone. Educational change for American Indian students is one that should involve not only a segment of academicians or education theorists, but also community members, teachers, teacher education institutions, in-school administrators, parents and students working collaboratively.

Inherent in our project is the need to go beyond education in the traditional sense to cultural learning as an intrinsically a bicultural process of knowledge acquisition (Harris, 1990). This project clearly showed the importance of collaboration among teacher education faculty members, parents and teachers for the improvement of schooling. In principle, the thinking that a culturally oriented curriculum, freed from European-American standards would focus efforts that would lead to greater achievement of American Indian students has some hypothetical justification and extensive educational appeal. However, it is difficult to reconcile this thinking with the beneficial effects of what happens in terms of actual teaching and learning. It should be obvious that the complexity of bicultural learning makes it—as any other complex phenomenon, vulnerable to ambiguity and confusion. One of the greatest difficulties we envisaged was the ability of teachers to cope with our cultural curriculum. The overall impact of a cultural curriculum may be negligible if non-Native teachers do not possess the necessary tools to utilize cultural content and reinforce traditional values in their classrooms. It is, therefore, crucial that teachers of American Indian children should be

carefully selected and given the proper education and orientation needed for their task in American Indian schools. We view the cultural elements in the Mohawk Education Project curriculum as nexus to American Indian schooling and should form the integral parts of all subject areas. The changes are crucial in their impact on teachers in reshaping the information content of their teaching and reshaping their own perceptions. If properly utilized, the elements could be used by teachers as the ammunitions that would help the Mohawk student in the understanding of knowledge and learning as functional concepts with an internal logic.

In principle, the policy of raising academic standards seems desirable. However, in circumstances where academic standards convey only political undertones (Spring, 1998) and do not carry grassroots implications, it becomes difficult for American Indian students to achieve at the same level as their European-American counterparts. From our perspective then, academic standards must focus on the diverse realities that together make up the student population and the corresponding learning needs of the students. While our program may be academically appealing and standards-based, the actual learning mechanisms that should make the program meaningful and result-oriented may be lacking if we do not recognize the intricate inter-linkages between our curriculum and the rapidly changing needs of our complex contemporary society. The cultural curriculum should be complemented by the expressed need for new, modern forms of literacy—computer literacy, media literacy and visual and audio-visual literacy. If standards are to sustain their momentum and raise the academic performance of American Indian students in coming years, we should attempt to reconstruct our traditional concepts of education within a cultural paradigm that respects differences

and utilizes local resources to provide a framework for a suitable curriculum and teaching methods. We have to resolve the constraints or contradictions internal to traditional educational standards by exploring the key symbolic and structural characteristics that would raise academic standards of American Indian students. To the extent that American Indian schools and their teachers are alert to the cultural details of how learning proceeds, and strong enough to mobilize local resources on their behalf, we may entertain a cautious optimism on the raising of academic standards of American Indian students. The task of raising academic standards of students cannot be left to a few teachers in a school or to one schools system alone. The provision of successful education programs for American Indian students should entail a participatory effort among all those responsible for their education in redefining objectives concerning the purpose, priorities, and content of education. I contend that unless there is a genuine effort to mobilize Native resources and direct learning as far as possible towards Native identities and ideologies, the standardized test scores for American Indian children will remain mediocre in quality.

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