Successfully Educating Urban American Indian Students: An Alternative School Format

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An exemplary educator led the creation of a culturally appropriate secondary alternative school that refused to replicate the status quo, providing a haven for American Indian students who failed to connect with traditional high school settings. The case study method was used, specifically focusing on the school as the unit of analysis, describing and analyzing the responses of one administrator and three American Indian students to these practices. The words of one student aptly summarize this study, "I think that the people that went to the school that I used to go to—all the Whites and Blacks and Hispanics—if they came here, they would be a lot different."

Exploring a Tradition of Miseducation

The decades between 1890 and 1930 were filled with mechanisms aimed at forcing American Indian assimilation to European norms (Adams, 1995; Child, 1998). The U.S. Department of Education (1991) documents the acculturation efforts that American Indians faced in education through this period of time:

> The practice of providing for technical education and of providing financial support for reservation schools and other educational programs was formalized in 1921 by the Snyder Act. This legislation gave broad authority to the Bureau of Indian Affairs to spend federal money to educate and generally support the acculturation of Indians. (p. xi)

Although this statement sounds promising on paper, in theory and in practice, acculturation weakened the value of American Indian/Alaska Natives' cultural practices, relegating the cultural practices to a status below that of the dominant culture. The good intentions of empathetic reformers did not ease the transition from tribal life to American citizenry through federally established off-reservation boarding schools, reservation boarding schools, and day schools. From the first boarding school created in Pennsylvania to the experiences of Ojibwe children who attended boarding schools in Kansas and South Dakota, the boarding school

experience has been described as the last war fought against American Indians/Alaska Natives.

From the perspective of non-Indians, the Bureau of Indian Affairs was a blessing in "civilizing" American Indian/Alaska Natives by methods of assimilation and education. However, to the contrary, educational initiatives like boarding schools, along with other destructive methods of assimilation into America's mainstream, has caused a lasting disruption to American Indian/Alaska Natives' ability to attain economic and social stability and educational equality. Chrisjohn, Young, and Maraum (1997) vividly detail the horrible treatment endured by American Indian/Alaska Native children who were robbed from their families under the guise of American citizenship during the boarding school era. Research corroborates the systematic eradication of American Indian/Alaska native cultures via traditional American education (Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Huff, 1997; Reyhner, 1990; Sherrow, 1991; Thompson, Walker, & Silk-Walker, 1993).

Many of the historical assimilation efforts aimed at increasing American Indian/Alaska Natives' presence within mainstream American systems were double failures. Not only did these efforts weaken the pride and solidarity found among American Indians/Alaska Natives, but also assimilation rarely took effect on mainstream American thought; that is, the general populace and the institutions representing them did not and have not embraced American Indians/Alaska Natives despite attempts toward inclusion.

The National Center for Education Statistics (1996,1997) and The Condition of Education Report (1998) summarized national educational issues for people of color without American Indians/Alaska Natives in that framework. Prior to these reports, barriers were acknowledged in educating American Indian/Alaska Native students, especially transition to high school. Prior reports also recognized American Indian/Alaska Native students as having the highest dropout rate of all U.S. racial and ethnic groups (St. Germaine, 1995). Mainstream America leaves the American Indian/Alaska Native out of its own reports or simply does not react to its own reports.

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of culturally relevant practices by educators and the responses of American Indian students to these practices in one secondary alternative school. First, the study provides a framework for the case by examining the use of culturally relevant practices and alternative school formats among diverse student populations. Secondly, the study describes in broad context the experiences of the case participants in relationship to traditional versus alternative schools. Thirdly, the study explores the impact of school size, the implementation of school format and governance, and the use of culturally responsive practices in the schooling experiences of American Indians, particularly within alternative settings.

Cultural Difference Theories and Culturally Relevant Education

Critical theorists agree that the lack of understanding, high level of ignorance, and elimination of American Indians/Alaska Natives as an independent racial group on national education reports is not by chance (Apple, 1979; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Freire, 1970; and Giroux, 1981). All discussed schools as powerful economic and political structures that create winners and losers. The reproduction of the status quo is the central determining factor that governs mainstream American schools. Systems framed around what Freire called the banking model can do little more than deposit established norms into student recipients, leaving limited space for culturally diverse students to excel. The hidden curriculum and hegemony are ever present forces that perpetuate the status quo in educational organizations whereby most participants are, for the most part, unaware that they are behaving in ways that support oppression (Bowers, 1984; McLaren, 1994). These theories begin to explain why American Indians/Alaska Natives have struggled educationally for so long and why the problem continues to be minimized.

> The issues that must be addressed by schools in order to meet these challenges include an understanding of the historical relationship between the various American Indian cultures and the American educational system; the issues, meanings, and perceptions revolving around the idea of multicultural education; the nature of culture itself as dynamic and continuously evolving; and, identification of the educational strategies that will be most effective in building on Indian children's cultural strengths. (Van Hamme, 1995, 21)

Cultural difference theories that focus on teacher adaptations of curriculum and implementation of methods that culturally diverse student need to achieve gained prominence with the work of Au, Hu-Pei, and Jordan (1981), Kleinfeld (1975), and Roessel (1968). Their ideas grounded the notion that marginalized students respond to high expectations from teachers who care and that these students may benefit from the creation of alternative schooling formats. More recent research expanded the existing theories on culturally relevant schooling for students on the periphery include the work of Almeida (1998), Cleary and Peacock (1998), DeJong (1993), Fixico (2000), and Swisher (1990, 1994). Further edification of this research are the works of Osborne (1996) who explored the use of culturally relevant teaching practices in North America and Australia with marginalized student populations and McLean (1997) whose research proposed formalizing in schools the cultural transmission practices from students' homes and communities.

Finally, Pewewardy's (1999) research examined successful, culturally relevant pedagogy specifically designed to address the needs of American Indian/Alaska Native students. What appears as a mundane expectation in traditional, mainstream schools, for example, greater demands on students to be in and out of several classes a day at particular times, often exists in contrast to

many American Indian students' view of "time as a flow of events, with no beginning or end." For example, meetings begin when all are gathered and the participants are ready (Little Soldier, 1997, p. 652). This research explores the tremendous impact that a culturally relevant education can have on students who are unresponsive and unsuccessful with inappropriately selected curricula; improperly trained or selected personnel; and other characteristics often found in traditional, mainstream schools.

Alternative School and Dropout Prevention Programs

Alternative schools offer a wide variety of ways in which nontraditional students can become or stay connected to education. For many students, it is their last chance to salvage dreams that have been squelched in traditional educational settings. For others, it is their first chance at recognizing dreams heretofore unrealized. The literature reflects over 20 years of generative research on alternative schools that address the requirements of students whose needs are not met within the traditional school format. Ranging from free-flowing, flexible programs focusing on the individual learner's needs to highly structured programs targeting students with social and behavioral problems, alternative schools' main thrust has been to offer a learning environment that will encourage marginalized students to continue and complete their education.

Alternative schools have been effective organizations for educating marginalized students due in part to their small size. Although criticized as fiscally inefficient models for educating young people, small alternative schools have a positive influence on student achievement, allowing students to assume more responsibility and take ownership in school-sponsored activities, and providing opportunities for increased interaction and communication between students and teachers (Schneider, 1980). First Nations students living in urban Canadian areas benefited from an alternative school that offered dropouts from traditional schools a way to return to some form of education and improve their economic futures (Lee, 1986). A larger, midwestern study (Gregory & Smith, 1983) comparing alternative and traditional high schools revealed that alternative schools were superior in meeting student needs in the areas of social development, self-esteem, and self-actualization. Although school safety was rated higher for traditional school setting, the data were statistically insignificant.

Often regarded as a nonacademic dumping site for students who refuse to conform to the traditional school format, alternative schools provide structured learning environments where marginalized students can earn educational credits while learning academic skills, as well as life skills. Surveys of 45 students enrolled in an alternative high school program showed greater satisfaction with their alternative educational program than with the traditional high school program from which they had left (Griffin, 1993). Many high school students with serious social and behavior differences are simply unable to function in traditional learning environments. Alternative settings with regimented rules, coupled with the expectation that students will function responsibly and independently, offer

many nontraditional students parameters in which they feel more comfortable. Many of these students have adult-like pressures and responsibilities in their personal lives and respond more positively to an educational setting that treats them in the same manner.

Classroom environments designed to appeal to an adult learning style have been cited as another reason why alternative high schools work for nontraditional high school students (Fraser et al., 1987). Students who have been rejected in the traditional school setting report success in alternative schools and find the setting far more conducive to their overall learning (Taylor, 1987). Alternative programs that offer job training provide nontraditional students a sense of relevance and alleviation from economic pressure in their personal lives. It is not uncommon for economically disadvantaged students to have myriad pressures that prohibit them from excelling in the traditional learning environment. Peer pressure about such things as clothing, shoes, and lack of school supplies can increase apprehension and decrease attendance for economically disadvantaged students. Again, pressures to earn money and contribute to the family budget are often reasons why high school students are too distracted to excel in traditional high school settings. Many students cannot value a theory driven program that has no short-term promise for economic gain. A school-to-work program operating as an alternative high school in Fairfax County, Virginia reported higher levels of achievement and increased grade point averages by students who left traditional high schools to participate in this program (Canny, 1996).

Other alternative programs have explored more flexible formats to increase nontraditional student participation and engagement in their learning. Performance-based assessment is one way teachers in alternative settings can encourage student learning. This method reduces its focus on class attendance and assignment completion and values a learning progression model that rewards student effort toward meeting certain criteria (Conklin, 1996). Using an empowerment, theory-practice model, which resembles the adult-style learning model, an alternative high school in New Haven, Connecticut discounts hierarchical teacher-student relationships and emphasizes community and cooperation. This project's focus is dedicated to developing a caring and humanized approach to education where student, teacher, and parent input permeates the entire organization. Furthermore, this project is committed to understanding the stages at which participant ownership occurs (Trickett, 1991). Moving away from hierarchical, top-down structures are difficult with accountability pervading every aspect of education. Programs that use a "come when you can" schedule may be seen as unaccountable for students' time-on-task, however, an alternative high school in Louisville, Kentucky using this flexible schedule encouraged students to earn high school diplomas as opposed to General Education Development (GED) certificates. The success of this program lies in its ability to deliver highly individualized coursework and to use computer-assisted programs (Gross, 1990). A southwestern Texas school district used self-paced programs and flexible timetables for completion of coursework to

encourage nontraditional students to complete their high school education (Brown & Chavkin, 1991). Abbott (1995) documented a successful, 20-year old program in Michigan catering to nontraditional students. This alternative high school used individually tailored programs that students complete through a variety of formats including workshops, independent study, community service, and work experience.

Programs using even more flexible formats value theoretical, arts-based concepts as a method for engaging nontraditional students. Tractmans's (1994) ethnographic work in an urban alternative high school showed how formerly silent students *and* teachers found their voice in educational environments that used participatory management and valued their natural contributions. In another study, writing was explored as a tool for personal healing and growth for urban, nontraditional students in Massachusetts (Geis, 1997). Because of its vast departure from traditional learning techniques, however, many students resist this confrontational style of learning that can help them process life in urban America, as well as develop tools to critique and improve their lives. Alternative schools using drama rely on the transforming power of performance to captivate nontraditional students. Performance offers students opportunities to understand cultural events created and represented in everyday life (Turner, 1992). The Manhattan Theatre Club, using inmates and alternative high school students, moved toward formalizing and institutionalizing the ability of performance to alter the course of young people's lives through education (Goldstein, 1995). These various programs, aimed at saving students who are in jeopardy of giving up on education, represent models of success.

Methodology

Research Site

Black Raven High School (pseudonym), an alternative high school located in a major midwestern city, was created in 1994 by concerned American Indian professionals, parents, and affiliated entities in response to the high academic failure and dropout rates of American Indian high school students in the public school system. The majority of students who are enrolled at Black Raven are American Indian or identify themselves as American Indian either through federal tribal affiliation or family heritage. The grade level of students at Black Raven range from 9th through the 12th grade, and they are assigned to appropriate grade levels according to the public schools' approved competency testing. Throughout attendance at Black Raven, a student's academic progress is monitored and tested based on the school's Competency Performance grading system. Of the ten certified teachers at Black Raven, there are three American Indians, one African American, and six Anglos. In addition to support staff (administrative assistant, housekeepers, etc.), the principal and assistant principal are also American Indian. Black Raven employs welfare recipients who perform various clerical duties intermittently during the school week. The majority of tutors and volunteers are also American Indian.

Black Raven was established to reflect a philosophy of values that promote a sense of community, self-esteem, ethnic identity and pride, and an appreciation of all cultures and their relevance in today's society. This alternative school serves students ages 14-18 who have dropped out of traditional schools or are at risk of dropping out. The school uses culturally integrated curricula and coordinated community services to meet the needs of the students and their families. These aspects are viewed as the cornerstones of the alternative high school model, and the prioritization of student needs creates an environment where barriers are addressed and overcome.

Data Collection and Analysis

Since its conception in 1994, the coauthor has been associated with Black Raven as a tutor and a paraprofessional. This period of involvement created many lasting, positive relationships with former and present students that have influenced both the students and the coauthor to attain further education and to stay in high school and university respectively. This period of time spent at the research site also created an insider perspective and a Native eye for the researchers.

The first author sponsored the research and with the coauthor collectively performed observations and conducted open-ended, life history interviews with students, teachers, the administrative assistant, and the principal. These interviews resulted in the production of verbatim transcripts. Both researchers coded transcripts to identify thematic frameworks using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) across transcript data and observational data. Transcripts and observational data were compared and re-coded to confirm and identify emergent themes. Member checks were conducted to confirm variability and trustworthiness within and across the narrative data (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990).

Specifically, this is a case study focusing intently on one educator whose use of culturally relevant curricula has made a significant impact on a randomly selected sample of American Indian students' lives. The case study method was used specifically focusing on the school as the unit of analysis. The participants' narratives were explored to gain an understanding of what makes culturally relevant schools effective from the perspectives of the administrator and three students. The outcome of the case study is heuristic in that it illuminates the reader's understanding of the phenomenon under investigation by describing in rich detail the experiences that led students to leave traditional school settings and seek out an alternative form of education. Additionally, the data show convergence in the experiences and expectations of culturally relevant educators and marginalized students, in particular, the participant in this study who realized and understood the requirements of marginalized students and took measures to address those needs.

Creating an Alternative School: A Case of a Culturally Relevant Educator

Starting an alternative school takes an enormous amount of dedication. As the literature reveals, the flexible format and culturally responsive teaching practices make small class sizes an imperative. Additionally, these alternative settings require an above and beyond attitude that generally originates with some compelling cause. The administrator, an American Indian woman who is one of the creators of Black Raven, discussed in length how she was unable to ignore the gap between American Indian students' fantasies about their future aspirations and the reality of their educational abilities:

> One of the summer employment programs I worked with made all the applicants take a reading, math, and writing test. I added the writing portion, which asked them to write an essay on what they wanted to do with their lives and how far in school they wanted to go. When they came in, I was horrified because lots of Indian youth were 15–18 in high school, and their skills were at junior high or elementary level. They were scheduled to graduate soon and one essay said, "The key to success is to become an attorney." Ninety percent said they wanted to go to law school and become an attorney. Yet, looking at their writing skills many of them had poor grammar. Their punctuation was totally nonexistent and their syntax was awful. This was emotional for me. This really hurt me very deeply to know that this was the future for Indian people, and that for whatever reason, our kids, and I'm sure there are other ethnic groups, but I'm being selfish and self-centered because my concern is for my—our Indian kids. And when I saw these test scores and I saw what was happening, I said, "There's no future for them. They're functioning at a fourth or fifth grade level, and they're never going to make it into law school if that is truly their ambition. They will never even make it out of high school."

Frustrated and inspired to make a difference, she began to do research on American Indian/Alaska Native education to discover what was working and what continue to be problems for American Indians/Alaska Natives in this country. She found the theory and speculation very intellectualized and although she understood the research, she knew there was something more to be done. She went to the source and talked to American Indian students who were working through the summer employment program to find out what they liked about school:

> These kids were not stupid. If you just talk to them like human beings you find that they are very, very intelligent, which substantiates that American Indians do possess high levels of intellectual capabilities (laughs). What I found was that they were being taught very inappropriately or the kids felt that the teachers really didn't care, didn't have time to answer their questions. It just seemed to me the expectations were so low. I didn't know if it was for all the traditional public schools students or just for American Indian kids. I'm not going to make a judgment on that.

What she did do was go back to her elders to get an historical perspective on how American Indians have thrived despite oppression thus far:

> I started to remember things my grandparents and great-grandparents had shared with me and things started to gel for me. I think the thing that came across real clear is that we've always been experiential learners. One hundred, 200, 500, 1,000 years ago the entire tribe or village or band took responsibility for the children. If it was a young male and he needed to learn hunting skills, the best hunters in the tribe taught the young man what he needed to know and it wasn't because we didn't have a written language. It was like, well, I'm going to tell you what you need to do. Now, go out there and do it. They took you by the hand, they showed you how to track animals, they showed you where the animals lived and how best to hunt. They showed you how to make weapons and you became a part of the learning process. People function better when they are a part of something and have ownership of something rather than just being spectators.

With a formal background in social work, this educator, who claims she is not an educational administrator, but rather a facilitator, used her connections to help create Black Raven. She thinks her naiveté allowed her to accept the educational concept she calls integrated, whole-brain, cooperative learning, but her experience tells her it works:

> In trying to put Black Raven together, I wanted an education here to be a life learning experience for the kids and not just an academic learning experience. They need to know how all of the academic courses fit into their lives, and they have to know there is interaction between the disciplines. These are all things they needed to know. We can't segment math from science, and science from social studies, and social studies from English because that's not how life is. Life is an integration of all of your experiences and all of the knowledge. So I wanted to make sure that all of the disciplines here were integrated with one another. Not to bastardize them, but to make them more meaningful for the students.

Addressing the students' needs has been at the forefront of her decisions about how to construct a learning environment that would not only enhance the educational opportunities for American Indian students, but also provide a haven for students who were unable to get this format elsewhere:

> And by cooperative learning I mean that I really wanted the kids to learn together. That's why we really don't have grades here at Black Raven. We don't have freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. We have seniors and then everybody else. And so students are put into learning teams and mentoring groups not based on ability or skills but where we feel they might be able to communicate and feel a sense of belonging. The whole brain is the way we do business at Black Raven. In the morning the left brain's ability for facts and figures is addressed and in the afternoon they take what they learned in the morning and they apply it in a more practical way, addressing the right brain's ability. We use a hands-on, interactive, involving way. These are the things that are important to me. That's what I got from talking with kids, with elders, and with educators.

She coupled her theoretical research with her qualitative data and created an alternative educational format that brings together rigorous academic preparation with culturally responsive teaching. According to students who have

experienced Black Raven and have compared this format to the traditional public schools they left, her coupling is a winning combination.

Being a Student at Black Raven: Responses to an Alternative Setting

Dropping out of school seemed to be a slow, progressive, clouded event that culminated in these three students giving up on education. Dropping in to Black Raven was an event that was described by the three students with enthusiasm and clarity. Not surprisingly, all three students were referred to the school through family members and school personnel. They regarded the referral reliable because of an immediate feeling of connectedness to the organization and its mission. The small size of this alternative setting, along with its mission to increase and improve students' self-esteem and self-actualization and its ability to provide interaction and communication between teachers and students has created Black Raven's reputation. Ultimately, that reputation lured these hopeless students back into a thriving, learning environment.

One student recalled her admission process with Black Raven and how positive the experience was. Even though she had to repeat part of her sophomore year, she looked back fondly at the time spent at this school and was proud to graduate only one semester later than she originally anticipated at her traditional high school:

> During the summer after my sophomore year; we came here to apply for this school because I had a half-sister who came here and told me a little bit about the school. And I knew the secretary here and she was like, "Come on in. We'll interview you!" So, during the summer my mom and I had an interview with one of the teachers. He took us around the school and basically they accepted me right away and told me to look forward to coming at the beginning of what would have to be the beginning of my sophomore year, again. I have been here 2 1/2 years. I will be done with school in January. I was supposed to finish in June, but unfortunately I'm paying for my mistakes now.

Another student recalled that he had never heard of Black Raven until his desperate father recommended the school to him. After trying several traditional schools within the public system, he had dropped out for the fourth time. Black Raven made a connection with him that other schools were unable to make:

> I really didn't know anybody here until I came. I didn't even know about this school until my father said something about it. And then he and I came and I enrolled. I got accepted right away, and the first day I was here, I got to know a couple of people. I didn't even know this school existed, but after I started coming, I started meeting more people, and it started getting fun. That started making me come to school. I come more than I ever did before. My attendance has improved a whole lot.

Family influence, a factor that has been cited as responsible for American Indian success, continued to be a theme in this study. The uncle of this student encouraged him to try Black Raven because no other school had been able to hold his attention:

> My uncle was a teacher here, and now he works across the street. He just told me to come in, and try it out. I came in just thinking that I was only going to apply, seeing how there was a waiting list. And the next morning, I had to be here by 8:00 am! I was like—what? I hadn't gone to school since I was little, and all of a sudden, it was "Be here by 8:00." I was kind of glad they did it that way, because if there had been an extra week to think about it, I would have kept on working. I had to go and buy paper and pens that night. I borrowed a backpack off my nephew. It felt weird coming back to school.

Once back in school, these former dropouts did not necessarily become model students, but they did report a sense of connectedness. More importantly, they reported a sense of responsibility to the educators who made them feel they belonged in school:

> Now that I go here, I know everybody. I don't keep to myself much anymore. When I'm here at this school, I feel like I can talk to anybody about anything—all the teachers, all the staff, at any given time. They will step aside and talk to you, like, "Okay, what's wrong? You want help? You want somebody else to talk to if you don't feel comfortable talking to us?" And when I was at my other school, I don't think that I could have stepped up to any of the staff members or the counselors. I didn't feel that I could.

Using alternative strategies for keeping kids connected to school was cited repeatedly as the reason students stay:

> Yeah, they keep trying to keep you coming. You miss a couple of days; they keep encouraging. If you come so many days, you win an attendance award or you win a $25 gift certificate for some store. You know, they encourage you to come. You get stuff for coming. It makes you want to come to school.

Flexibility was a key element to reconnecting with these distracted students had who lost interest in education long before they found Black Raven. Even the more resistant students were encouraged to play the school game:

> The teachers are fine now that we know each other. When I first got here, all they used to do was tell me what to do. One time I went to light a cigarette on the side of the building, and there is "no smoking" whatsoever in that area. I just lit it up there with my buddy's lighter, and I was going to walk it over to the smoking area. Before I could get there, this teacher ran over to me and said, "There's no smoking here, so get away before the rules change and you can't smoke anywhere." Now, I understand that the teachers are just doing their job.

Students cited the small population as a positive factor because everyone knew each other at Black Raven felt responsible for each other. Because the school day starts later and there are longer breaks between classes, students feel the faculty are making every effort possible to support their success in school. They sense the teachers are on a mission to see that they graduate from school:

> The teachers are here because of the students. They want to work with the students. In the traditional public school teachers are there for the money. They really don't care. I like it because the teachers here can jump around. The teachers here are funny. They get along good. I get along with them real good.

The dedication of the teaching staff is evidenced by more than the mission on the school wall. Students reiterated the concrete ways in which teachers let them know they believed in their abilities and how that belief contributed to their willingness to succeed:

> The [teachers] don't sit there and just pray you mess up. Them other teachers sit there and watch. "You want a 72 (code for detention)?" That would be the first thing they would say to me—not even realizing it. I was like, "Sure, I'd love one." They would write that down, "Sure, I'd love one," and send me to the office. Then I would go home for two days. These people don't want to send you home for two days. They want to make you stay after three extra hours. That's the way it's different here. I don't want to mess up here. They ain't gonna send me home. They are either going to kick me out, or they are going to make me stay after. In this place it's more like a community, like if you are having a bad day, they understand that. They don't have 500 students that they don't have time to give a d__n about if you are having a bad day. They are having the same bad one right with you.

The total number of students registered at Black Raven is no more than 80 with approximately 70 attending daily. The largest classes are 15 students and the average classes are approximately seven to eight students. Again, small student population and flexibility within the governance structure allows these students to become integrated in a school setting and connected enough to succeed:

> Here, there are not as many classes that I have to change to everyday. So, in the morning here, we only have three classes. They are longer, but there is not as much moving around. That other school was just too big.

When asked what was the most significant thing that had turned him around from being a dropout and made him care about graduating from school, this student responded:

> Probably just this school. It's the best school I've ever seen. I'd still be working at all those odd jobs, not even giving a d__n about my education, if it wasn't for this little building here. And the people that care.

Future Directions: Creating Successful American Indian/Alaska Native Schools

This case study described, from a leadership perspective, the process of creating a school environment where American Indians consistently excel. It explored three American Indian students dropping out of traditional schools and the solace they found in this alternative school environment. Their narratives reveal the barriers present in their personal lives and in the traditional educational environments that contributed to their decisions to leave school. The ability of an alternative school to bring nontraditional, culturally diverse students back into an educational setting and keep them connected to learning is also explored. The case study methodology employed proved useful in the exploration of an exemplary school with an exemplary leader. While the school as the unit of

analysis provided data about educational environments that support struggling students, the most revealing data came from the analysis of the leader and the ability of an individual using culturally relevant methods to create the environment.

Themes from the data reveal that significant factors contributing toward American Indian/Alaska Native student success are (a) small school size, (b) flexible school formats, (c) governance structures, and (d) culturally responsive teachers. These factors, occurring in concert, present the best possible environment for American Indian/Alaska Native students to achieve school success. Although the data point to solutions that would likely improve the environment of any school, what is the significance of these issues for American Indian/Alaska Native students? Small schools that offer individual attention and encouragement provide impetus for the development of significant educational relationships. Time constraints encourage superficial learning; whereas, flexible schedules allow students to learn at their own pace. However, culturally responsive teachers, unlike the first two themes, can compensate and create conducive environments within a classroom setting when school size and flexible schedules cannot be controlled.

Culturally responsive teachers are the vital link to addressing the requirements of American Indian/Alaska Native students. McCord's (2000) research is indicative of what makes culturally relevant teaching so powerful. She learned with and from her students how to restore their love of learning and how to explore the world in which they lived. She used communal style groups that relied on methods of learning with which American Indian/Alaska Native children are familiar from their informal, community learning experiences. Students made vast departures from their prior apathetic school performances in response to her methods.

For these urban American Indian students, Black Raven Alternative School provided a viable, necessary option for their educational success. The urban American Indian high school students in this study ultimately left traditional public schools due to a lack of connection with the nonresponsive curriculum and culturally inept teaching methods. Dauphinais' (2000) research at the Turtle Mountain Reservation schools revealed a similar phenomenon where children come to school excited and ready to learn and, somehow, institutional practices extinguished their fire for learning. Clearly, we need to explore the systemic elements of school to better understand the role they play in disconnecting students from the educational process. One solution involves schools at all levels embracing culturally relevant curricula to assist marginalized students realize and connect to the link between the economic realities of living in America as an American Indian/Alaska Native person (Pavel, 1995).

Contrary to Pavel's (1995) work that cites key focus areas that hinder American Indian/Alaska Native education as being (a) the lack of parental involvement due to economic factors, (b) chemical dependencies, and (c) historical educational relationships among American Indian/Alaska Natives, this

data would indicate otherwise. This study explored dropout students who were not struggling with chemical dependencies or lack of family involvement, and yet they dropped out of traditional schools. Most had some level of family support, a link that enabled them to become connected with an educational environment that was conducive to their needs. While Pavel's notions of addressing systemic issues are quite relevant to the educational dilemmas faced by American Indian/Alaska Native students, short-term relief can be found using the models as described in this study.

Despite the seemingly grim news for American Indian/Alaska Native students, smaller class sizes, flexible school formats, and culturally responsive teaching are addressing their educational needs. Schools that respect and support a student's culture demonstrate significantly better outcomes in educating American Indian and other marginalized students (Van Hamme, 1995). Culturally relevant pedagogy has been shown to promote academic achievement and increase a sense of bonding between American Indian/Alaska Native students and education, reducing the power of extrinsic rewards that often distract marginalized students from academic endeavors (Brady, 1995).

> The challenging task facing educators of American Indian children is to assist in the maintenance of bonds to traditional and contemporary American Indian cultures while also providing preparation for successful participation in a culturally diverse, modern technological society. (Van Hamme, 1995, p. 21)

Model schools, in addition to Black Raven, have been successful in preparing American Indian/Alaska Native students to succeed in high school and postsecondary education. These institutions, located in metropolitan Seattle, Washington, Spokane, Washington, and Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota have similar demographics and serve predominantly urban populations ("Spokane Medicine Wheel Academy," 1997). In honoring American Indian culture and historic traditions, these schools are committed to preserving and respecting Native culture and develop in students an abiding respect for mother earth. Additionally, schools in this vein are responding to the chronic social ills experienced by vast numbers of American Indians/Alaska Natives who were urbanized in the 1950s-60s. These types of environments are creating a balance between the traditional cultures of American Indian/Alaska Native people and contemporary American life (Fixico, 2000). Culturally appropriate schools, which require the involvement of parents, families, and community members, including elders, create the balanced needed to teach students to celebrate the diversity and traditions of Indian culture. Culturally appropriate methods assist students who see little opportunity for their futures to grasp the value of education. These schools employ instructional methods that involve the most effective teaching strategies for educating American Indian/Alaska Native students.

> BIA/tribal school and public schools with high Indian enrollment should lead the nation in qualified administrators and expert teachers who have prior knowledge, experience, and training in the idiosyncratic practice of educating

> Indian children. Colleges of Education on or near tribal lands should be vocal and active in pursuing agendas that recruit and retain Native people, place undergraduate and graduate students in school internships, provide in-service training to school staff, offer the professional service of faculty to schools and tribal communities, and sponsor annual meetings to discuss critical issues affecting the quality of schooling American Indians/Alaska Natives experience in the area and throughout the state. (Pavel, 1995, p. 14)

Although these schools emphasize teaching styles conducive to academic success for American Indian/Alaska Native children, the schools are inclusive of students from all backgrounds and ethnic groups. Therefore, the three themes stated earlier (small schools, flexible schedules, and cultural responsiveness) are not necessarily applicable only to American Indian/Alaska Native students. Similarly, while there are particular methods that are especially applicable to American Indian/Alaska Native students, we must remember that American Indians/Alaska Natives represent over 200 distinct cultures. What works beautifully on the Navajo Reservation falls flat on the Rosebud Reservation and may be inapplicable in an urban setting representing 60 different cultures. What is notable here are the demonstrative narratives of success that speak volumes to educators who work successfully (or unsuccessfully) with struggling students.

McCord's (2000) personal success implies that culturally relevant teaching is an effective pedagogical method for use in any educational setting. These methods, as employed in the case of Black Raven school, can and should serve as models for traditional public schools formats that are unsuccessfully addressing the diverse needs of our ever changing society. One student from Black Raven clearly already understands this:

> I think that the people that went to the school that I used to go to—all the Whites and Blacks, and Hispanics—if they came here, that they would be a lot different. Everybody here is friendly. Everybody talks to you. They don't put you as an outcast. As long as you have a good attitude, you know, I think that everybody would get along. If they came here, it would be a whole different story.

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