

# Report of a National Colloquium, II—Research

## Improving Academic Performance Among American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Students

### Introduction to This Issue

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Guest Editors

**T**his issue of the *Journal of American Indian Education* (JAIE) is the second of two thematic issues evolving from a national colloquium to address the educational needs of Native American students. As in the first special issue, which focused on Programs and Practices, we have defined Native American as an overarching term, including all indigenous groups of the United States: American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian. At that colloquium, researchers and educational practitioners from federal agencies and professional organizations and associations met for three days, March 16-18, 2005, at the Indian School in Santa Fe to discuss the key issues and challenges for improving educational performance among Native American students, and to begin development of blueprints for practice and research.

The first thematic issue of *JAIE* concludes with commentaries by the organizers of the Santa Fe workshop and its Washington, DC, follow-up meeting. Those commentaries outline the issues and challenges in improving the delivery of improved educational opportunities to Native American students, as well as potential solutions and some suggestions for practice. In this, the second thematic issue, a blueprint for needed research on educational practices as well as for foundational research on culture and learning, is presented.

This issue is organized into three sections: What we know, challenging and promising areas for research, and what we need to know—the Blueprint. In laying out what we know, Demmert, Grissmer, and Towner offer insights from a major synthesis of the research literature on Native students' educational experiences, and a summary of available data on Native students from large national studies. August, Goldenberg, and Rueda, in a thorough review and synthesis, discuss research on the influence of culture, notably differences in discourse and interaction characteristics between children's homes and classrooms, on the academic engagement and performance of Native American children. These

authors also present an examination of instructional approaches to promote literacy that have been used with Native American children. Together, the Demmert, Grissmer, and Towner paper and the August et al. discussion not only inform us about current knowledge, but also set the stage for the discussion in section two of this issue on how research can be conducted in Native schools and communities. Section two comprises three papers. In the first, Mohatt, Trimble, and Dickson discuss culture-based education. They identify and explore several psychosocial variables and models that can be used to inform the development and study of appropriate culture-based educational approaches. They then offer their own culture-based education framework for understanding and improving the school performance and achievement of American Indian and Native children. Also in this section, the paper by Pugh, Sandak, Frost, Moore, and Mencl addresses a research tool that has been little used in studies of Native students' educational performance. The authors note that in neurobiological studies of reading and reading disorders to date, there appears to be more similarity than difference across languages and cultures. These authors discuss how developmental neuroimaging might be used to help to discriminate children with reading disabilities that are of a congenital origin from children who are at risk for or have developed reading disability or difficulty as a result of environmental risk factors. In addition, they discuss the future use of neuroimaging as a potentially sensitive neurobiological outcome measure to help evaluate the efficacy of different approaches to the teaching of reading, including approaches currently in use and being developed for use in teaching reading to Native students. Morris, Pae, Arrington, and Sevcik, in the final paper of this section, discuss research methodologies that might be applied to the study of reading performance in Native students, and the importance of being aware of children's context and culture when attempting to measure their performance and their growth over time. These authors point out that studying Native American students can not only increase our knowledge of Native Students, enabling us to better design effective educational program for them, but it will also give us much needed information on how to approach measurement issues for the education of all children in our nation of diverse cultures.

The final section consists of one paper, by Demmert, McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, and Leos, which reviews information from major reports that have addressed educational performance in Native students and ultimately presents a research agenda—the Blueprint for Research. This Blueprint is drawn from the existing research literature in part, and from the presentations of all of the presenters at the Santa Fe Colloquium, but is informed by the rich discussions that were held at that and the Washington DC follow-up meeting, as well as by email and correspondence from those who reviewed the draft document but were unable to attend either meeting in person. As such, the Blueprint represents, to some extent, a consensus of Native American researchers and practitioners and non-Native researchers and practitioners and other stakeholders who work with Native American students. It is not a comprehensive listing of all that could or

should be done in the research arena that might benefit Native students or contribute to their academic success and healthy development, but it does provide a starting point, some thoughtful suggestions and some important examples of types of research and research questions. It is offered here, by the authors but on behalf of all those who contributed to it, as a beginning. Indeed, these two thematic of the *Journal of American Indian Education* in total highlight the crucial importance of doing all that we can, as researchers, practitioners, and research funders, to help to ensure the healthy development and academic success of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students of all ages.

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### **Endnotes**

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<sup>2</sup>The opinions and assertions herein are those of the author and do not purport to represent the policies or official position of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the National Institutes of Health, or the Department of Health and Human Services.