

# Rethinking Social Studies for a Critical Democracy in American Indian/Alaska Native Education

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This investigation examines an elementary social studies methods course taught on an American Indian reservation through a state university. Data were collected from American Indian pre-service teachers over four years through taped interviews, classroom observations, and a review of homework and in-class assignments. A Freirean critical pedagogy framework was utilized to analyze the data. Analysis revealed that the course replicated and reproduced dominant cultural values and knowledge of the state university and was insensitive to American Indian history, values, and pedagogy. Suggestions include the need for the course to interrogate historical interpretations and the economic and social structures of the local Indian community. The course also needed to emphasize the cultural strengths of the local community and its contributions and place in the context of state and national history.

**T**he nature and purpose of social studies education is to inculcate citizens into embracing the values and dispositions of society and promote national allegiance in order to promote active participation and involvement in civic affairs. These efforts are problematic when imposed on sovereign American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) nations and serve to subvert their historical and traditional values and social structures. The dilemmas of teaching social studies education on AI/AN reservations and communities have been complicated by and contributed to a legacy of disenfranchisement, cultural genocide, and imposed assimilation (Grant & Gillespie, 1993; Klug & Whitfield, 2003; Reyhner, 1989). Thus AI/AN children who are often educated in schools that reflect the cultural values and norms of middleclass European-American society (Cleary & Peacock, 1998) remain the least likely of all ethnic groups to be successful and benefit from the education system (Pavel, 1999; St.Germaine, 1995; Wright, 1992).

Grant and Gillespie (1993) note that important to the educational success of AI/AN children is a curriculum that reflects their experiences and the training of AI/AN teachers who understand the needs of their own culture and can act as role models for students. In response to the need to recruit and train American

Indian educators and administrators, Western University (WU) College of Education<sup>1</sup> developed the *Title II Teacher Quality Partnership* in collaboration with the two tribes on the Bear Ridge Reservation. The program was developed for the purpose of training and certifying American Indian teacher aides who were already working in reservation classrooms. Non-Indian pre-service teachers were allowed to join the cohort and their presence served to illuminate and contextualize the differences and problems American Indian pre-service teachers encountered in an off-campus teacher education program. All pre-service teachers were required to complete their undergraduate credits through the university outreach school in addition to a series of foundations and methods courses that were delivered on the reservation.

This study evaluated and examined the dimensions and utility of a social studies/humanities methods course that was the final course of a three-course phase pre-service teachers had to complete before beginning their residency teaching experience. During the semester, pre-service teachers were required to spend a quarter of the semester in the classroom with mentor teachers where they would develop and teach a thematic social studies unit. Given the goals of social studies education to introduce and instill society's core values and loyalty to ones country, the study raised questions and presented contradictions between the university curriculum required of American Indian pre-service teachers for state certification and their need for a culturally sensitive curriculum that explicated their cultural backgrounds and world view. Thus, the question posed by this study focused on: How does the content and pedagogy of a social studies/humanities methods course relate and correspond to the cultural and social backgrounds of American Indian pre-service teachers? This study also examined the implications and suggestions for delivering such a course off campus on an American Indian reservation. In sum, the study spoke to the ability of Eurocentric public universities to develop culturally sensitive programs that attract and retain American Indians who aspire to be classroom teachers.

### **Understanding American Indian/Alaska Native Education in the Context of a Critical Framework**

The well-documented failure of American Indians/Alaska Natives at all levels of the education system can be understood and explicated in a critical framework. A critical framework in regards to minority schooling posits a view of education as the production and reproduction of culture in terms of power relationships that maintain and perpetuate the status quo (Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1999). It encourages minorities and oppressed groups to question their understandings of social, political, and economic relationships and empowers them to develop their own understandings of these relationships. In essence, they must develop a collective consciousness that includes awareness of and interrogates the production and engagement of knowledge in a historical context (Freire, 1993). A critical examination of education takes into account the involvement of the individual in the structure of education and allows for the examination of schools

as social sites that includes a hegemonic view of culture in the curriculum and reflects the values, history, and practices of the wider society.

Two hegemonic devices that work to oppress and subordinate American Indians/Alaska Natives are what critical theorists refer to as the hidden curriculum and the reproduction of the dominant culture in the educational setting (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1996). Essentially the hidden curriculum is the unspoken knowledge and behavior that is accepted and goes unchallenged in the school and classroom setting. It serves to reinforce basic rules and leaves unquestioned language practices, cultural standards, histories, and perspectives of the dominant culture (Wink, 2000). The hidden curriculum negatively affects American Indian/Alaska Native students in that primacy and affirmation is given to the histories and cultural practices of the Euro-American culture while delegitimizing their own cultural practices and knowledge through its absence. Likewise, cultural norms, and social stratification are reproduced in the classroom by educators whose values, cultural identity, and world views are aligned with that of the dominant culture (Pinar, et al, 1996). Transmitted through the curriculum and educational practices, American Indian/Alaska Native students are taught to comply with the status quo of Euro-American culture, which emphasizes an absence of conflict and questioning of content and practices that have silenced and maintained them in the margins of mainstream culture.

Given the social and political nature of American Indian/Alaska Native teacher education, the examination of past and present policies are important in understanding the success and failure of current practices. From the examination of this history, teacher educators can develop understandings of how historical decisions and policies led to present predicaments in American Indian/Alaska Native education. In the context of AI/AN education, particular attention needs to be paid to how Euro-American cultural values formed the underpinnings of present policies. More specifically, attention needs to be paid to how a history of disenfranchisement, cultural genocide, and assimilation has led to the development of racial stereotypes and prejudices that exist today between American Indians/Alaska Natives and the mainstream population and creates formidable barriers to the development of effective teacher education programs on the reservation. Essentially many American Indians/Alaska Natives have failed to adapt to mainstream culture in large part due to an Eurocentric curriculum that has been promoted over the recognition of AI/AN existence and history (Grant, & Gillespie, 1993; Klug, & Whitfield, 2003). AI/AN history is seldom mentioned at the level of teacher education that would allow teachers to understand the source of negative attitudes toward education by parents and the cycle of failure that is prevalent among AI/AN students (Reyhner, Gabbard, & Lee, 1995).

As a critical theorist, Freire's work with poor and marginalized groups of peasants in Brazil provides insight into explicating the problematic nature and systematic failure of American Indians/Alaska Natives to successfully participate in mainstream educational processes with any degree of autonomy. He believed that the historical and cultural world must be approached as a created

transformable reality that is constantly changing and being shaped (Freire, 1993). In his work, he stressed the importance of literacy and education as a means for the oppressed to explore and question their location within the privileging class structure in order to extricate themselves from the cycles of social reproduction. As the subjugated and marginalized took control of their own history and education, they would independently assimilate more rapidly into society on their own terms. In respect to American Indian/Alaska Native pedagogy, this means empowering and training teachers who have an in-depth understanding of their communities, their history, can provide unique cultural knowledge to their students, and can serve as role models (Pavel, 1999).

Even though critical pedagogy reveals and explores issues of social justice as inherent democratic ideals, this perspective is criticized by some scholars for its focus on autonomous individualism (Bowers, 2005; Grande 2000). These scholars charge that critical pedagogy emphasizes individual rights at the exclusion of the indigenous collective communities and their historical bases of knowledge and unique social, economic and political structures. Grande argues that the critical theorists' concepts of democracy and social justice does not consider American Indians as a categorically different population that is incomparable to the struggles of other oppressed minorities in the United States. She notes that American Indians have historically struggled to retain tribal sovereignty, the right to remain distinct and resisted inclusion into the democratic imaginary. Grande concludes that since close to two-thirds of American Indians presently live on or maintain ties to the reservation they have maintained a tribal orientation and that the forces of democracy in the form of civil rights and citizenship have acted as a lethal colonizing force on the complex and elaborate tribal systems.

Grande (2000) does not completely reject a critical perspective as critical pedagogy can be used to deconstruct democratic ideologies that continue to absorb and colonize the American Indian. She calls for the development of an American Indian intellectualism that focuses on and negotiates the political terrain between the American Indian identity, sovereignty, tradition, and community and the current democratic order. In addition Giroux (1997) drawing on the work of Freire, does not inherently position critical pedagogy in democratic ideology but rather sees it as the processes, the examination, and the location of knowledge in specific historical contexts as a means of uncovering the specific human interests it serves. Likewise, Wink (2000) in her work with American Indians utilizes critical pedagogy as a means to look back "at our own histories and generate new questions in order to find new answers based on our knowledges, literacies, and cultures" (p. 31). Critical pedagogy interrogates curriculum and practices that serve to liberate or oppress American Indian students in the classroom. Yet the concerns of Bowers (2005) and Grande are equally important in considering the collective knowledge and consciences of indigenous communities whose identities emanate more from a shared community than democratic individualism.

## **A Physical and Cultural Environment of Separation**

The social studies/humanities methods course met each week on the southern edge of the Bear Ridge reservation in a high school classroom similar to all the foundation and methods courses previously delivered by Western University. For the uninitiated, the dissimilarities between the physical and cultural environments of the Bear Ridge Reservation and the rest of the state are sharp and distinct. Surrounding the reservation are two prosperous farming and tourist communities in stark contrast to the reservation that has almost no visible economic base outside of a few hay fields, small herds of cattle and horses, and a few small bands of sheep. The living and physical conditions are identical to the description that Goodman (1993) provides in her critical study of the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma. Other than a few filling stations/convenience stores, health clinics, community centers, and the local public and private schools, the reservation with its quasi-modern, rundown single family ranch-style homes and prefabricated housing exists in an economic time-warp. Few signs of development outside of an occasional road construction project are apparent on the reservation. The small sign that marks the southern boundary of the reservation is hardly necessary as well maintained farms and ranches give way to empty grasslands with an occasional dwelling or building.

Not surprisingly, there are distinct cultural separations among the non-Indian communities that border the reservation and the American Indian communities and similar divisions between the non-Indian teachers and administrators who work and live on the reservation. The divisions are often manifested in racist's remarks and attitudes as typified by the fact that non-Indian children seldom attend the reservation elementary schools where a majority of the teaching staff is non-Indian. One non-Indian elementary school teacher named Mary remarked that although she lived on the reservation in a house provided by the school, she sent her children to the elementary school off the reservation, because "they didn't fit in and were discriminated against" (Mary, personal communication, September 27, 2002). She and several of her colleagues made numerous remarks about the amount of time their American Indian teachers' aides spent in the bingo halls rather than preparing for their classes. The sentiment is as Andrew Hacker (2003), describes in the title and throughout his book on racial inequality in the United States, the communities remain "separate, hostile, unequal." Ironically, it was within this context that future American Indian teachers were taking a course that taught them how to inculcate and promote among their future students the democratic values of equality and social justice.

### **Methodology**

This study examined how the teaching of a social studies/humanities course related and corresponded to the cultural and social backgrounds of American Indian pre-service teachers using a naturalistic research methodology (Cresswell, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Stake, 1998). The naturalistic approach allowed

for a substantive understanding of the “lived reality” (Shaffir & Stebbins, 1991) of prospective teachers as they passed through the course. Rather than examining merely how the course affected American Indian pre-service teachers, focus was placed on their experiences in contemporary, historical, and institutional contexts. This approach assumed that an understanding of the social and political context of teacher education is essential to understanding the viability, success and failure of such coursework.

A primary source of data collection was taped interviews with select American Indian informants collected over four years. A case-history interview was utilized to select a sample of informants that would provide information-rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 2002). Questions were developed and posed through formal and informal conversations with informants and focused on various themes such as relevancy of course materials, pedagogical practices, and the development of their individual as well as professional identity. Data was also collected from classroom observations, pre-service teacher interactions, and frequent reviews of journals, homework assignments, and in-class work. Observations were noted in a field log. These secondary data sources were used to generate questions for future interviews, provide multiple data points, and were used to triangulate, cross-check, and compare data from the different data sources (Johnson & Christensen, 2000; Lather, 2003).

All data were reviewed for key assertions and reoccurring themes, which became the basis of analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The analysis thus became a process of sorting out and finding the significant structures and determining their social ground and importance (Geertz, 2003; Stake, 1998). The purpose of allowing these themes to emerge was not to capture the greater world in a single study that could be generalized across all cases. Rather the purpose was to examine the relevance of a particular course and curriculum that was designed to inculcate learners into the values and structures of a democratic society on the Bear Ridge Reservation. The themes that emerged were analyzed in the context of critical pedagogy, which is meant to expose the contradiction in democratic education in order to portray and uncover the role of schooling in the reproduction of inequality. The goal of this analysis was for the purpose of developing a commitment to less exploitative social and economic relationships, to human rights, and to social justice (Lather, 2003).

## **Findings and Discussion**

In keeping with the definition and purpose of social studies education which is to promote civic competence and respect for democratic processes (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; National Council for the Social Studies, 1994), the humanities/social studies methods course was built around a student-centered and experiential-learning focus (Dewey 1916). These principles were implemented to acknowledge and promote respect for the cultural diversity that exists in a democracy and to connect students’ lived reality with the course content. Creating realistic experiences that relied on student knowledge meant stepping away from

conveying knowledge out of the textbook and readings and avoiding what Freire (1993) labeled as the banking concept of education. The course required pre-service teachers to demonstrate behaviors that would promote the principles of democracy in their future classrooms.

Essential to the promotion of democracy was the development of a critical consciousness and the creation of the Freirean idea of self-reflection where pre-service teachers would examine their own knowledge as a means of making connections between their own lived conditions and being to the commonly held reality that existed in society. Linked to this idea was the importance of constructing a collective consciousness within the class itself where pre-service teachers as a group would interrogate and deconstruct the oppressive and liberating structures of the society as a means of self-empowerment (Freire, 1993). Lastly, it was important to develop what Bryant (1999) refers to as a classroom community, which would encourage students to interact and work together in positive and supportive ways. From the perspective of teaching social studies, the classroom community is important to introducing teachers to the concepts of democracy, diversity, and pluralism that encompass democratic practices and honors individual differences and helps students to understand that within any group there are many way to look at the world. Implicit in this was the implementation of practices, which research has shown to be effective in establishing intercultural harmony (Cotton, 1994).

The curriculum was structured to examine three principal aspects of social studies education. The first part of the course investigated the purposes of social studies education in terms of society and schooling. Readings and in-class exercises explicated the history, theories and different approaches to teaching the subject as a way to look at its functions within a democratic society. The second focus of the course required pre-service teachers to develop their own social studies curriculum, which they would teach during their practicum experience in the classroom and in the following semester during their residency teaching experience. The goal of this focus was to allow teachers to develop a social studies curriculum that was relevant and spoke to the social and cultural needs of their students. The final section focused on methods and resources for integrating history, geography, the social sciences and humanities into the curriculum. Integrated into much of this later section was social studies content that provided a framework for teaching methods. As a result of the course structure and approach, three salient themes emerged as problematic. These themes will be discussed in the following sections under the headings; building a democracy through community participation, culturally relevant curriculum, and cultural gaps, conflicts, and American Indian pedagogy.

#### Building a democracy through community participation

The focus on building a participatory democratic community through classroom practice had a contradictory implication because of the physical and social isolation of the reservation from the surrounding communities as noted



previously. This isolation was exacerbated by the physical environment of the classroom at a local high school where the university education courses met each week. On the surface, the room appeared to be normal for a health education classroom; materials lying around the room and posters on the walls indicated there was an emphasis on prevention of alcohol and drug abuse, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases. The materials were culturally sensitive in that many of the characters depicted were American Indians. Yet these materials, as Goodman (1993) noted of most American Indian/Alaska Native health education materials, embodied the values of white Anglo Saxon middle class values and nuclear family structures and were void of the historical, political, and social context that might explain the reasons for some of the problems American Indians face. Though unspoken, the classroom reinforced the image of American Indians as unable to control alcoholism and avoid teen pregnancy.

As minor as this may seem, the classroom environment as noted by Routman (1991) is important in promoting attitudes, concepts of ownership, and responses from students. Though none of the pre-service teachers in the course took ownership of the classroom or commented on the materials and posters, the room's theme promoted cultural separation and the stereotypes that existed between the American Indian and non-Indian communities. This message was not lost on the non-Indian pre-service teachers who were also enrolled in the class. Throughout the semester, pre and in-service teachers from the nearby communities who worked in the reservation schools commented on the persistent drunkenness of the American Indians and how by Monday morning most of their money had gone to buy alcohol or drugs. These remarks were common among the non-Indian community; the point being that such problems were endemic to American Indians and did not exist elsewhere.

Building a classroom community was accomplished by organizing the pre-service teachers into culturally heterogeneous cooperative learning teams that cut across economic, social, and cultural lines. Non-Indian pre-service teachers from off the reservation were divided among the American Indian groups. Groups were assigned tasks that required cooperation and interdependence. The intention was to increase inter-group contact where students had equal status so they could advance individual or group goals through cross cultural interactions. Surprisingly even after two years of previous course work with the same cohort, there had been little interactions between the two groups of students to the point where at times students did not even know each others names.

The first assignment at the beginning of the semester required pre-service teachers to draw, using the analogy of a tree, a concept map of what they had learned about the world from their earliest childhood memories. They had to think of their lived experiences as a tree with roots in early family experiences, beliefs, and values; the trunk as growth and development in childhood; and branches as lessons learned from school, work, travel, and new relationships. The purpose of this activity served to help pre-service teachers clarify and define their dispositions toward teaching and to analyze how their worldviews had developed



and evolved over time. The activity also became a way for them to examine their different values and perspectives as they shared and described their drawings in their assigned group. One non-Indian pre-service teacher commented after the class:

I never really ever talked to them (American Indians) before...even in the other classes we had together. It was amazing what the woman had to say about her tree of life...you know her experiences, where she was coming from. I never had the slightest idea who they were or how they lived. I always had those...well you know, the stereotypes of "those people" (Indians) over on the reservation (Judy, personal communication, October 11, 2002).

Judy had lived for 33 years within three miles of the reservation border and claimed that she had never taken the shortcut across the reservation to a nearby community before she entered Western University's teacher education program.

The book, *The keeping quilt* (Polacco, 1988), provided another opportunity for the pre-service teachers to experience cooperative classroom participation and the development of a classroom community, while at the same time self-reflection upon their individual values, cultural symbols, and personal characteristics. During the class, the pre-service teachers had to design a square that reflected the individual contributions each brought to the classroom through their personal interests and talents. Working collectively, they developed a design, constructed a border, decided on a theme, and later pieced their squares together to form one large quilt. When the quilt was finished, they were required to reflect on their individual square as well as the group process. The stories the students told were diverse, varied, and powerful, reflecting their insights and values towards their religion, culture, and family history. One AI pre-service teacher in the description of her square related a particularly powerful story:

The teepee and buffalo are who we are and where we came from, but we aren't like that any more. The buffalo are gone and we do not live in teepees. We live in houses like you do. My square symbolizes who we are but it also symbolizes that we have to change. We have to start living in today. We have to learn to live in this world. (Rosalia, personal communication, September 13, 2002).

While the quilt served the purpose of acknowledging and analyzing who they were, their differences, and what each brought to the classroom as teachers, it also served to bring those differences together and demonstrate that the differences could co-exist and were not mutually exclusive. The class quilt was a way of fostering a sense of community and cooperation and stood as a class heirloom that represented and acknowledged their own special knowledge.

Interestingly, attempts to bring the group together through the development of a community of learners and shared experiences did not shift the attitudes the pre-service teachers had towards one another. As they developed their lesson plans for their thematic curriculum units there was little sharing of ideas outside of their respective cultural groups as even though class time was devoted to this.

In reviewing a unit on American Indians, a non-Indian pre-service teacher from a town off the reservation asked about the inclusion of American Indian legends as a way of teaching about the culture. The class had just covered the use of legends the previous week as a way of studying about the cultural structures and belief systems of indigenous cultures. Specifically, the pre-service teacher asked for library resources or web addresses where she might be able to find some AI stories and legends. The suggestion that she ask the American Indians sitting at the next table for ideas was met with skepticism and only after a week of being unable to obtain some suggested trade books did she reluctantly ask for help from an AI in the class. (Excerpts from field notes, November 2, 2002).

The pre-service teachers did not see each other as potential resources for ideas and knowledge. The activities over the semester failed to build sufficient trust and classroom community to the extent where they felt comfortable relying on one another for help.

This did not surprise one American Indian pre-service teacher who commented that she was used to this reaction from the White community. When asked to verify and comment on field note observations she noted that:

You meet up with the prejudice and...racism in classes. But I didn't let them bother me. I felt like if you're here, if you want to feel that way about us then, you know, it's your problem. Not mine...I ignored them... But you know what; I got to meet each and every one of those people that were in that class. I went out of my way and I'd visit with them, I'd talk to them and they knew me. And that's what I liked about Jo. She was White and we are still best of friends...She's younger than me but she didn't care what they thought. You know, she would come over and sit with us...She wasn't afraid of us...(That is the problem with the others) they think someone's different and that scares them (Betty, personal communication, August 13, 2006).

There appeared to be more dialogue, respect, sharing and friendships did develop, but overall the activities did not open spontaneous cooperation among the different groups. Towards the end of the semester, the pre-service teachers complained that they were tired of being moved to other groups and requested that they be seated in their respective groups.

### Culturally Relevant Curriculum

Traditionally, as noted earlier, elementary social studies content has centered on the transmission of knowledge, which has provided justification and has legitimized prevailing mainstream institutions, social behaviors, and beliefs. Citing Jean Anyon's study of elementary social studies curriculum, Giroux (1997) in his critical analysis, writes that content has been presented in a way that has mitigated social conflict, social injustice and institutional violence. Social consensus and harmony and consensus history have been promoted in the place of human intentionality and the multiplicity of intellectual and political perspectives. Giroux writes that rather than approaching historical events and the political system of the United States as a social construction, elementary social studies education often appears as inert and as historical.

The book *Lies my teacher told me* (Loewen, 1995) and a number of videos and class discussions that focused on textbook bias and adoption controversies were assigned as a means of introducing the pre-service teachers to the idea of history and social studies as socially constructed and its use to justify and legitimize the social and political structures in American society. Furthermore in constructing their own social studies units, pre-service teachers were required to use a variety of children's literature resources as a means of presenting a multitude of perspectives to their own students. Throughout the course, children's literature was also modeled as a technique to present a variety of perspectives and for introducing learning activities. For example the completion of the first practicum provided an opportunity for the pre-service teachers to cooperate as a group and share insights, experiences and knowledge of teaching. One of the pre-service teachers read the book, *Knots on a counting rope* (Martin & Archambault, 1987) which served as an introduction to their own stories of their first practicum experiences that they shared in their small groups.

The story recounted the life of a Navajo child who was born blind and learned how to ride his horse in an annual race across the mountains. Through the retelling of his life story and acknowledging the dark mountains he must face, he became less afraid of the challenges that he must face in his life. The boy gradually took over the retelling of the tale from his grandfather and with each telling tied a knot in a rope, which symbolized his knowledge and ability to overcome his fears and face the future on his own. For the pre-service teachers returning from their first practicum experience, the story became a reminder of the knowledge they must develop and the challenges they face and must overcome in the classroom. As the semester progressed and the pre-service teachers developed their thematic units that they were to teach during their second practicum, they returned to the counting ropes they had started and continued to share the problems, success, and challenges that remained for them. The activity was designed to help them construct, acknowledge, and share their own realities and knowledge of being teachers.

Throughout the semester, the course attempted to present a multitude of perspective and resources as a way of presenting content in the social studies. Yet despite this focus the American Indian pre-service teachers in reservation schools were continually exposed to Eurocentric curriculum content as examples for the development of their own instructional units. Often these influences perpetuated traditional racial stereotypes that have been transmitted through elementary social studies texts and practices.

On the wall outside a first grade classroom was a row of little Indians that had been cut out from a stencil and glued together by the students. The females were dressed in buckskin dresses and the boys in buckskin pants and shirts. All wore a feather in their headbands. The display in the hallway depicted the jobs and attributes of "good" little Indians (Excerpts from field notes, November 18, 2002).

It was difficult for American Indian pre-service teachers to question the traditional classroom content where they had worked up to this point as aides basically because both pre-service and mentor teachers maintained the dominant/subordinate roles that had been previously established nor had there been a framework or precedence established for challenging such content and practices.

In another kindergarten Halloween classroom in the same school, a lesson that was part of a larger unit on fall holidays developed by an AI pre-service teacher with help from her non-Indian mentor, students were going to carve a pumpkin. Even though all the students in her classroom were American Indian, the lesson and entire unit were void of any reference to how the pumpkin was a “New World” food, cultivated by American Indians, or the many contributions of American Indians to the American society (Weatherford, 1991). Though there was a great deal of content in the unit on fall that could have been related to the American Indian culture, there was little questioning even after discussions with both the pre-service and mentor teachers about the appropriateness of such content and references to the importance of focusing on more culturally relevant materials. The response from both teachers was that it was not that important and too much was being made of simple lessons that had been taught in the school for years. The acceptance of these situations is what Freire (1993) and other critical theorists (Allen, 2002; Giroux, 1983/1997) refer to as cultural hegemony or the acceptance and acquiescence to the ideas and practices of the dominant culture by the oppressed. While not explicitly opposed by the subordinate group, hegemony creates a type of consciousness among the oppressed that blinds and paralyzes them against action because, as Wink (2000) notes, they have been schooled to be polite and behave appropriately or to play it safe in order to make it through the program.

In retrospect, the lack of reaction by the AI pre-service teachers to the children’s literature should be of little surprise. While many non-Indian pre-service teachers in the course included the children’s literature activities and a variety of children’s literature in their units, it was conspicuously absent among the AI pre-service teachers. The selection of particular children books to introduce activities and present a variety of perspectives was for the most part culturally irrelevant. For example, *The keeping quilt* (Polacco, 1987) traced the immigration of Patricia Polacco’s Jewish family from Russian and how traditions from the Old World were maintained down through the generations. Likewise *Knots on a counting rope* (Martin & Archambault, 1987), a trade book that might have had some relevancy to the Native pre-service teachers, has been faulted as romantic imagery and non-Indian fantasy of the Navajo (Slapin & Seale, 1989). In their review of the book Slapin and Seale charge that the book panders to the romantic mythology about Indians and that little in the book realistically depicts an AI culture.

In later interviews with the AI pre-service teachers they commented on the irrelevance of not only the material in the social studies class, but the lack of cultural relevance for all the methods and foundation classes that had been taught

on the reservation. When asked for suggestions, one AI pre-service teacher responded:

I would ask that WU set up a place (to) create culture awareness and develop skills for the students. The college is so big they could have a room—a culture room where they can set up computers and access Native American literature to do research on. (Betty, personal communication, August 13, 2006)

Outside of passing references to AI culture, few direct connections were made in the course to the history or social identity of the AI pre-service teacher that was essential to justifying and legitimizing their existence in the dominant Euro-American culture.

### Cultural Gaps, Conflicts, and American Indian Pedagogy

Eurocentric cultural frameworks and values have had a profoundly negative effect on AI students through the cultural disconnection between students and their educational setting as noted throughout this study. Because of past attempts to subordinate AI culture to the dominant culture through educational practices and institutions many questions have been raised as to the value of the White man's education for American Indians on the reservation. While no one questions the need for AI education, Klug & Whitfield (2003) call for more autonomous control of educational decisions and curriculum. Yet outside of initially setting up the *Title II Teacher Quality Partnership*, there was little oversight exercised by tribal leaders in the curriculum or pedagogical decisions of the individual courses. Outside of teaching the course on the main campus, the only requirement for WU professors and instructors to teach in the program on the Bear Ridge Reservation was that they were willing to make the three hour trip each week to the reservation. Few of the instructors had ever been to the reservation before teaching a course there and even fewer had any insights or knowledge into the cultural nuances of the people who lived there.

Likewise, the principal and mentor teachers in the reservation schools where the AI pre-service teachers were placed for their pre-service practicum were also non-Indian and little attention was paid to the fact that ensuing problems might have had cultural rather than practical sources. Instructional strategies and teaching practices became problematic for the AI pre-service teachers and the university instructor unwittingly sided with the mentors as to decisions of best practices in the reservation classrooms. As products of the WU College of Education, the mentors were familiar with and supported the practices and objectives of the university courses. When lesson did not turn out, frustration surfaced on the part of two AI pre-service teachers.

“They (the lessons) didn't work out, the kids were all over the place, and we aren't getting any support from our mentors,” two pre-service teachers complained one day in the computer lab. “Can you ask them (the mentor teachers) what they want us to do?” In a conversation with the mentors immediately following this exchange, the mentors stated that they wanted

the pre-service teachers to “try things out” and if it didn’t work “try something else” (Excerpts from field notes, November 20, 2002).

Essentially the AI pre-service teachers were not encouraged to reflect on the classroom dynamics and reasons why the students were not engaged with the lessons. Rather than helping the pre-service teachers with possible ways they might modify their lessons, the lack of student engagement was reduced to a question of classroom control and management by the university practicum supervisor and mentor teachers. In the end, anxiety over failure to exercise proper classroom management forced the AI pre-service teachers to just emulate their mentors’ practices and lesson plans.

In later interviews with other AI pre-service teachers after they had graduated and had their own classroom, there was general agreement that the mentors and many of the university faculty had little knowledge and sensitivity to the culture that existed on the reservation. In reflection, one teacher who had dropped out and later finished her degree on the main campus put it this way.

I wish they (mentors and WU faculty) would’ve known more about who we were...knew more about our reservation and the communities that we lived in. Knew how kids grow up and you know, just the things, the lifestyles. Everybody’s lifestyles different today, there’s a lot of White teachers out there (on the reservation) and they still don’t have a clue. Some of them do now, but they don’t have a clue on what the kids are doing, what kind of lifestyle that kid has or what he’s going through (Teresa, personal communication, August 6, 2006).

This is not to say that the methods and theories taught on the reservation by the university had no value to AI pre-service teachers. In the WU College of Education teacher education program, the methods classes were designed to examine and promote “best practices” for a diverse population of learners. Similar to the other methods course the social studies/humanities course was inherently sensitive to cultural differences and learning styles. In developing their thematic units, pre-service teachers were encouraged to use a variety of instructional strategies and assessments. One AI pre-service teacher in reflecting on the social studies class and the development of the curriculum unit, after she had graduated and had her own classroom, acknowledged the value in developing her own curriculum from within a framework that allowed for flexibility in the content and teaching strategies.

He (the social studies instructor) was the one that...he gave us a hard time, you know, in learning...He was the one that taught us how to be persistent, consistent. That’s why when I do my curriculum I base it on the format that I was shown from WU. They taught me how to do my overview, they taught me how to do my lesson plan, and they taught me how to do the outcomes of my lessons. I always did my own book (curriculum)...you know my own binders and my own lesson plans. I always related it back to my culture though. Everything was back to my culture and that was acceptable to WU. I used this in my classrooms because I used to teach my culture. And, you know this is where WU really helped me. You know, you were a qualified

teacher because, the way I seen our culture teach is they don't use these things (Betty, personal communication, August 13, 2006).

Being encouraged to view themselves as curriculum developers rather than curriculum users encouraged pre-service teachers like Betty to step away from what Giroux (1997) sees as a tradition of reified knowledge that has been found not only in the principles that structure texts but in content as well. Betty embraced what critical theorist call a reconstructive perspective that promotes the conditions necessary for the development of pedagogical practices, curriculum materials, and school practices appropriated and/or produced by the teachers and educators who use them.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The use of critical theory offered an opportunity to deconstruct and interrogate the content and pedagogy of the social studies/humanities course that was taught on the Bear Ridge Reservation connecting it to larger questions of power and domination of AI pre-service teachers through the delivery of an Eurocentric university curriculum. By locating this study in a critical framework, the analysis revealed how historically education has worked to oppress and marginalize American Indians and allowed for the chance to examine how current efforts can either work to liberate or further marginalize the American Indians on the Bear Ridge Reservation. Grande (2000) notes that the use of a critical theory is important as much of the past research on American Indians has focused on historical monographs, ethnographic studies, and practical based research. While there is a need for this type of research, Grande argues that because of the increasing pressures on American Indian lands, resources, and cultures there is a pressing need for research that frames and elucidate theories of liberation for American Indians and questions the existing social order that has historically worked to oppress them.

Although important, it would be of limited benefit as a principal goal of this study to find fault and uncover practical solutions to the social studies/humanities course and the *Title II Teacher Quality Partnership* at the expense of acknowledging the failures and problematic nature of such efforts in the larger context of AI/AN education. In the context of this study, it appears that the education program and subsequent methods and foundations courses occurred in a Euro-American framework that while in recent history has become sensitive to the socio-economic status of American Indians/Alaska Natives has done little, as Cleary and Peacock (1998) argue, to acknowledge or address their history or culture and has ignored over a century and half of cultural genocide. Other than bring the classroom to the reservation the social studies/humanities course and many such efforts have followed a "civilization policy" that was a typical 19th century educational mentality (Gibson, 1978).

The humanities course was an opportunity to teach critical history and to interrogate historical interpretations and the economic and social structures of



the Bear Ridge community. Yet the course emulated the structure of the course taught on the main campus and was reinforced by the mentor teachers through the practicum supervision. Even though there was an emphasis on multicultural history, there lacked an examination on the contemporary social, economic, and intercultural structures that worked to oppress and denigrate American Indians. Since social studies education is about introducing learners to the society in which they live, a starting point for such a course could have emphasized the cultural strengths and structures of AI tribes, including the tribes that inhabited the Bear Ridge Reservation. More specifically, since history is taught as a justification and acknowledgment of present society, a critical social studies course should have included recognition that the North American concept of democracy and many of the agricultural products that saved Europe from starvation after the 16th century came from the Americas and American Indians (Weatherford, 1991). Equally important, efforts to promote a critical democracy should have included an examination of the multigenerational trauma and oppression that occurred among American Indians/Alaska Natives as a result the effects of colonization, specifically the policies of extermination, relocation and assimilation (Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Klug & Whitfield, 2003). Such a focus would have given the AI pre-service teachers an opportunity to understand the present educational predicaments and reasons for education failure that they must now confront in their own classrooms.

The inclusion of the non-Indian pre-service teachers in the reservation classroom was also a missed opportunity to develop common understandings and hence a community of learners. As noted by Bryant (1999), classroom communities function best when the students honor the experiences and contributions of their members. Grouping the students to share their insights and the development of their units was not enough of a foundation and grounds for the development of a common interest. There needed to be a purposeful acknowledgement of the AI pre-service teachers as viable actors in North American and state history. The lack of this acknowledgement in the course was evidenced by the non-Indian pre-service teachers who, even though they had grown up next to each other, remained ignorant and unaware of the strength of their neighbors' cultural heritage and practices. Besides recognizing the strengths of American Indian culture, open discussions of the conflicts in its historical context would have been insightful in explicating the stereotypes and misunderstandings that have been common between the two groups. The building of a classroom community entails the building of trust and in retrospect; little trust was built among the pre-service teachers in the class over the course of the semester.

Educating for a critical democracy demands the inclusion of all voices and recognition of the many cultural communities that make up the larger nation. Cleary and Peacock (1998) note that a barrier to a focus on AI/AN content and pedagogy is that it has been accused of amounting to special treatment and that students should be educated as a single American nation. Yet this perspective has

given primacy to Euro-American culture and history and has denigrated AI/AN culture. As one AI pre-service teacher put it in a rationale for her lesson about her culture.

This lesson represents a voice that is rarely in the general population of the state...Great things are coming for the tribes: great sacrifices have been made by the ancestors, the great chiefs, the great-grandfathers and grandmothers. The voice is there and the impressions are lasting (Excerpt from field notes, May 5, 2003).

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### Endnote

<sup>1</sup>All names and locations are pseudonyms.

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