

# Special Issue on Culturally Responsive Education for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Students<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction to This Issue

**A**ssimilationist models of education such as remedial and mainstream alternative education programs have proven ineffective for Native students, yet continue as the menu of academic program options and school choices for Tribal Nation communities, despite the inequities of such an education (Aguilera, 2003). Widely accepted comprehensive school reform models also undermine both the Native American Languages Act (1992; Public Law 102-524) and the civil rights of Indigenous students to learn their heritage languages and cultural knowledge—as Caucasian students do in English medium education systems (Aguilera & LeCompte, in press). Extensive research and Congressional reports detail the consequences of inferior schooling for Native peoples (Deyhle, 1992; Druian & Butler 1987; Hope for Urban Education, 1999; Indian Nations At Risk Task Force, 1991; Johnson & Asera, 1999; Kozol, 1991; LeCompte & Deyhle 1994; McCarty & Schaffer 1997; Meriam, Brown, Cloud, Dale, Duke, Edwards, et al., 1928; Noley, 1992; Oakes, 1986; Philips, 1982; Platero, Brandt, Witherspoon & Wong, 1986; Senate Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, 1969; Tatum, 1997; Trueba, Guthrie & Au, 1981; Wax, Wax, & Dumont, 1964; White House Conference on Indian Education, 1992). Other research targets school leadership, teaching and learning practices, and as well ideas about future investigation in Native education (Cahape, 1993; Demmert, 2001; Demmert & Towner, 2003; Strang, von Glatz & Cahape Hammer, 2002; Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999).

Recommendations based on this research call for dramatic changes in the way Indigenous students are educated. These include: 1) examining educational processes that support and provide opportunities for students to fully participate in achieving individual and community goals; 2) focusing on research in public, private, and parochial schools because 90% of Native students attend these schools, yet studies primarily are conducted in BIA/Tribal grant/contract schools; 3) studying effective instructional practices (i.e., teaching approaches, models) and relationship building among teachers and Native students; 4) investigating effective school leadership and school improvement efforts; 5) examining partnership

building to improve schooling; 6) studying reform efforts to improve instructional practices in schools serving Native students; and 7) examining effects on student outcomes for culturally compatible curricula and culturally relevant learning environments. Yet these recommendations have rarely been implemented, have been greatly under-funded, and basically have been ignored, revealing a pattern of neglect of Native people on the part of federal and state programs (Demmert, 2001; Indian Nations At Risk Task Force, 1991; Strang, von Glatz, & Cahape Hammer 2002; Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999). This disregard also reflects persistent patterns of hegemonic dominance and oppression in the United States which impede movement toward more equitable and democratic education that supports Tribal Nations' sovereign rights. Furthermore, the advent of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001<sup>2</sup> has meant policy changes in the federal Title VII Bilingual Education Program<sup>3</sup> that undercut funding for bilingual curricula resources, professional development, and hiring of bilingual teachers for Native language and culture programs across U.S. Indigenous populations (see Aguilera & LeCompte, 2005).

We view the collection of articles in this special issue of the *Journal of American Indian Education* as particularly important in advocating for support of Native families, communities and activists committed to revitalizing and preserving Indigenous languages and cultures, especially given current ultra-conservative efforts to impose English-Only legislation on sovereign Indigenous nations and the general public. The articles expose patterns of outright discrimination by federal, state, and local government agencies and total disregard for federal laws and court-mandated regulation such as *Lau vs. Nichols* (1974) and the 1992 Native American Languages Act. These patterns include failure to use tax revenues in support of regenerating heritages and endangered languages across the nation.

The authors in this collection premise their research on the belief that Indigenous<sup>4</sup> students will respond better and learn more in schools that reflect their Native heritages in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessments, particularly through Indigenous language immersion education. In this special issue, three articles by Aguilera and LeCompte, Wilson and Kawaiyaeÿa, and Hermes identify language immersion models and describe social, cultural and demographic aspects of both the schools and communities. Another article by Yazzie-Mintz explores teachers' philosophical ideas about creating culturally appropriate learning environments for Native students based on the key components of culturally responsive education drawn from the research literature. Two articles by Lipka, Sharp, Adams, and Sharp, and Parker-Webster and Yanez examine the teaching and learning environments in Alaska schools using a newly created mathematics curriculum and instruction embedded in the principles of culturally responsive education. Another article by Nelson-Barber and Trumbull addresses issues concerning culturally responsive assessments, particularly in terms of how Native students' academic performance is measured—and adversely portrayed—using standardized assessments reflecting non-Indian middle and upper class culture and language.

One of the greatest educational needs in Native communities and schools is culturally-based classroom and community resources for acquiring and preserving Indigenous languages. In this collection, two articles describe studies targeting curriculum and instruction resources developed by the University of Alaska-Fairbanks' Project for Yup'ik-based Mathematic Modules called *Math in a Cultural Context* (MCC). The first (Lipka, Sharp, Adams, & Sharp) describes classroom instruction by one teacher and the learning practices of students in a geometry class based on the development of a culturally-based mathematic module called *Patterns and Parkas*. This module is then replicated by math teachers in seven schools. The second (Parker-Webster and Yanez) expands this research on the mathematics curriculum resources for teachers in schools serving Yup'ik students. It presents the work of several teachers in three schools. Both articles support the findings that students in these classrooms learned important mathematical concepts tied to the state's academic and cultural standards. These scholars propose that elders play a critical role in school communities to preserve language and cultural knowledge, particularly in the development of curriculum resources and as teachers in schools.

Understanding how culturally responsive education relates to academic performance is especially important to policy makers, educators, and constituents of educational programs and schools. Aguilera's and LeCompte's article provides a comparison of case studies examining three Indigenous communities' efforts to implement language immersion models, particularly those implemented and sustained from early childhood through high school grades. The article highlights the importance of these programs having Indigenous populations establish and control their educational systems, so as to support their notions of culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy. In these programs, the presence of fluent Native speakers, curriculum resources and materials for school communities, and sufficient funding resources were fundamental to the viability and longevity of language immersion schools.

Higher education institutions should also implement culturally responsive models, particularly with teacher preparation and licensing degree programs. Wilson and Kawai'ae'a describe the history and foundations of Hawaiian medium education, including preschool to advanced graduate degree levels in higher education. They describe the evolution of the University of Hawaii at Hilo Teacher Education Program, which is an exemplary language immersion model based on Native Hawaiian language and culture. These scholars highlight the process for developing such a model, including resolving legal barriers, grappling with all of the issues involved in identifying and developing linguistic and cultural resources, and building partnerships among private and public organizations. The article also describes trends in culturally responsive higher education systems and model development across Hawaii and in tribal colleges.

Hermes' case study describes her own experiences both as an administrator and teacher at the Ojibwe Language Immersion Charter School, implementing culturally based curricula and pedagogy in classrooms. She notes the importance

of valuing culturally responsive practices and curriculum resources by teachers as well as the challenges to implementing innovative and effective ways of teaching and learning cultural knowledge and language. Hermes' article is grounded in the notion that language immersion, as culturally responsive education, is key to Native students attaining both language fluency and academic success.

Another series of case studies (Yazzie-Mintz) examines schools where teachers are implementing culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy in their classrooms. Her article builds on research for describing and defining what constitutes culturally responsive pedagogy, how three Navajo teachers create conceptual constructs about Navajo-ness that will connect students to their Indigenous beliefs and cultural traditions in classrooms, and what these look like when three teachers and their students use them in teaching and learning practices. The article details fundamental differences and similarities among three teachers' theoretical and philosophical ideas about implementing culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum in schools serving Indigenous students. Yazzie-Mintz describes the interesting and diverse approaches these teachers use in their classrooms to integrate cultural standards based on individual and community goals for utilizing and preserving cultural knowledge, including the use of Dine' language as content.

Nelson-Barber and Trumbull examine the research literature pertaining to culturally responsive assessment and accountability systems for Native student populations. They address potential alternatives to current assessments used by schools and states to measure Indigenous student learning. Noting their own research in this area, they identify methods and strategies used by classroom teachers to better understand Native students' learning of content knowledge. These scholars pose questions about the lack of resources for professional development, the development of culturally-based assessment instruments and resource materials, and the implementation of all these components as part of a culturally responsive accountability system.

As a collection, these articles touch on many different issues concerning both the relevancy of culturally responsive education and trends in developing viable Indigenous models of education including utility of language immersion models and programs, legislative and policy issues, and identifying and accessing the community resources that provide the foundation for revitalizing and preserving Indigenous languages and cultural knowledge. We recognize that this research is not exhaustive, either of the problems which exist in schools serving Indigenous populations, or of viable resolutions to those problems. However, it is the hope of authors that their research will provide useful information about developing and implementing Indigenous models of education and assessment to interested parties.

These articles show high levels of effort in Native communities with respect to exploring how best to provide diverse educational options for students and families. The commitment of language and culture activists and educators to

making these inroads for Indigenous models of education is both compelling and exciting, and points to what could be a brighter future for Native youth. We encourage others who have a similar passion for improving the educational experiences of Indigenous students and their futures to join us in working to revitalize and preserve Native languages and cultures.

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### ENDNOTES

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<sup>2</sup>No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the legislation reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) can be found in Public Law 107-110 Title I Part A, section 1111. Retrieved March 12, 2007, from <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup>The list of reauthorizations of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 are: Bilingual Education Act, Pub. L. No. (90-247), 81 Stat. 816 (1968); Pub. L. No. (93-380), 88 Stat. 503 (1974); Pub. L. No. (95-561), 92 Stat. 2268 (1978); Pub. L. No. (98-511), 98 Stat. 2370 (1984); Pub. L. No. (100-297), 102 Stat. 279 (1988); (P.L. 103-382, Oct. 30, 1994.

<sup>4</sup>Indigenous is used to describe Native Hawaiian, American Indian, and Alaska Native populations in this introduction to the special issue.

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