

The Power of Place: Creating an Indigenous Charter School

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Recognition of the disproportionately high failure rate of American Indian students in local public schools caused Tribal officials to consider development of a reservation-based charter high school. Eagle High School opened its doors August 30, 2004. This article presents the findings of a two-year study, which examined the struggles of the school staff as they sought to provide a culturally rich environment and curriculum that would engage and challenge students academically. Cummins' (1992) theory of cultural differences provides a schema for discussion of the findings. Analysis of the issues raised by the study foregrounds the complexity of factors affecting both the development of a culturally grounded charter school and the achievement of students attending the school.

Introduction

Eagle High School (a pseudonym) opened its doors August 30, 2004. The establishment of the charter school was predicated on the local public schools' dismal record with American Indian students. Data gathered for the charter application showed that...

- 12% of 8th grade Native students, by the end of the third quarter, had either dropped out of school or had been suspended for failure to attend.
- More than 50% of 9th grade Native students had less than a C average.
- 63% of 11th grade Native students were failing.
- 58% of 12th grade Native students didn't have the grades to graduate.

When I heard about the start up of Eagle High School I was intrigued. I had not been a proponent of charter schools as they rarely seemed to live up to their promise (Bracy, 2005; Bulkley & Fisler, 2003; Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel & Rothstein, 2005); yet, Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) point out that "Native-operated charter schools represent one option for mediating the pressures of the standards movement and exerting local control" (p. 162). Being aware of American Indian/Alaska Native student lack of success in public schools, I

wondered if this reservation-based school grounded on Indigenous cultural values might really make a difference for the students. Having worked in an adult education program on a reservation in the Northwest and administered Title IV programs for Indian education in area public schools in the late 1970s and 1980s, I had maintained my interest in the educational fortunes of American Indian/Alaska Native students even as I moved on to higher education.

I met with the Charter Board of Directors for Eagle High School in early July, 2004 and gained permission to study and document the Tribes' development and operation of their school. The stated purpose of the study was to provide a historical record which could serve as a basis for evaluation of the school as well as documentation and analysis of policies and practices of a fledgling Indigenous charter school. The following is an account of my research on the first two years of Eagle High School's operation.

Indigenous Charter Schools

Charter schools are publicly funded. They "come in many varieties: they are shaped by a state's charter school law [and] by the motivations and capabilities of the charter school founders" (Dingerson, Miner, Peterson & Walters, 2008, p. xii). Many are designed to offer flexibility and creative teaching techniques to students who have trouble succeeding in traditional public schools (Renzulli, 2005). Some have been successful, many have not, and a number of states have revoked school charters or reduced funding to schools because of poor student achievement results and/or poor accountability (Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel, & Rothstein, 2005). However, the charter school movement continues to flourish, particularly in the development of Indigenous charter schools.

Indigenous schools (sometimes referred to as ethnocentric schools in the literature) may be described as schools whose mission is the promotion of the traditions and values of a tribal community with the goal of improving performance of students underserved by traditional schools (Buchanan & Fox, 2003). They have emerged in response to active suppression or, at the very least, benign neglect of Native cultural perspectives within the traditional Euro-centric public school curricula, and many incorporate Native languages and promote pedagogical practices that are congruent with the culture of the target population. "The hallmarks of these community-based institutions are autonomy from state public school standards and choice for students and parents. For American Indians/Alaska Natives, "they offer the opportunity to create and offer curriculums geared towards their cultures" (Tirado, 2001, p. 4). Eagle High School fits the profile of an Indigenous school with its focus on Native culture and language and effort to forge partnerships within the Tribal community. It also offers a comprehensive education program and assesses student progress with a State test in order to meet State benchmarks as well as State-mandated guidelines for charter schools. A local off-reservation public school district serves as the sponsoring agency for the school.

The School and Community

The site of the school is an Indian reservation in the Northwest. The reservation is located about five miles from a rural town that provides schooling for most American Indian children in the area. There is an early childhood, adult education, and language development center on the reservation. Eagle High School is housed in the former Tribal Community Center as well as a modular housing unit that was converted for instructional purposes. Both buildings are centrally located within a complex of buildings that contain the various departments and service agencies of the Tribal government. There are five classrooms, a computer lab, the main school office and offices for the principal and counselor, as well as a gym and small cafeteria. Across the parking lot is the language development center where several of the Native language classes are taught.

In its first year of operation Eagle High School had 48 students, grades 9-12; during the second year the school enrolled 60. Because this is a public school, there is no discrimination on who might attend. In 2005-06 school year, three of the sixty students were non-Indian and two of those students were foreign exchange students from South Korea. The school population also included at least eight students identified as “special needs.”

The school started with an administrator and clerk, four teachers (Language Arts/Health; Social Studies/Science; Art/Math; Native Language and Culture), and several Elders who taught two other Native languages, which are spoken on the reservation. State charter school guidelines allow up to 50% of the faculty to be uncertified. Of the four full time faculty, three were certified and were non-Indian. During the second year of operation, two of the non-Indian teachers left for personal reasons. They were replaced by two certified teachers, a non-Indian, who would teach language arts and writing, and a member from the local Tribe who had recently completed a master’s program in teaching and would teach social studies and leadership. Two additional teachers were hired to teach math, science, health, PE and life skills. Neither was certified but possessed experience and/or advanced degrees in their respective fields.

Pedagogical Foundations

There is considerable evidence to support the claim that when students’ culture and language are incorporated into the educational program, students are more successful in school (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; Kanu, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Powers, Potthoff, Beringer & Resnick, 2003). For most educational researchers and theorists, there is a tacit understanding that incorporation of culture goes deeper than a compensatory strategy of adding cultural units to the dominant curriculum. Rather, effective use of culture and language involves reconstructing curricula to reflect cultural values, historical perspectives, knowledge, and stories (Beaulieu, 2006; McCarthy, 1990; Mohatt, Trimble & Dickson, 2006). In a historical review of the intersection of culture and pedagogy, Tharp (2006) found

that the “most effective school pedagogies have been revealed by the study of Native American classrooms that use their traditional cultural patterns of activity and interaction” (p. 19). This approach also reinforces the concept of “power of place” (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). The traditions and values of the Tribal community are intimately tied to the land where the Tribes have lived, fished, and hunted for hundreds of years. The landscape provides a context for historical, geographical, and natural knowledge of the Tribal community and serves to define that community (Lapier & Farr, 2006). “Place-based educational practices have received wide-spread national support” (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005, p. 19) and recognition of this relationship of people and place is an important element in development of a culture-based educational program for Eagle High School.

Methodology

Procedures and Researcher Position

My research builds on other studies related to the exploration of the complexities associated with development and implementation of culture-based curricula in Native schools (Hermes, 2005; Lipka, 1998; Manuelito, 2005; McCarty, 2002; Peshkin, 1997). As I considered the fresh possibilities of a new school, the issues raised in these studies along with my experience working with Native students in public schools and on the reservation led to the question, which guided my study: What kind of education will transform and empower American Indian students to become successful learners?

I began the study of Eagle High School in the summer of 2004. Although my time at the school was limited during the first year of the study, I attended school board meetings and other school functions, interviewed school staff, and conducted numerous classroom observations. During my sabbatical in the fall of 2005 I volunteered at the school and had daily contact with students and staff for one semester. The balance of the year I periodically met with school staff and attended faculty in-service sessions and school functions. I employed ethnographic techniques to gather and analyze data. I kept written field notes on interviews, meetings, and observations; taped daily journal entries; and collected various school-related artifacts, such as school charter, student/parent and staff handbooks, school schedules, classroom handouts, etc.

This study is an interpretation of what was experienced and observed as filtered through my unique perspective as participant/observer. During the months that I worked alongside teachers in classrooms, served as lunchroom monitor, worked the snack bar during basketball games, and filled in for the school clerk, I was received warmly by school staff and students. I believe that my participation in all aspects of the school influenced their response to me. I was viewed not so much as a researcher, but as a colleague or teacher. However, I am not a member of the Tribal community, and my research methods and understandings are influenced by my position as an outsider as are the judgments and choices I made on what to observe or document. As Peshkin (2000) notes, “We unavoidably

interpret what we learn through the filters of our own lives, but we do this attuned to and informed by the ‘realities’ of those whose lives we strive to understand” (p. 19). Because of the relationships with school staff and students, I am fully aware that my interpretation of events may indeed affect “the interests and lives of the people represented” (VanMaanan, 1988. p. 5), and it is with this knowledge that I present my findings and as understandings, not explanations (Stake, 1995).

Data Analysis

Cummins (1992) in his theory of cultural differences provides a framework for examining the curriculum and pedagogical practices within a school that is culturally grounded. He identifies four factors that affect minority student success: incorporation of students’ language and culture in the curriculum; community participation in the school; motivational instruction; and broadened assessment that address contextual as well as cognitive processes. Review of the data produced a number of themes which were analyzed within the frames of Cummins’ theory. Field notes were checked with taped notes and interviews, and artifacts were analyzed in order to triangulate the data. The initial analysis was reviewed by the school administrator and a student researcher who transcribed the taped notes, helped organize the disparate pieces of raw data into categories, and provided a valued Native perspective on study findings.

This study though grounded in theory is intended to have a practical application. Invoking the “principle of reciprocity often found in Native communities” (Hermes, 2005, p. 47), it is anticipated that the recommendations emerging from analysis of study findings will generate further research questions that will continue to inform educational practices within the school.

Findings

Eagle High School’s mission statement reads: “[Eagle High School] is dedicated to recognizing an individual’s worth and dignity and mutual respect between all people. [It] will provide a new educational environment and unique curriculum to bridge educational, cultural, economic and social gaps.” For an Indigenous charter school, situated within a reservation community rich with cultural and language resources, it would seem that development of a culturally relevant academic program would be relatively easy. This proved not to be the case. That is not to say there were not successes; however, a number of factors conspired to confound the process. Cummins’ (1992) theory of cultural differences provides a schema for examining the efforts to move the school toward its goal of increasing educational opportunities for students through a culturally-based program. The following discussions, centered on each of Cummins’ four essential characteristics, provide a meta-analysis of the issues confronted by the staff and students as they worked to establish an Indigenous charter school on the reservation.

Incorporation of Students' Language and Culture

Studies have shown that for minority students who have not succeeded in school, incorporation of their cultural history and language improves their potential for academic success (Cummins, 1992). "Linking language revitalization and culture poses a tremendous opportunity for revitalizing the culture-based education movement" (Hermes, 2005, p. 52). From the early planning stages, the curriculum of Eagle High School was envisioned as culturally-based. During the first two years of operation, this took the form of integration of cultural values and issues into lessons, specific classes and activities dedicated to cultural traditions, and Native language classes. Each of these is described below.

Eagle High School's charter mandates compliance with State curricular goals; consequently, cultural content was to be integrated within traditional school subject matter. For example: language arts were to include Native languages and local myths; social studies, units on Tribal history and government; science, a study of salmon recovery; etc. When teachers did base their instruction on cultural topics, particularly those related to the reservation itself, they reported engagement and interest of students. The language arts teacher discussed the difference in student interest from their reading of "Romeo and Juliet," when she had difficulty involving students in the discussions, to when they read "Touching Spirit Bear," a text students could better relate to and enjoyed. The art teacher noted that "using Tribal history and culture as a basis for art projects encouraged students develop their own style," and the social studies teacher became aware of increased attendance and student engagement with units on civil rights and the Tribes' treaty. The science teacher reported that a field trip to a traditional hunting and fishing area gave students a sense of place and helped them "realize where they have been." While the success of these activities was encouraging, they remained, for the most part, unique lessons or isolated units that were not part of an overall plan of cultural integration.

The school also scheduled classes and activities specifically designed to reinforce cultural values and teach cultural competence and Native language proficiency. These actively involved students, but also brought their own set of problems. Each day began and ended with "protocol," a gathering of the school community designed to connect with students and discuss the day. The process of protocol is steeped in tradition with students lining up eldest to youngest, boys on one side, girls on the other, facing each other. School staff line up between the boys and girls, with men on the left, women on the right. Everyone has an opportunity to speak. This daily observance has produced several important learning opportunities, such as the day an Elder joined the group after a funeral on the reservation to explain the rituals surrounding a man or woman who loses a spouse. However, in spite of the sense of community and cultural grounding protocol is meant to engender, members of the faculty sometimes got distracted and missed the afternoon session and often about one third of the students didn't show up for the morning session. When asked why they missed protocol, students said, "it isn't a real part of the school day," and several complained that

teachers used the time to harangue students for classroom behavior or missed assignments.

A “culture class” was offered as an elective and focused on cultural crafts, drumming, and singing. The cultural instructor explained, “One of the things I am trying is to get students to take ownership—drum with me. [We] use [Native] language around the drum rather than written language.” And though there were some successes in “bringing students to the drum,” he expressed frustration at the reluctance of many students to actively participate in class activities. He noted that even though some students have been raised in traditional homes, they resisted his efforts to engage them, “It is not cool... [cultural interests] have to compete with mainstream society. It is a challenge to keep it appealing—it being an old style.” Also, some students, not raised in traditional homes, were intimidated by traditional activities. This apparent unease with some cultural activities was one of the reasons that the school required all students to attend a four-day Culture Camp during the last month of school. The purpose of the camp was to not only teach cultural values and skills, but to continue to build community within the school. Students learned tipi set up, flint knapping, fishing and hunting techniques, root digging, and the importance of sweat (a ceremonial, spiritual cleansing). Although most students were actively engaged in these traditional activities and some important connections were made among students and between students and staff, particularly during sweat, several students refused to take the teaching seriously and nearly one fifth of the student body did not attend.

Inclusion of Native languages as an integral part of the curriculum was seen as the cultural grounding of the school, and students were required to sign up for one of three Native language classes. The school’s cultural instructor taught one of the languages; the other two instructors came from the Tribal language program, which is separate from the school and essentially functions to preserve the Indigenous languages of the Tribes. Early on these instructors were Tribal Elders, but they found teaching to be more demanding and stressful than they had anticipated. They had no training on how to “teach” language in a classroom situation, “Language is ourselves. We are the textbooks; it was never written.” Also, several had difficulty with disrespect shown by some of the students. Midway through the second year, the Tribes received funding for language apprentices who took over the instructional responsibilities, freeing the Elders to serve in a resource capacity. A meeting with the Native language apprentices at the end of the school year highlighted frustrations with the language program’s participation in the school. Their issues included the disconnect between language and other instruction, lack of a language curriculum, students skipping class, interruptions from other activities, and many instances of miscommunication. Most of these concerns were shared by Eagle High School staff, and the principal acknowledged that while the school is “predicated on...Indian cultural values, and the base of all that is the language, there has just been this division and it [language program] has been sort of an add on.”

The linking of language and culture to traditional school subjects was a stated priority for the school, but unanticipated problems hindered successful integration. Attitudes of students toward cultural activities, poor communication and coordination between programs, and lack of teacher expertise with synthesis of cultural and subject matter knowledge caused this to be an area of concern throughout the two years of the study.

Community Participation in School

Eagle High School set out to establish itself as an integral part of the reservation community. That was the intent of the school board, which stated, “We envision the school as part of the community... We want to reach out to the community. It is important that the community sees the school as their school” (Field Notes, 7/23/04). However, Cummins (1992) warns of the difficulty in revising school’s traditional internal focus to beyond the classroom, “There are no easy formulas for implementing these changes; patience, ingenuity, and a spirit of committed experimentation are necessary” (p. 7).

The charter school application for Eagle High School proposed extensive involvement of community and parents in the operation of the school. It was anticipated that they would serve as mentors, school monitors, cultural experts, and teaching assistants, as well as serving on the school board or other school-related committees. Very little of this came about. In spite of the problems described earlier with the Tribal language program, the most successful community/school connections were made with that program and with the Tribal Department of Natural Resources whose staff provided the instruction at Culture Camp. Also, a few Tribal members did appear as guest speakers during the school year, but the school often had difficulty attracting and involving members of Tribal departments and community.

Parents and the general community actively supported the school’s athletic program by taking tickets and participating in the booster club; home basketball games were standing-room only. However, parent involvement in the school itself did not extend much beyond attendance at parent-teacher conferences and the participation of a few parents on the school board. Contrary to early expectations, no parents or community members served as mentors, classroom assistants, lunchroom monitors or even chaperones on field trips. The principal was pleased with the support for athletics but voiced frustration with the lack of active involvement of parents and the larger community in daily school activities, “How do we create the same kind of conditions as basketball [to involve parents]? The community places emphasis on basketball [but] not necessarily on homework.”

Instruction

“A pedagogical approach—how one chooses to teach—is just as important as what is taught in classrooms serving native students” (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007, p. 80). The traditional model of instruction in most high schools is a transmission model where the teacher transmits a codified body of knowledge and academic skills

to the student. Content is divided into separate categories, which are taught in isolation of one another. This is the antithesis of a more Indigenous or holistic approach to learning or understanding of the world, and may be, in part, the reason so many Indian students experience failure in public schools (Cajete, 1994; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). Cummins (1992) proposes an “experiential-interactive” model, which accommodates a more collaborative approach to learning.

Eagle High School’s principal envisioned project-based learning as an experiential-interactive model that would combine both a focus on culture as well as State-mandated benchmarks. Her ideal was that projects would be cross-disciplinary and individualized according to student needs and interests and would incorporate student generated questions as an organizing framework for each area of study, but application of this model was more complicated than first anticipated.

During the first year, teachers were hired so late that they had little time for planning and had no real idea how to implement project-based learning. Consequently, they tended to rely on instructional techniques, which were familiar and more teacher-centered in nature. The one exception was the art and math teacher who had a number of years experience working in alternative schools. He also had the advantage of visiting an Indigenous charter school where project-based instruction was being used. His visit, combined with his experience teaching in alternative classrooms, made him more knowledgeable about the project-based learning process and more open to divergent methods of teaching.

The second year, with three new teachers, the struggle with implementation of project-based learning continued. Attempts were made to begin the school year with a project focused on the upcoming vote on a Tribal referendum of selling alcohol on the reservation. It was a timely topic and of interest to students, but, again, limited planning time and teachers’ lack of knowledge and experience with project-based learning led to muddled goals, unsatisfactory student outcomes, and general frustration for both teachers and students. One teacher reflected, “The alcohol project would have worked [but] it happened so quickly... [we] pushed too fast, too hard.” This experience caused teachers to be hesitant about pursuing additional interdisciplinary projects, and for the rest of the year they tended to focus on their own subject area. Teachers did incorporate several projects within their own classrooms with some success; however, without the training and time necessary for cross-discipline planning, they lacked the confidence or energy to use project-based learning on a broader scale.

In the spirit of project-based instruction, the school instituted block scheduling of hour and a half classes designed to give students and teachers extended time to interact with subject matter; yet, it produced its own problems. Students had difficulty focusing for that length of time, and the language arts teacher noted: “[class] is scheduled every-other-day and things interrupt; I can’t count on continuity. If a student misses a day, she misses a lot.” Frequent interruptions to the school schedule by Tribal and school related events could be seen to correlate with students’ misbehavior and inattention in class.

The initial focus for Eagle High School, as described by a school board member, was “a college prep school where students will exceed standards.” But stating something doesn’t necessarily make it so, especially when the general student population has little knowledge of how to be successful in school. According to the principal, the first year was spent “deprogramming students from thinking they are failures.” A continual source of discussion among the teachers was concern over the balance between rigor of expectations in order to prepare students for college and flexibility of expectations because of the poor academic background of many of the students as well as the number of identified special needs students. One teacher lamented, “I struggle [because] I know project-based learning is smarter, but we are up against the test and getting the kids into college.” Midway through the second year students’ poor academic performance led the school to emphasize a focus on development of study skills versus content. The staff had come to the realization that until students learn how to learn, they would never be successful in acquiring the content. The “habits of mind” curriculum (Carter, Bishop, Block & Kravits, 2001) was introduced as the vehicle for development of those skills along with a greater emphasis on the process of learning.

Testing (assessment)

Historically, testing has served to support the perception that the cause of Indigenous students’ lack of academic success is the students themselves rather than a problematic curriculum (Cummins, 1992). “Competency is often assessed on predetermined ideas of what a person should know, which is then measured indirectly through various forms of ‘objective’ tests” (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005). Passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 has served to reinforce this view. “Standards and accountability are national obsessions that strike at the heart of Indigenous self-determination and minoritized community control. The very existence of Indigenous community schools depends on their compliance with standards that not only devalue Indigenous knowledge, but jeopardize children’s life chances by threatening to deny them a high school degree” (McCarty, 2002, p.198).

Students at Eagle High School are held to the same standards as other students throughout the state. In fact, Eagle High School’s charter states that the school “shall meet or exceed the Performance Benchmarks...if, in the District’s reasonable judgment, [Eagle High School] continues to fail to make adequate yearly progress towards any benchmark in two consecutive years, the District may begin the termination procedures set forth in this Contract.” This placed enormous pressure on the school to “teach to the test” and focus on traditional content rather than Indigenous knowledge. In spite of this focus, 79% of students tested did not pass the State assessment.

The teachers were both disappointed over the test results and angry with the emphasis placed on them. They were painfully aware that standardized measures were “not a good measure of student success,” much less knowledge

of culture and Native languages, and they worked to identify assessment instruments that would measure individual gains large and small, using outcome-based measures, proficiencies gained. Their dilemma over assessment reflected their concern for the needs and abilities of the students, their concern for the academic rigor of the curriculum, and their concern for the survival of the school itself.

Discussion

The first two years of operation of Eagle High School have not been easy. The principal noted that losing and replacing over half of the teaching staff the second year made it seem as if she was starting over. Certainly this turn over in staff set back the anticipated progress of the school as did the lack of a reasonable start-up period. Eagle High School opened less than two months after the principal was hired and less than one month after rest of the staff were on board. In their review of charter schools in New Mexico, Casey, Andreson, Yelverton, and Wedeen (2002) found that, "there is more to starting and running a charter school than is apparent to most founders...Nothing is in place at the start-up of a charter school, and what must be created has taken decades to evolve in public schools" (p. 519). They recommend charters be granted for six-year periods rather than the five-year norm in order to allow an extra year for planning and start-up activities. This would have made a tremendous difference for Eagle High School.

An extra year would have allowed for broader recruitment of teachers and, perhaps, fewer turnovers. It also would have allowed time for curriculum planning. The principal noted, "[We] really needed a year to get everything in place. A lot of time was spent making up for the lack of planning time." Integration of culture and academic content proved less than successful during those first two years. Staff turnover and inexperience working within the framework of an Indigenous school contributed to this. The teachers were knowledgeable in their subject areas and comfortable preparing traditional academic lessons, but most were ill-prepared to incorporate cultural values, history and knowledge into academic courses, nor did they have training or the background to implement project-based learning across disciplines. Staff turnover also meant that there was no history or relationship established among the teachers as they began their planning. With no curricular guides, the process of designing a culturally relevant curriculum that incorporated State standards for every class was a daunting task. Working together on developing learning projects became impossible as everyone struggled within their own subject areas.

One of the attractive features of most charter schools is liberation from tired or unsuccessful structures and routines; however, uncertainty on how to address the dual purposes of the school led teachers to fall back on the familiar, inserting bits of culture into an essentially traditional subject-centered school framework. Short training sessions and in-service days scheduled throughout the year offered some encouragement and fresh ideas for teachers, yet the sessions were never long enough or comprehensive enough to effect change. Concern for the requirement

within the school's charter that students must meet or exceed State benchmarks further complicated the curricular and pedagogical decisions facing the teachers. Teachers vacillated between imposing rigorous academic expectations on students and cajoling them into completing coursework. Also, attempts at alternative pedagogical approaches were often resisted by students who pressed for routines (worksheets, teacher directed lessons) that may not have served them well in their earlier education but were less demanding of them. One teacher admitted, "[We] tried to improve rigor rather than bring students along. [It was] easy to slide back into what is familiar and cave into the students." The ambiguity of curricular structure, academic expectations, and lack of consequences for inattention contributed to student reluctance to take responsibility for their learning.

The problems experienced coordinating with the Native language program seemed to stem from several factors. The existence of the language program as a separate entity set up a physical (separated by the parking lot) and communication barrier between the program and the school that caused multiple misunderstandings. Also, Native language program teachers were on a different work schedule from the school and not included in school staff meetings, teacher in-services, or planning sessions. It is possible that because the Native language program is generally recognized by all as the core of cultural teachings and Indian identity, the existence of it outside the scope of Eagle High School's curriculum may have contributed to the lack of student respect for their language teachers as well as other cultural aspects of the school program. As McCarty (2002) notes, "Even for children whose parents endeavor to transmit the heritage language, the forces of a racially compartmentalized world persuade may young people that it is better—and easier—to speak English and "be White"" (p. 188).

The pride in the school by the community was undeniable. During registration and at meetings with teacher parents expressed their appreciation for a school that recognized the individual needs of their children, "This is so cool for my kid...At [Eagle High School] teachers have time for these kids." Several commented that their children would not have stayed in school if they hadn't enrolled in Eagle High School. Tribal leaders honored the school by inviting students and staff to represent the Tribes at several State meetings. However, opportunities for direct community (and parent) involvement in the school were minimal. This probably should come as no surprise. Parent and community involvement in public schools usually takes place in formal, organized activities such as a PTA activities, attending sports events, science fairs, and parent/teacher conferences. Rarely is the community invited to be an integral part of a school. As Cummins (1992) noted, it is difficult to develop a different standard of involvement even when included in school plans. Eagle High School planned to use community members as cultural resources and mentors and parents as volunteers at the school. However, just getting the school up and running took precedence over concentrated efforts for community outreach. With no real mechanism for recruiting and incorporating parents into school operations, active parent/community involvement did not happen.

Situating the discussion of Eagle High School within Cummins' (1992) theory of cultural differences proves useful in understanding the growing pains experienced by the school during its first two years. What is missing from Cummins' theory is the element of relationships—relationships between the students and their environment or “place” and relationships between students and teachers. (Note: In more recent work, Cummins (2000) does make this connection central to his concept of “transformative pedagogy” which incorporates a collaborative instructional approach and a focus on student experiences.) “To put it simply, Indigenous means ‘to be of a place’... Indigenous people represent a culture emergent from a place and they actively draw on the power of that place physically and spiritually” (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001, p. 31). Locating the school within the environment of the reservation provided a linkage between the school or “external institution” (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005, p. 21) and home for most of the students. They were surrounded by the familiar and the sacred. And, though limited in these first two years, students were afforded opportunities to connect their studies with local traditions and knowledge. The context of the school became closer to the context of their lived experience.

Nearly all school staff succeeded in establishing positive relationships with students despite the problems they experienced seeking appropriate curricula, discovering effective pedagogical practices, and connecting with parents and the community. “Learning is embedded in relationships” within Native traditions, and is not “abstracted from the knower and seeker” (Hermes, 2005, p.51). There was evidence of the strong relationships teachers forged with students: students teasing the social studies teacher when she got something wrong in the language class that she attended with the students; students bestowing the esteemed title “grandmother” on the language arts teacher. Students seemed to know that staff members genuinely cared for them as individuals. Teachers identified “relationships” as a major strength of the school. As one teacher noted, “The heart connection is so important. Students know you care.” And, a student remarked to the principal, “I have never talked to a principal without being in trouble.” For many students this was the first time they established relationships with their teachers, much less their principal. Both the human and environmental relationships were powerful forces that helped carry the school forward.

Conclusion

It is imperative to consider that the Indian is, for the time being, better off in his own world than in another. His is the only world in which he has a fighting chance. Certainly the Indian cannot remain indefinitely isolated; that is neither possible nor desirable. When the Indian no longer needs the reservation he will leave it of his own accord. (Momaday, 1997, p. 73)

This is the premise on which Eagle High School was founded. The evidence of American India/Alaska Native youths' lack of academic success in off-reservation public schools is overwhelming, both locally and nationally (Ward, 2005). The purpose of Eagle High School is to help Native students develop the confidence

and skills necessary for their future as Tribal leaders and necessary for them to function in the society beyond the boundaries of the reservation, should they so choose. The study outlined above foregrounds the complexity of establishing Eagle High School as an Indigenous charter school as it worked to develop a learning environment that would transform and empower Indian students to be successful learners.

Indigenous charter schools are characterized by their culture-based curricula, connection to community, incorporation of Native language(s), and a purpose that includes not only academic achievement, but also cultural competence and preservation (Buchanan & Fox, 2003). Eagle High School incorporated all of these elements in its proposed design, but struggled with the actual implementation. The principal had a clear vision of positioning the school within the cultural framework of the Tribes, but the actual involvement of the community and creation of a new, “contextualized, culturally relevant, and authentic” (Hicking-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003, p. 16) learning environment was uncharted territory for most of the staff, students, parents, and Tribal community. The learning curve was much steeper than anyone had anticipated, and the unexpected barriers of staff turnover, organization and communication issues provided additional challenges.

The instructional struggles of the first two years of the school relate to attempts at encapsulating elements of local Indigenous culture and language into academic disciplines of existing school frameworks. Rather than opening the door to Native ways of knowing, this approach perpetuated the hegemony of Western epistemology (Patrick, 2008). It served to narrow and diminish the concept of culture to create a pretense of culturally-based learning. The tension created in that narrowing process may help explain the problems experienced by classroom and language teachers when they attempted to incorporate cultural values and interests into academic lessons or tried to teach culture and language as isolated, compartmentalized, subjects. Culture had become institutionalized, stripped of its power and meaning (Hermes, 2005).

In her study the Ramah Navajo High School, Manuelito (2005) found that grounding of education in Indigenous epistemologies was integral to developing “capable, self-determined individuals and members of strong Indian nations” (p. 84). Eagle High School is seeking to regroup its curricular focus. It will be experimenting with a different instructional model in the next several years. The staff has borrowed a curricular design from an Alaskan Native charter school and adapted it to fit local cultural values. The adapted model has twelve culturally-based themes that will serve as the framework for the school curriculum in combination with the habits of mind. Academic content will be taught within those themes. Native language instruction will overlay all areas and serve as “connective tissue” for the entire curriculum. This approach is designed to “bridge the artificial gap between academic and cultural curriculum” (Hermes, 2005, p. 53). The focus of instruction will be on process as much as outcomes, and by doing so will, hopefully, create spaces for community and parent involvement.

The strength and potential success of any culturally-based model resides in the school climate, the quality of the instruction, and involvement of parents/community (Powers et al., 2003). The school climate of respect for cultural traditions, caring, and trust as established by a connection to the reservation, a “place of memory” (Peshkin, 1997, p. 9) for the Tribes, and positive student/teacher relationships certainly provides a base on which to implement the new culturally-based curriculum. However, teachers (including language teachers) will need time dedicated to discussing, planning and collaborating in order to open “a place in which historically silenced knowledge of indigenous peoples...is privileged alongside traditional academic discourses” (Lipka, et al., 2005, p. 369) and to develop the quality of instruction that will ensure success of the new curricular model. Also, special attention to active recruitment and design of programs or activities for parent and community involvement will be necessary to ensure their meaningful and fruitful participation (Buchanan & Fox, 2003; Ward, 2005). Finally, critical to the success of this new culturally-grounded instructional model as well as the continued existence of the school’s charter will be consistently high teacher expectations and academic rigor necessary for students to meet the State benchmarks.

Will this be the kind of education that will lead to student transformation and empowerment? Cajete (1994) suggests that is a distinct possibility:

[An Indigenous education] destigmatizes the Indian learner from being disadvantaged and the educator from being the provider of aid...The educator enters the cultural universe of the learner and no longer remains an outside authority. By co-creating a learning experience, everyone involved generates a critical consciousness and enter into a process of empowering one another. With such empowerment, Indian people become enabled to alter a negative relationship with their learning process (p. 219).

It is as Lipka (1998) describes, “[a] concept of culturally negotiated schooling” (p. 197).

Should students begin to develop a cultural competence as well as achieving academically, then Eagle High School might well be on its way to meeting the goals set out in its charter school application. One of the school’s important achievements is that American Indian students are no longer ‘invisible’ as in their previous schools where they could disappear and their absence was never questioned. They are known here; they are valued here; it is where they belong. As one parent stated at a school board candidate forum, “This school is different because it is a community school and the school is set up to acknowledge who these children are—help them understand who they are—not make them fit one mold.” Eagle High School’s effort to link the institution of school to “place” is aimed at developing a solid cultural context for learning where American Indian students may actually have a chance to claim identities as serious students. It is an important goal, an imperative goal, but, as has been shown, not an easy one to achieve.

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