

# SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP FOR AMERICAN INDIAN SOVEREIGNTY: A MODEL FOR PRINCIPAL PREPARATION

David Henderson, Montana State University  
William Ruff, Montana State University  
Jioanna Carjuzaa, Montana State University

*Abstract:* The Indian Leadership Education and Development project (ILEAD) at Little Bighorn Tribal College and Montana State University did not begin with an intentional focus on social justice; this article tracks the evolution of the program to becoming a model for indigenously sensitive/culturally responsive preparation for K-12 school leaders.

Beginning with a U.S. Department of Education grant in 2006 and after three iterations, the program has trained over 70 American Indian school administrators serving Montana, South Dakota, North Dakota and Wyoming.

Despite the program's success in preparing school leaders for historically underserved reservations and other schools across Indian country, the program has not achieved success without significant transformation from a dominant society, western academy, typical educational leadership program to becoming a program sensitive to Indigenous ways of being/ knowing but actually honoring and recognizing how these American Indian ontologies/epistemologies made the program stronger for all students - Indian and non-Indian.

## Introduction

The Indian Leadership Education and Development (ILEAD) project is designed to recruit, educate, certify and induct American Indian educators to effectively lead schools and school systems. It would be wonderful to write that the ILEAD project began with a purposeful vision for social justice and an effective action plan. Unfortunately, the first glimpse of that social justice vision only began to unfold after the first year of program implementation. The most accurate description of how ILEAD began fits best within the “garbage can model of organizational choice” (Cohen, March and Olson, 1972).

In this model, several problems freely floated independent of a stream of potential solutions,

just waiting for problems to surface, all of which were independent from the political will necessary to get anything done. One evening in a hotel bar, an American Indian school superintendent and two university faculty members contemplated what it might take to make the world a better place. In the solutions stream was a geographically-based graduate cohort model, partnerships between the university and the school district, and problem or field-based leadership instruction. In the problems stream was a revolving door of school leaders entering and leaving isolated rural schools stalling out the potential for meaningful school improvement. Hampered access to high quality graduate courses and professional development for rural communities because of distance and severe winter weather that starts in October and continues through May was another issue that freely floated in the problems stream. Within the same week, one of the faculty members saw a request for proposals (RFP) for a multi-year professional development grant. The RFP opportunity and subsequent award of a 1.2 million dollar, 4-year grant integrated the problems, solutions, and political will necessary for action. That action was the birth of the ILEAD project.

So, the initial conception of ILEAD was as a school improvement project slowing the revolving door of school leaders, especially in Indian country, enough for school improvement efforts to be implemented and providing educational access to graduate education for educators living in remote communities. But before we delve too deeply in the details of the ILEAD program and its significant impact, it's important we describe Indian education in general

and contextualize Indian Education for All in Montana and how it's become a bellwether for increasing social justice through culturally responsive pedagogy.

### OUR MONTANA CONTEXT

Montana, which is located in the high plains and Rocky Mountains of the West is larger than Japan and it can take more than a day to cross the state by car. We share a border with three Canadian provinces. Our only city, Billings, stretches over 32 miles and has just over 100,000 inhabitants; only four additional towns have a population greater than 35,000: Missoula, Great Falls, Bozeman, and Butte-Silver Bow.

Nonetheless, even though the 2010 Resident Population Estimate did not reach the million mark, the American Indian population in Montana is substantially higher than the national average. The first inhabitants were American Indians and today, 12 tribal nations call Montana home: Assiniboine, Blackfeet, Chippewa, Cree, Crow, Gros Ventre, Kootenai, Little Shell, Northern Cheyenne, Pend d'Oreille, Salish, and Sioux. Montana has seven Indian Reservations each of which is a sovereign nation and supports a Tribal College. In addition, the Little Shell Band of Chippewa Indians who are landless, call northern and central Montana home.

According to the 2010 Census, the percentage of American Indians in Montana was 6.5% (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2013). This is much larger than the national average of only 1.2%. In comparison to other states, then, Montana's American Indian population is sizable and, in fact, growing. For the 2012-2013 academic year, the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) reported the American Indian K-12 student population in Montana to have increased to 13.5% (OPI, 2013), more than ten times the national average for American Indian students in K-12 classrooms.

According to State Superintendent of Education, Denise Juneau (Mandan/Hidatsa), only 6 percent

of Montana's school districts have student populations greater than 500, while 54 percent have enrollments of fewer than 100 (McNeil, 2009). Approximately 92 percent of all American Indian and Alaska Native candidates across the U. S. and in Montana attend regular public schools (U. S. Department of Education, 2011). In Montana, American Indian youth attend regular public schools on or near reservations with high concentrations of other American Indian students. In fact, in 58 public schools in the state, the American Indian student population is between 75-100%, 17 report 50-75% American Indian students and 37 report 25-50% American Indian students (OPI, 2013). Of the non-reservation school districts with a 50-100% American Indian student population, 27 of 62 did not meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals while 66% of the school districts on the seven reservations across the state did not meet AYP.

In fact, many American Indian students are not successful in their respective learning communities and a staggering 50% of American Indian students in Montana, as is the case nationally, do not graduate high school. To address these inequities, Indian Education for All (IEFA), an unprecedented state constitutional reform effort 40 years in the making, inspires educators to become more culturally inclusive in their classrooms and communities. In addition, "In 2007, the Montana State Legislature passed a statute, Montana Code Annotated (MCA) 20-9-33-, appropriating \$200 per American Indian child, totaling over \$3 million dollars per year, to provide funding to school districts for the purpose of closing the educational achievement gap that exists between American Indian students and non-Indian students." (OPI, 2013, p.1).

In addition to low academic achievement associated with these American Indian schooling contexts, what is noteworthy here is that, wherever American Indian students attend public school and whether their classmates are Indian or

non-Indian, they are unlikely to have an American Indian teacher.

#### ADDRESSING THE CULTURAL MISMATCH

A lot has been written about the cultural mismatch between the increasingly diverse K-12 student population and what is described as a teaching corps made up primarily of white, middle class, females in the U.S. At the inception of the I LEAD program in 2006 there were only twelve licensed American Indian school leaders in Montana and only 2% of the K-12 teachers were American Indians (OPI, 2013). It is our task then, to prepare our educators to be culturally competent and to meet the academic and social needs of ALL of our students. In Montana, that means making sure all school personnel know about American Indians' unique histories, cultures and contemporary issues, as well as their contributions to core curricular areas.

"Most non-Indians don't know a great deal about the first peoples of the Americas, but what's worse is that much of what they do 'know' is wrong" (Fleming, 2006, p. 213). IEFA benefits Indian students in several ways: by reducing anti-Indian bias resulting from a lack of knowledge, by enriching instruction through cultural relevance, and by instilling pride in cultural identity. Pewewardy (1998a) claims, "Enhancing the self-concept of American Indian learners is essential to their effective education. Helping learners recognize their heritage and giving them a sense of belonging as well as a sense of their uniqueness as American Indians are equally essential" (p. 11).

As Fleming (2006) points out, American Indians are the most misunderstood and most isolated of all cultural groups. Although there are over 563 distinct tribal nations across the United States, stereotypes and pan-Indianism abound. Pewewardy (1998b) observes that because many teachers grew up with stereotypical and often-times racist imagery and messages regarding American Indians, it is sometimes difficult for

teachers to become culturally responsive educators. Congresswoman Carol Juneau (Mandan/Hidatsa) explained, "Indian people have understood for a great many years that it is only by educating our young people that we can reclaim our history and only through culturally responsive education that we will preserve our cultural integrity" (2006, p. 217).

#### SELF-DETERMINATION AND INDIAN EDUCATION

The spirit of self-determination and the U.S. governmental shift in dealing with Indian sovereignty began with the advent of legislation such as the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 and culminated with the Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968 and the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA) of 1975. Prior to and during the decades between these pieces of legislation, the U.S. history of Indian interaction has ranged from a long-standing policy toward Indian people and culture of genocide and paternalism to cultural colonization, assimilation, dismissal, and extinction. As American Indian author, theologian, historian, and activist Vine Deloria, Jr. has long suggested and as President Nixon stated upon the passing of the ISDEAA in 1975: "The time has come to break decisively with the past and to create the conditions for a new era in which the Indian future is determined by Indian acts and Indian decisions" (Utter, 2001, p. 269).

These federal shifts in Indian policy were influenced by overall civil rights actions throughout the 1950s and 60s but ultimately by Indian activists fighting for these changes.

As Indian sovereignty has evolved and grown, Indian education has as well resulting in programs throughout Indian country that have been developed with an increasing deference to Indian tribal leader design and implementation. The ILEAD Program has embraced this approach and has tried with all due diligence to honor Indian cultures, and tribal leadership has played

a key role in the design and implementation of the program. Indian activists such as Deloria have “pushed Indigenous people to achieve self-governance, but he advocated change through education rather than through violence” (Author & Fennimore-Smith, 2010, p. 4).

## INDIAN EDUCATION

The visionary Crow Chief Plenty Coups knew the importance of being educated. As he once famously said to his people, “Education is your most powerful weapon. With education, you are the white man's equal; without education, you are his victim, and so shall remain all your lives” (Little Big Horn College, 2009). Although Indians have always valued education, what they have encountered in the Western educational system is the colonization of their minds and identity. The system is designed to promote socialization and adherence to Western values, beliefs, and traditions. The brutality of this indoctrination process is well documented. Unfortunately, Indigenous pedagogies which are community-based, which are holistic, and which highlight the reciprocal relationship between teaching and learning, differ greatly from the Western philosophy on education. (Author & Fennimore-Smith, 2010). The incongruence between these two pedagogical approaches has had a negative impact on Indian students since the Boarding School era. The hegemony of Western educational policies and practices explains the compliance of Indigenous peoples to the educational system that in effect has enforced their own oppression (Smith, 2005).

“The exclusion of Indians from America’s story also excludes them from a prominent place in our collective understanding of the American ‘we’” (Starnes, 2006, p. 186). In this way, generations graduated from the educational system with little knowledge regarding American Indians and their contribution to America’s story. This enigma was echoed by multicultural education theorist James Banks at the IEFA Best Practices Conference in Bozeman, Montana: “In order to endorse the national culture, people must see themselves reflected and valued within that culture. We must make all children feel included in our national identity” (personal communication, 2007).

There has been a long history of culturally inappropriate services being pushed on Indian communities. Although there is no one proven formula for successful reform of Indian education, it is clear it must involve the entire school system, as well as American Indian leaders. “Individual teachers can do phenomenal things, but nothing (in education is going to change systematically) ... until power is shared”, says Julie Cajune (Salish), director of American Indian education for the Ronan Public Schools on the Flathead Reservation. Montana is crafting a unique approach to school reform by recognizing tribal sovereignty, partnering with tribes, honoring self-determination, and promoting economic development (Boyer, 2006).

## INDIAN EDUCATION FOR ALL

Montana educators have legal, instructional, and ethical obligations to teach all Montanans, Indians and non-Indians alike, about the unique histories and cultures of the state’s first inhabitants. Statewide collaborations between Indians and non-Indians help educators fulfill that obligation. The Indian Education for All (IEFA) Act in Montana, a state constitutional mandate and law, requires educators to integrate American Indian content in all instruction. IEFA is for *all* students, as Montana’s Superintendent of Public Instruction, Denise Juneau (Mandan/Hidatsa) asserts: “This constitutional, ethical, and moral obligation, known as Indian Education for All, is not only for Indian students; in fact, its principal intent is that non-Indian students gain a richer understanding of our State’s history and contemporary life” (Juneau, 2006, p. 3).

In 1972, the delegates of the Constitutional Convention included language in the state’s constitution specific to preserving the cultural integrity of Montana’s 12 tribal nations. Article X, Section 1 (2) pledged, “The state recognizes the distinct and unique cultural heritage of American Indians and is committed in its educational goals to the preservation of their cultural integrity” (Mont. Const. art. X, §1).

The constitutional language was finally codified in 1999 when the Legislature passed MCA 20-1-501, now known as Indian Education for All (IEFA). It requires that “every Montanan ... whether Indian or non-Indian, be encouraged to learn about the distinct

and unique heritage of American Indians in a culturally responsive manner. ... all school personnel should have an understanding and awareness of Indian tribes to help them relate effectively with Indian students and parents. ... Every educational agency and all educational personnel will work cooperatively with Montana tribes ... when providing instruction and implementing an educational goal" (MCA. tit. 20, ch.1, pt. 5 § 1, 1999).

American Indian-inclusive content stands to reduce the cultural dissonance Indian students feel between home and school environments, easing their alienation and encouraging staying in as opposed to dropping out, and, in this way, affecting what has been a persistent achievement gap. A hopeful comment from a member of the Little Shell Chippewa tribe of Montana expresses this new possibility:

I think Indian Education for All...will help our children understand who they are, take pride in their identity, and see that they have possibilities and opportunities. When I was in school, we didn't talk about being Indian. If we could, we kept it secret. That was a way to get along. But with IEFA, our children won't have to do that. They will see themselves in school. They will know that their classmates are learning important things about them. (Hopkins, 2006, p. 207)

The growing success of this unique legislation has depended on adequate funding, collaboration with tribal partners, active state leadership, and a long-term commitment to professional development. More important, though, is the willingness of educators to engage in the demanding, but often profound, endeavor of becoming culturally responsive. IEFA recognizes a continuum of awareness, promotes an environment of respect, empathy, and cultural sensitivity, and "is a hopeful indicator of the changing paradigm of public education; rather than aiming to inculcate nationalism through a culturally homogenized curriculum, IEFA attempts to strengthen democracy by fostering relationships and including multiple perspectives" (Author, Jetty, Munson, & Veltkamp, 2010, p. 197).

Indian Education for All exemplifies tenets shared in myriad definitions of multicultural education. Neither a prescribed curriculum nor an add-on program, IEFA is a comprehensive approach to be infused in every

aspect of education. By challenging and confronting misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes about American Indians, educators effect social change by making curriculum more inclusive of all groups (Banks, 1998).

### THE 4 R'S + 1

Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) identified four requirements for promoting more equitable relationships and interactions between Indian and non-Indian educators in education. These include: respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility. Another key factor, relationality, is emphasized by Indigenous educators who honor the significance of relationships (Deloria & Wildcat, 1998; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008).

Kirkness and Barnhardt's (1991) research provides a template which can be used for negotiating inequities within the education system. Their study sought to transform the relationship between First Nations/American Indian students and the faculty, staff, and administrators in higher education across Canada and the United States. It focused on the mismatch of perspectives and the effect on pedagogical practices. Their findings are applicable to preparing classroom teachers and school leaders in the K-12 system.

#### RESPECT

Smith (2005) poses the question, "What is respect...? What does respect entail at a day-to-day level of interaction" (p. 97)? With this query, she is teasing out the complexities embedded in cross-cultural interactions and understandings. Respect for the individual...may have been considered a social norm..., but these ethical codes tend to inscribe as truth a single perspective of morality (Lincoln & Cannella, 2009). Good intentions can be inadequate; concern for the rights and well-being of individuals may ignore the communal nature of Indigenous cultures and the values and responsibilities of individuals within these social structures.

#### RELEVANCE

Learning from Indigenous perspectives implies an acknowledgement of the value of Indigenous knowledge and listening to what is important in Indigenous perspectives. Historically, this was never recognized. Indigenous knowledge has “been viewed by Euroculture as inferior and primitive” (Kinchloe & Steinberg, 2008, p.136). Sequestering Indians on reservations, legislation such as the *Dawes Allotment Act* (1887) and the *Termination Act* (1953), and placement of Indigenous children in boarding schools are evidence of a concerted effort toward destruction of Indigenous cultures and assimilation to American values (Cajete, 2008; Grande, 2008). Any consideration of Indigenous knowledge has been to regard it as “peculiarly local” (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 134). Indigenous knowledge has been relegated to a lower, more provincial status—an alternative knowledge that is marginalized within general society, and certainly within the academy. Additionally, study of Indigenous knowledge has often resulted in romanticization of traditions and customs

#### RECIPROCITY

Reciprocity within our schools implies a give-and-take within the education process that has largely been absent in Western pedagogy:

For those imbued in privilege, to know someone is to expect them to reveal themselves, to tell themselves, to give up their sovereignty, while at the same time shielded by their privilege, never having to show their own bloodstains, track marks, piling bills, or mismatched socks (Fine, Tuck, & Zeller-Berkman, 2008, p. 169).

It is an issue of power. The power differential is determined by whose knowledge is valued, who determines the importance of ideas, and who determines the rules for procedures for examining knowledge. Dismantling or interrogating this power differential requires an examination of the purposes—who initiates and who benefits—and clarification of institutional policies and procedures that inform protocols. Reciprocity

within an educational context demands collaboration, interchange of ideas, sharing power, learning *from* the other. Hermes (1997) defines the concept of reciprocity as “going back and forth between the problem, the practice, and the community” (p. 23).

Overcoming the power differential through a dialogic process may move participants to disregard or downplay differences in a movement toward shared understandings, which leads to a spirit of unity. Recognition of ever present issues of power and privilege are necessary for the educator to successfully engage in truly collaborative and reciprocal teaching-learning.

#### RESPONSIBILITY

The concept of responsibility rests with both the Indigenous community and with educators. Indigenous communities have realized that they can’t depend on the school system to protect their cultural traditions, values, and knowledge. The school system values Western perceptions of the world and conceptions of knowledge as frames for educating youth and maintaining the status quo (Smith, 1999). “Indigenous peoples must control their own knowledge and retain a custodial ownership that prescribes from the customs, rules, and practices of each group” (Battiste, 2000, p. 136). Many Indigenous communities are taking responsibility for defining their own educational goals within the community. Assuming control of the education process enables guidance of the purposes of education to the benefit of the community, as well as protecting the community from inappropriate practices and commodification of Indigenous knowledge (Author & Fenimore-Smith, 2010).

The most important responsibility for educators is a willingness to learning *from* rather than *about* Indigenous peoples. This creates opportunities for a reconceptualization of the education process that recognizes issues of sovereignty, identity, culture, and place (Lincoln & Cannella, 2009;

Mihesuah, 1998). Educators are also responsible for ethical use of knowledge that has been entrusted to them. This translates into providing a venue for Indigenous voice as well as a critical examination of the systems and discourses that continue to promote colonization.

#### RELATIONALITY

Many Indigenous scholars emphasize the importance of relationships, not just current human relationships, but the connection Indigenous peoples have to their ancestors, the future generations, nature, and to the land (Author & Fenimore-Smith, 2010). Deloria, Deloria, Foechner, and Scinta (1999) explain that relying on our interconnectedness as a methodological tool for obtaining knowledge “means that we observe the natural world by looking for relationships between various things in it” (p.34). Full implementation of IEFA involves collaboration with the entire school staff, relationships with tribal members, and continued work to create policy change.

Successful relationships between public schools and tribes depend on individuals’ willingness to share information and make sometimes uncomfortable forays into unfamiliar territory. Anger, fear, indifference, or resistance may arise from a significant historical context that, if recognized and respected, can facilitate greater understanding.

Relationality is key in Indian country. Relationships in the twenty-first century world often rely on reports, contracts, email, and other forms of *impersonal* transactions. In contrast, American Indians place a high value on long-standing *personal* relationships and oral communication. Opportunities for misunderstandings abound between these two value systems, worldviews, and operating cultures. Even though misunderstandings and disappointment are inevitable in any relationship, they are likely to surface more frequently in a relationship challenged with

cultural differences, power imbalances, and very different communication styles.

When Wilson (2008) polled his colleagues, “Several stated that the relational way of being was at the heart of what it means to be Indigenous” (p. 80). He emphasized that the sharing and participation that relationship building entails is an important aspect of Indigenous life. When Linda Tuhiwai Smith was interviewed, she described introductions in this way, “In our culture we begin by introducing ourselves by naming our geography, where we come from, then our ancestral lines, and then finally we name the people” (Smith et al., 2002, p. 169).

The four Rs, as discussed here, are practices that provide entry to the relationship building process between an educator and Indigenous community; however, it is relationality that will allow both parties to create intimate, on-going relationships and is the key to building trust and understanding and embracing Indigenous ways of knowing. According to Wilson (2008), if Indigenous ways of knowing have to be narrowed through one particular lens (which he emphasizes it certainly does not), then surely that lens would be relationality. In fact, the key to being included has more to do with how well you have connected with members of that community than the work you have done in the past. As Wilson has observed, “the relational way of being was at the heart of what it means to be Indigenous” (2008, p. 80). The most important lesson learned by the faculty and university staff was that relationality lay at the heart of I LEAD’s success.

#### I LEAD PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The true potential for I LEAD as a meaningful social justice project was not understood until the project was in its second year of implementation. Toward the end of the first year of the first I LEAD cohort, a vacancy occurred at one of the high schools in a American Indian community. One of our I LEAD candidates was hired for the

Principal position at that high school. It is not uncommon for a candidate in our principal preparation program to be appointed as a school principal while still in the preparation program. The frequency in which this occurs underscores the needs and disparities of isolated rural communities on and/or near Indian reservations. This candidate was among our best and brightest. He understood best practices in organizational and instructional leadership and flawlessly implemented best practices in leading the school. As a condition for his temporary administrative licensure, the state required he be supervised by university faculty. This promising candidate, flawlessly implementing the lessons taught by our Educational Leadership faculty, but he was fired within six months of appointment, and had to leave town in the night with his family under the threat of violence. This tragic event humbled each Educational Leadership faculty member. Shocked to its core, the faculty, as individuals and as a collective, was awakened to a point where we could see, listen and learn. From that day to now, we seek to question our assumptions, especially those assumptions tainted by privilege, and better understand how those assumptions play out in our teaching, research and professional practice. That day was a first step on the *road from Selma to Montgomery*. We continue to walk on that road to Montgomery slowly step by step, not always going in the right direction, but we do reorient ourselves without wandering too far astray. For us, Montgomery is still a long way off but getting there is a shared vision.

Edgar Schein (1985) included in his seminal definition of organizational culture the notion that organizational culture is created from a series of individual events pivotal in the organization's success. This collective failure of the faculty and the faculty response to it by questioning their assumptions of privilege and professional action has been institutionalized into the culture of the Educational Leadership program. The above mentioned candidate is now among our best and brightest alumni; he has been a successful

Principal and Superintendent for a number of years. He has been one of only a handful of school leaders that have been able to successfully turnaround a persistently low-performing school in a American Indian community.

Since that day of our collective awakening, the faculty members continue to meet and discuss meaningful issues more frequently. Relational trust and collegiality among the faculty and between candidates and faculty members is strong. The shared vision of I LEAD is a vision for social justice and this shared vision is deeply embedded into the fabric of the larger context of the Educational Leadership program.

Lindsay, Robins and Terrell (2003) have noted a continuum in understanding and addressing cultural differences. On one end of the continuum you have cultural destructiveness where cultural differences are addressed by stomping out the difference. In the middle is cultural blindness where cultural differences are ignored; then pre-awareness where cultural difference is acknowledged at a superficial level, then at an increasingly more in-depth level driven by a desire to better understand. Finally, at the opposite end of the continuum is cultural activism. From the inception of the I LEAD project, faculty had cultural awareness regarding a potential social justice impact, but not until our best candidate was fired for doing everything he was taught did we begin to understand the social justice impact and our role in perpetuating oppression. After seeing the nature of the oppression and the link between the oppression and our own actions, seeking better understanding without helping to intervene against the oppression no longer was an option. Activism became the only viable decision to make. The awareness of injustice and inequity grew more personal compelling us to engage and to act.

#### I LEAD CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of I LEAD is to prepare and support Indian school leaders and school systems leaders

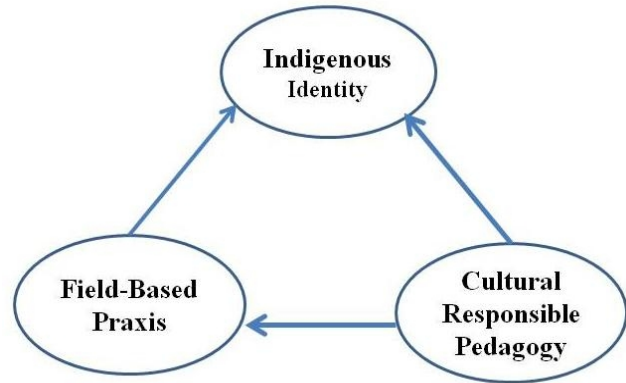


working in American Indian communities with the knowledge, skills and understanding to improve educational equity and college/workforce readiness for the children of those communities. The project began in 2006 and has been sustained by a series of grants from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Indian Education, to recruit, educate, certify, place and induct American Indian educators into leadership positions within schools and school systems. Sixty-three leadership candidates have graduated from the program since its inception and currently 48 candidates are matriculating through a Masters of Education, Educational Specialist, or Doctor of Education program in Educational Leadership. Of the 63 I LEAD graduates, more than 93% have or are currently serving in administrative positions at the school, district, state, and federal level.

#### I LEAD CONCEPTUAL DESIGN

Three interconnected subsystems drive the preparation and support of I LEAD candidates before and after graduation—Indigenous identity, culturally responsive pedagogy, and field-based praxis. The first component, Indigenous identity, reflects how the I LEAD program honors the cultural heritages and life experiences of the candidates such that their worldview can expand and their authentic leadership can be realized. The second component, culturally responsive pedagogy, serves as the curricular approach emphasizing academic rigor and professional excellence. The third component, field-based praxis, merges leader identity and professional knowledge resulting in active engagement in the practice of school improvement and a strong understanding of the link between theory and best practices research. Such praxis is dynamic and synergistic. Indigenous identity informs culturally responsive pedagogy which in turn drives field-based praxis which further deepens Indigenous identity and culturally responsive pedagogy reinforcing a positive feedback loop that strengthens candidate growth like a flywheel.

Figure 1: I-LEAD Conceptual Design



I LEAD is a collaborative endeavor between Montana State University (MSU), the state’s land grant institution, and Little Big Horn College, the Crow tribal college. Through this partnership, a Center for Native American Leadership was created at Little Big Horn College. The center exists to facilitate a better understanding of Indigenous identity, tribal community leadership, and culturally relevant pedagogy among the I LEAD candidates. The role of the Native American Leadership Center is to facilitate the I LEAD candidates’ abilities to enhance relationships within the education community and among American Indian communities contributing to the goal of self-determination. To enhance the relationships among these communities, I LEAD candidates must: (1) understand the inherent complexities and contradictions that exist between the nature of American schooling as deculturalizing (Spring, 1998) and the policy of self-determination for American Indian communities; (2) reconcile the conflict in the daily routines of schools between cultural identity and assimilation pressures tacit within No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability; (3) develop the dispositions and skills to create a climate within school systems that enhances and celebrates the identity and achievement of all students. Through the Center, semiannual retreats are designed and presented, featuring prominent Native American scholars and leaders, to facilitate essential and

deep understanding of the educational leadership issues of American Indian communities.

Additionally, the Center has been instrumental in one of the most important developments in I LEAD's evolution, the embedding of two courses on Indigenous leadership and identity, designed and delivered exclusively by American Indian scholars, into the curriculum. Beyond demonstrating reciprocity and respect, embedding coursework that is culturally relevant provides a forum for each I LEAD candidate to articulate and examine deeply held Indigenous values and perspectives repressed through 16 plus years of colonizing formal education. The courses cultivate and celebrate Indian ways of knowing which in turn enable I LEAD candidates to articulate their Indian voice as leaders. The projects and discussions in these courses have proven to be some of the most profound in the program where dreams of what Indian schooling could be are articulated and the challenges of these dreams becoming reality are discussed as well.

Culturally relevant coursework engages the I LEAD candidates in critical conversations and readings regarding the realities of educating Indian children in the dominant society's schooling system, as well as affording them the space to openly discuss the challenges they face personally in leaving their homes and families to pursue graduate education and how that will position them back home in their communities. Holding their contexts in what Palmer (2004) calls the *tragic gap* which is the space between *what is* and *what could be*, invites these candidates to be leaders who can lead in that space and model how great leaders allow that space to pull their hearts open but not break their hearts.

#### Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The innovative teaching and delivery methods discussed by Author and Erickson (2008) continue to be incorporated into current teaching

and leading practices. What has evolved has been a tacit understanding among faculty and candidates regarding professional commitment. The I LEAD curricular framework invites candidates to engage in the personal meaning of professional excellence in school leadership as they develop an understanding of theoretical constructs and how they intersect with the daily realities of schooling. Also, within this curriculum, as we encourage these leaders to embrace these constructs internally, we encourage them to embrace the demands of facilitating second-order change. Visiting scholars with national reputations in the field of Educational Leadership come to MSU's campus each summer to deliver a course in their specialty.

We honor the five Rs framework as we deliver our curriculum for this Educational Leadership program. We feel confident that our coursework accommodates the theoretical and practitioner demands for school leadership in Montana but we also know that the demands on school leaders in Indian country are not the same as the demands on school leadership in the dominant context. Although we recognize that our program reflects the dominant bias of educational leadership research and praxis, we deliberately create space where all voices can be heard so the curriculum isn't colonizing or promoting the status quo of institutional racism. As Author and Fennimore-Smith (2010) noted, "In order to create institutional change, the curricula, textbooks, instructional strategies, practices and policies, and research protocol need to be decolonized" (p. 6).

We have to embrace uncomfortable realities if we are to honor the five Rs of respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility and relationality. We have to look at our own participation and collaboration with the benefits of white privilege and the myth of American meritocracy. Essentially, to honor the five Rs throughout the program, we need to examine our inner-

commitment to this framework so that our pedagogy might emanate from the spirit of a Freirean leadership pedagogy (Kaak, 2011). Kaak recognized that institutional models of leadership can be a means of oppressing would-be leaders. We as a faculty must hold “a whole-hearted conviction that those once called students are credible contributors to the overall process of learning” (p.135).

By combining the five Rs framework with a Freirean critical leadership pedagogy, we hoped our hearts and minds as faculty might create in our courses safe spaces or a sort of “third space” where boundary crossing could happen along with a “variety of means to make sense of the world” (Bhabba, 1990) as well as a rejection of false dichotomies and in its place more of a both/and thinking could be cultivated (Zeichner, 2010, p.92). Critical pedagogy must be a good faith effort to question the inequalities of power and the false myth of meritocracy so that we may prevent these deeply ingrained ideas from influencing our impact on others (Burbules & Berk, 1990). In doing this we also hope our program might honor the alternative approach of *Red Pedagogy* which:

...necessitates (a) the subjection of the processes of Whiteman schooling to critical pedagogical analyses; (b) the decoupling and dethinking of education from its Western, colonialist context, including revolutionary critical pedagogy; and (c) the conceptualization of Indigenous effort to reground candidates and educators in traditional knowledge and teachings (Grande, 2008, p. 244).

By practicing these pedagogies within the five Rs framework, our non-Indian candidates will deepen their leadership enabling them to serve better all students especially those who fall in categories of disenfranchisement. The I LEAD course design and program delivery makes it not only a viable graduate education venue for excellent schools in Indian country but across all communities. As Author and Fennimore-Smith (2010) wrote:

...to reframe paradigmatic structures to reflect the values and beliefs of Indigenous peoples so that the Indian/non-Indian divide is bridged with a culturally responsive...paradigm. This process raises a number of ethical issues related to voice and privilege that we believe have to be resolved in order to be inclusive of multiple perspectives (p. 1).

Kirkness and Barnhart (1991) in describing reciprocity wrote, “...the emphasis is on making teaching and learning two-way processes, in which the give-and-take between faculty and candidates opens up new levels of understanding for everyone” (p. 10). We knew that inviting Indian candidates into a leadership paradigm which honors their worldview would also make our non-Indian candidates better school leaders; it had the potential to be a classic win-win program.

#### FIELD-BASED PRAXIS

Field-based praxis is the reflective connection between theory and practice through guided leadership experiences performed in K-12 schools. There are three developmental phases of praxis embedded in I LEAD. During the first year, I LEAD candidates engage in field-based praxis through participation in authentic course projects designed to augment improvement efforts at the schools where the candidates work. During the second year, students complete a minimum of 324 hours of logged field experience (internship) requiring them to complete a major activity for each Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC) standard. The third year of field-based praxis is each candidate’s induction year as a school administrator. Throughout each of these phases mentors play a key role. Mentors are previous I LEAD graduates who are trained in mentoring skills and seasoned by several years of leadership experience in schools serving American Indian communities.

One of the most important advances made in the evolution of I LEAD is the fact that with this third cohort, previous I LEAD graduates, who have gone on to prove themselves as capable, outstanding leaders, serving successfully in Indian schools, are available to mentor current I LEAD candidates. In the section above discussing the 5Rs, we noted that responsibility required the joint engagement of both educators and American Indian communities. It is through the mentoring of I LEAD candidates by I LEAD graduates seasoned by leadership experience that responsibility integrates educator and American Indian community into coherent praxis. It is through the mentoring process that education for self-determination truly begins. All mentors are American Indian school leaders with 3 to 30 years of experience as administrators of schools serving American Indian communities. Furthermore, mentors are initially provided five full days of training and then meet for two days each quarter as a group to discuss and reflect on issues related to the preparation of I LEAD candidates.

As described more robustly by Author and Erickson (2008), a key aspect in the initial I LEAD design was to contextualize the coursework through the assignment of course projects specifically developed to initiate improvement of instructional and organizational processes and programs in the schools where the I LEAD candidates worked with the cooperation and collaboration of the schools' principals. Unfortunately, the full potential of this design was not fully realized in either of the first two cohorts because of large variations in the feedback given by different course instructors and situated school leaders. The quality of instructional feedback has one of the largest impacts on learning when compared to all other teaching attributes (Hattie, 2009). Therefore, in contextualizing coursework, the contextualization learned by students is dependent upon the contextualization of the feedback and not so much on the contextualization of the instructional materials. Through the use of mentors assigned to candidates at the

very beginning of the program, the elements of responsibility and relationality strengthen this component of I LEAD by providing consistent feedback through an ongoing relationship with the candidates.

#### INTEGRATION OF SUBSYSTEMS INTO THE FLYWHEEL

A positive accelerating loop integrates all three I LEAD subsystems while creating an expanding network of experienced leaders situated in tribal communities, school systems, state education agencies, universities, and professional associations. The mechanism driving this expanding network of leaders starts with the five Rs creating a safe space for American Indian educators to assert their identity. Through culturally responsive pedagogy, I LEAD candidates and faculty interact in a reciprocal process of teaching and learning. In formal coursework, candidates and faculty share knowledge, experience and perspective. However, a deep, common understanding and perspective begins to take place in the field-based praxis subsystem in which candidates and experienced leaders jointly focus on concrete school improvement actions.

The development of a common perspective (Bruner, 1997) required to frame and act on complex issues of school improvement in a concrete context, create relationships between I LEAD candidates, university professors, mentors and practicing site administrators. These relationships then facilitate a deeper common understanding about the shared perspective. Through this perspective a better understanding regarding issues of identity and leadership emerges facilitating an increased degree of reciprocal teaching and learning and a greater capacity for common perspective in solving concrete issues within a specific school context.

There are several important program design elements that we have not discussed such as recruiting and selection of candidates, student support interventions, and program assessment.

Each of these elements were designed and implemented within the five Rs framework and systemic design described above. For example, respect was demonstrated in recruiting efforts in discussing I LEAD with tribal officials and making presentations to communities at school board meetings. This demonstration of respect signaled the importance of both identity and relationality. Student support interventions were integral to a culturally responsive curriculum and demonstrated responsibility, respect and long-term relational commitment inherent in relationality. Program assessment encompassed each component of the design system and the methods used highlighted reciprocity and responsibility.

### LESSONS LEARNED

Several important findings have surfaced over the last six years of the I LEAD program. We highlighted some of these here while knowing there are several more to be discovered. Without question, Kirkness and Barnhardt's four Rs, respect, relevance, reciprocity and responsibility and the fifth R of relationality suggested by Wilson (2008) as well as Author and Fennimore-Smith (2010) have informed our development of the program and undoubtedly been at the root of its success. Navigating the colonizing perspectives embedded in K-20 education while honoring and maintaining their Indian identity remains a challenge for I LEAD candidates specifically and American Indian graduate students in general; however, faculty members mindfully honoring Indigenous identity make critical differences in student success.

#### LESSON 1: INCREASED INDIAN INVOLVEMENT IN PROGRAM DESIGN IS ESSENTIAL

As discussed previously, we have increased Indian input into program design, and course content and strengthened feedback systems with each cohort as ILEAD evolved. This involvement helped us make the five Rs more of a reality as we remain open to learning from our candidates

and stay sensitive to our own positions of power and privilege. This willingness and openness to learning on our part as faculty has fostered trust with our candidates, tribal leaders and community elders. These leaders have offered significant input for improving the program's relevance which has in turn made the program increasingly Indian-owned, better connected to American Indian communities, and better in meeting the goal of education for self-determination.

#### LESSON 2: UNDERSTANDING CONNECTEDNESS COMPELS ACTIVISM

Perhaps one of the most important lessons for all of us involved in I LEAD, including candidates, graduates and faculty members is a deepening of our various epistemic realities which in turn has expanded the understanding of our individual identities. Indeed, a circle has emerged where epistemic revelation has yielded an ontological awareness which has in turn deepened us epistemologically. Recently, Frank (2013) in rebutting Siegel's (2008) epistemic diversity discussed what he calls epistemic injustice using a quote from Fricker:

...we must take up the point of view of those on the losing end. If you are the one doing the crushing... then not only are you not in a position to know what it is like to be crushed, but also—and this is a separate point—your general picture of the social world in which such crushings take place will be in an unhelpfully partial perspective, the perspective of the powerful (p. 288).

Frank continues,

If the perspectives of those positioned without power in our social world go unheard, then our collective epistemic resources are less robust than they otherwise would be. This situation is one of epistemic injustice. Those without power are silenced and this leads to an incom-

plete and inaccurate vision of the social world (2013, p. 365).

An unintended consequence of the I LEAD program for all involved with it was a deepening understanding that compels activism toward addressing epistemic injustice. It is one thing to become aware of epistemic injustice; yet, as awareness crystalizes into understanding, action toward eradication of injustice, both in the social context and the academy, remains as the only moral choice.

As non-Indian faculty we have come to understand that the longest journey undertaken is the sixteen inches from head to heart. Through this understanding, we deepened our capacity to teach and bridge relationships across a greater diversity of candidates because of our engagement with I LEAD.

#### LESSON 3: DIALOGUE EXPANDS TEACHING CAPACITY

As our collective identities, epistemologies and pedagogies have taken new shape within the five Rs framework, how we teach has changed not so much in terms of content, although minor content changes have occurred, rather how we delivered the courses changed and the content has reflected these changes. Specifically, all of us have started *marching from Selma to Montgomery*.

This change of heart also surfaced in our willingness to negotiate a broader interpretation of the standards used to assess the candidate's ideas and assignments. As with most graduate educational leadership programs, we provide a foundation in organizational, instructional and relational leadership research. And as is typical, an ability to understand, synthesize and write analytically about these ideas and their practical implications is expected. In both classroom discussions of case studies and in written responses, the I LEAD candidates brought their epistemology with them and the 5Rs demanded that we question tacit assumptions about the validity of our teaching and assessment methods. For example, assess-

ment rubrics built upon deconstruction and linear expectations needed to be adjusted to accommodate a more holistic and circular reasoning approach. Epistemic injustice compelled us to honor what seemed like a new way of knowing. For a detailed account of negotiated standards in assessing a doctoral course assignment, see Author and Author (2010).

#### LESSON 4: OVERCOMING COLONIZATION IS AN ONGOING STRUGGLE TOWARD HOPE

Some of our most important findings have been those discovered within our own minds and hearts. Over the last six years of working with these candidates, visiting these educators in their communities and seeing firsthand the cultural disconnects and economic injustices that can exist between the dominant society and oppressed populations, these experiences have changed all of us in several ways. We have experienced many of the common feelings that members of the dominant group will feel when confronted by a more accurate historical picture as its injustice plays out in the structures of racism and the stories of that racism as told firsthand by these candidates. We have been confronted by what Duran (2006) has called the *soul wound* perpetrated upon Indian nations and its ongoing repercussions.

These confrontations have created discomfort but we have also experienced an array of positive and even joyful experiences. We have witnessed Indian humor and humility and hospitality as many of us have been invited to their ceremonies and into their homes. We have witnessed purposeful storytelling in our classes that have stirred deep emotions for both Indians and non-Indians present. All of these experiences have invited us to be more humble, more forgiving and better listeners. We have experienced in the telling of these traumas the paradox that telling and hearing suffering resolves nothing and yet seems to resolve everything.

These confrontations with this soul wound have also witnessed hope. We have seen this hope first-hand in the resilience of our candidates. The capacity of heart of these educators to hold in creative tension the reality of the cruel history, cultural and physical genocide, that has been visited upon their nations and to know that suffering can have meaning as Frankl (1946) has suggested provides a source of continued hope. While holding historical trauma, current realities of reservation life, and truths unseen by outsiders, somehow these educators know they can hold all of these truths yet their hearts remain intact rather than being shattered. The true hope is that they can and do bring those hearts to service in their communities. Each of the I LEAD candidates would be successful educators and leaders in any community, in communities where the effects of historical trauma are not as evident and in communities where their rewards might be more visible and immediate. As their teachers and mentors, we have been humbled and amazed by their willingness to stay and serve in communities where the levels of poverty and its impact rival any place in the world suffering these realities.

In conclusion, the overarching essential understanding learned from the I LEAD journey is that any effort by members of the dominant society to be activists in the fight for social justice requires constant vigilance because the weave of privilege exists throughout the fabric of our identity. Tacit assumptions based on privilege permeate decisions about how we organize a syllabus, select course materials, prepare assessments, and evaluate educational outcomes. Constant vigilance and mindfulness are the means to recognizing and questioning these tacit assumptions of power and privilege. Additionally, we have learned to ask forgiveness and become vulnerable. Scollon's advice on responsiveness has become real for us, "[As] the faculty we must allow ourselves to become vulnerable. Institutional invulnerability is the mark of institutional unresponsiveness" (cited in Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991, p. 9).

#### NOTE

The terms Indian, Native American, American Indian, and Indigenous are used interchangeably

throughout the manuscript to refer to tribal members.

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