

Identity, Heritage and Achievement: A Comparative Case Study of Effective Education in Indian Country

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Abstract: *A comparative case study design sought to determine how effective schools on Indian Reservations infuse local epistemologies into leadership practices. The converging themes fit a Social Identity Theory model. The leader identity was deeply rooted in the community and the values of the school were beginning to reshape community norms.*

Keywords: *Indian Education, Social Identity Theory, School Improvement*

Last year, 2013, was the 50th anniversary of an American president first using the term *self-determination* in regards to federal Indian policy (Nuby & Smith, 2012). Actualization of self-determination cannot occur without effective education, an education that places at its center a curriculum that is culturally responsive to the identity and heritage of students. Furthermore, schools that do incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy have increased achievement scores among their students (Cleary & Peacock, 1998). Unfortunately, for many American Indian students, Western pedagogy dominates instructional practices. This situation is made worse by standardized testing and current school accountability policies (Klug, 2012).

From 2000-2009, the National Assessment of Education Progress showed a persistent difference of more than 20 scaled score points for 4th and 8th grades in both reading and math between American Indian and Alaskan Native students and white students (NCES, 2009). McCarty (2009) wrote that the No Child Left Behind Act's goals of closing the achievement gap by holding schools accountable was laudable; yet, "in practice, the policy has proven to be one of the most problematic education reforms in US history" (p. 7).

Culturally responsive schooling has consistently been linked to gains in academic achievement in rural schools with high proportions of American Indian students (Williams, 2003). Yet, current academic standards are based upon the assumptions of the dominant culture (Spring, 2004; Malott, 2008). Values and norms are seldom openly acknowledged by school officials; yet, these assumptions have an unequal impact on the educational outcomes of students (Vang, 2006; Warikoo & Carter, 2010). The integration of culture and academic rigor are compatible and a necessary condition for closing the achievement gap for American Indian students (Apthorp, D'Amato & Richardson, 2002; Oakes & Maday, 2010). Boyer (2006) in discussing the Rural Systemic Initiative (RSI) put it best in writing, "all agree that a quality education must reflect the values of tribal peoples and must ultimately serve to strengthen whole tribal communities" (p.16).

Tangible outcomes that close the achievement gap come from place-based innovations (Hall & Hord, 2011), collegial trust and collaboration (Fullan & Hargraves, 1996) and the involvement of tribal leaders and community elders (Powers, 2005). Effective school leadership is critical. A significant body of literature exists that informs leadership principles involved in

change (e.g., Fullan, 2009; Hall & Hord, 2011; Reeves, 2009). Yet, very little has been written on the leadership practice of turning around chronically low performing schools on Indian Reservations. Given the need to infuse tribal culture and indigenous ways of knowing into the center of a framework built upon dominant cultural standards, such research seems critical to closing the achievement gap. How do effective rural schools on Indian Reservations infuse local epistemologies into the practice of school leadership?

METHODS

A comparative case study design was used bounded by the professional practice of two school's leadership teams and the interventions used to improve student attendance and academic proficiency as measured by the state's annual achievement test. Purposeful selection was used in identifying two successful rural schools located on Indian Reservations in two different states. One school demonstrated high levels of achievement, as measured by the state's standardized test. The other school demonstrated persistently increasing achievement over the past 3 years. Data used in the case study was collected using two observers in the school on two separate days. During these two days, researchers observed classroom instruction, school-wide routines, and interactions of students with elders in the community. Semi-structured interviews with the principal and two teachers considered by both the principal and other teachers at the school to be members of the school leadership team were conducted to ascertain leadership practices and specific interventions used. The data from field notes, audio recordings of interviews, and notes from artifacts were separately coded and analyzed using a constant comparative analysis model by the researchers independently and then discussed.

CONVERGENT THEMES

Both schools had American Indian principals with deep connections with the community, demonstrated tribal traditions, and enacted leadership best practice models. The sense of relationship and commitment expressed by both principals was described by one principal as a:

connection [formed] with growing up with them [community members], and there's a close bond. [As you grow up] you know one way, then you leave and you have to learn a whole new way of being, so then you see how your communities can improve themselves. The hard part is to try and make changes in a non-threatening way.

The principals both practiced the traditions of their tribes and participated in ceremonies on a regular basis. Like many other successful schools with large proportions of American Indian students, school practices incorporated tribal language and tradition into daily routines and instruction. Yet, a difference between these schools and other schools was seen in the degree of personalization. This personalization connected students with traditions and facilitated a strong sense of identity that seemed to be fostered by the principals' sense of identity. As one principal stated:

Our identity is based on family. So for me I don't think I've ever had a problem [with identity] because, for us it's just been engrained. I can't speak for the other tribes, some of them have different mysteries, so for them it's a little bit rougher too, but growing up when I we'd always hear (*Veveilg derltolga*) that's, I'm one of us, I'm a *Tolga*.

A network of partners existed among faculty and staff, family members and faculty, faculty and students, and staff members and community agencies. Specifically, observations of staff interaction at both schools could be characterized by what Argyris (1999) described as Model II organizational behavior. At one school, a teacher described how such a high level of trust developed. "We confront or challenge each other to improve directly, face to face, while working together to improve the capacity of the school." Students also had a clear understanding of the expectations. As one student stated, "I know that if I screw up, [the principal] can make life bad for me both at school and in the community – so I don't screw up." From a high level of trust, a collective sense of efficacy emerged facilitating a common vision and shared purpose.

Both schools were deeply integrated into a community network. An example of this was seen in one school where students and staff each indicated an ongoing, positive relationship with the Juvenile Court Judge and County Prosecutor. When a student appears in court, the attendance officer, a tribal elder and former long-term school board member, is there to demonstrate support and concern for the student. Similar to the high levels of trust among faculty members, the demonstration of authentic concern for the student by "being there" for the student in non-school events, such as a court appearance, promoted high levels of trust between school and student as well as school-family partnerships.

CONNECTING SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

A conceptualization of leadership emerging from social psychology research stems from social identity theory. As described by Haslem, Reicher and Plalow (2011), "the exercise of leadership, in the sense of influence over a collectivity, depends on the existence of a shared identity among those who constitute that collectivity" (p. 73-74). The more an individual is seen to be representative of a given group, the more influential the individual becomes. The more leaders advance the interests of the group as perceived by group members, the more the leader is seen as a champion for the group. Yet, leaders typically do not wait around to be recognized; they actively construct the identity of the group for group members to align the group identity with their own identity. This constructed identity is then translated into social reality through the use of language to create a compelling vision, enacting norms and values of the shared identity, and focusing the actions of the group on reshaping the environment to reflect the shared norms and values of the group's identity. As demonstrated in the converging themes found in this comparative case study, there was a clear and deep connection in the identity of the principals with community identity. The principals effectively met the expectations of the community and championed the identity of the school within the larger community context. These school leaders created identity within the school through facilitating a shared vision among faculty, staff and students as well as enabling action toward the shared vision. Furthermore, there was evidence that the norms and values of the school were beginning to reshape the norms and values of the community.

Contemporary American Indian education practice is caught between two contradictory federal policies. On the one hand, the policy of self-determination espouses to promote tribal identity through sovereignty. Yet on the other hand, the No Child Left Behind Act promotes deculturalization and assimilation through the use of standardized testing as a primary school accountability measure (Klug, 2012). American Indian leadership is a key and essential element to perpetuating tribal norms and values that offer the hope of realizing the promise of self-determination (Tippeconnic, 2000). Viewing leadership through a conceptual lens of social identity theory seems to offer promise as a means of describing how American Indian leaders

can clarify indigenous (tribal) cultural norms and values within their own communities and promotes these norms and values within the larger context of society. More empirical research is needed on Social Identity Theory within the context of indigenous leadership to fully articulate and understand its value as a conceptual tool.

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