Complicating Discontinuity: What About Poverty?

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ABSTRACT

In this article, two white science teachers at tribal schools in the Upper Midwest of the United States, who were identified by community members and school administrators as “successful” teachers, describe experiences of how they wrestle with the daily effects of generations of oppression. Most vividly, they talk about poverty. This article provides a description of some of the beliefs and attitudes, described by the teachers, that help them to be effective allies and teachers for Native American students. Their interviews offer a glimpse into the internal struggle with the contradictions of oppression. This article broadens the discussion of Native American culture-based education and raises questions for the general applicability of cultural discontinuity as an all-encompassing explanation for Native American school failure.

George,1 a superintendent of an Ojibwe tribal school, and Agnes, a teacher at another tribal school, talk about their own white American children. They believe that no matter what kind or what quality of education their children receive, they will go to college and be successful. Assured of their future, George says,

See these kids? (He points to a portrait of his two handsome, blonde, blue-eyed boys on the wall directly above his desk.) No one can mess them up [italics added]. There is nothing that can happen in school that will jeopardize their success.
I am dumbfounded. I think about these unsolicited personal references all year; they stand in stark contrast to the daily worry I feel about my two middle-class Native American children going to school on the reservation. What a luxury it must be to feel assured that your children will achieve a degree, regardless of their experience in elementary school.

INTRODUCTION

Culture-based curriculum has become complicated and contested terrain for Native Americans as postcolonial debates about identity and authenticity collide with archaic and racist colonial systems for schooling and tribal enrollment. In many ways, the mission of Native American culture-based schools has been diluted by the inability to create systemic change. The teaching of Native culture in tribal schools is often merely an addition to the existing state-sanctioned curriculum. Adding “culture” to a preexisting system of schooling sometimes results in the teaching of culture as content, sometimes in essentialized ways (Hermes, 2001). For example, teaching beadwork or Native dance without a deeper cultural context can intersect with mainstream stereotypes and students’ notions of equating a Native identity with these traditions. The teaching of a Native culture-based curriculum must go much further to create systemic change. To reflect the epistemology of the indigenous people, changes are needed in the organization of the school day, the language of instruction, the content, the pedagogy, and the approach (Hermes, 1995).

The culture-based movement in Indian education was a response to the boarding school era and the tremendous loss of culture and language that subsequent generations of Native people suffered. In many ways, the idea of culture-based education opened the door for understanding and defining a different approach to schooling for Native Americans. However, culture-based curriculum has become the catch phrase for success in Native education. Often, “culture” in education is expected to remedy complex and deep-seated social problems—and yet the development of a nation-specific culture-based curriculum has not been a funding priority for research and development. For example, very few (if any) books, textbooks, or other curriculum resources have been published in the Ojibwe language. Further, many of the indigenous knowledge bases and languages have been fragmented through colonialism, making curriculum production even more difficult. Individual tribal members who are certified teachers often do not have language fluency or extensive cultural knowledge. On the other hand, many elders with culture and language knowledge have suffered abuse in boarding schools and are not eager to go back into any school. Consequently, the majority of certified teachers in tribal schools in the Upper Midwest are non-Native.

Within this context, I asked: (1) How do white teachers become successful teachers at Native culture-based schools? and (2) How do they fit
in with the school’s mission of teaching in a culture-based way? I wanted to understand their interpretation of the meaning of a culture-based curriculum and how they understand their own positions. These are middle-class white teachers of generally poor brown students. Their students are from the reservation and the inner city, the teachers are from the suburbs and border towns, and yet there is trust. “Mr. Joe! Mr. Joe! Look at this homework . . .” “Agnes, want to see a picture of my baby?” I hear their students trusting them, and I know that I am in the right classrooms. The students volunteer stories of their lives; they privilege these white folks in ways that are rare. I am quite happy to hear the teachers’ struggles, to ask how they’ve lasted, four, five, six years at the tribal school. The teachers wonder aloud about other jobs that pay more and cost less. I am content looking from the inside to the outsider who is looking back in.

The teachers in this study interpret the culture-based mission of their schools as going beyond what is being taught in culture classes. They talk about high rates of absenteeism. They talk about poverty and the socioeconomic status of families. In their minds, their students’ performance in school is affected most vividly by the family circumstances of poverty. They understand the socioeconomic oppression of Native Americans as deeply intertwined with culture. Their responsiveness to students’ needs is shaped by this knowledge as much as by awareness of the cultural differences.

In the following sections, I consider some of the theories that have informed Native American education within the broader context of minority school failure. I am interested in how dominant and narrow the culture-based approach can be. Next, I briefly describe the methods used in this research and then present data that describe how these teachers strive to understand and fit into their Native culture-based schools. I offer an analysis of data that underscores the teachers’ attempts to weave an understanding of socioeconomic oppression into the schools’ mission of culture. My research suggests that theory needs to be updated to reflect these current understandings in practice. I end this article by challenging the dominant position that sees culture in a narrow sense within Native American education, and by attempting to broaden this notion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is situated within the larger literature and debate concerning minority cultures and educational failure. Because this debate has been extensively detailed elsewhere (Foley, 1991; Trueba, 1991), I will only briefly refer to it here. Theoretical underpinnings for work on minority cultures and educational failure stem from at least two main areas of educational research. First, sociolinguistic and microethnographic research suggests that a lack of cross-cultural communication, or “cultural discontinuity,” can result in minority student failure (Dumont, 1972; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Greenbaum & Greenbaum, 1983; Philips, 1972). Second,
work by critical theorists suggests that larger societal variables, such as power structures, institutional racism, and opportunity structures, also play an important role in minority student failure (Deyhle, 1995; Lipka, 1994; McCarty, 1989; Ogbu, 1978).

The first strand of research, cultural discontinuity (the “communication process” explanation; Erickson, 1987), has been interpreted by some practitioners to mean that continuity between home and school promotes success (Au & Jordan, 1981). This approach, the cultural-based approach, has also had much popular appeal to Native American communities. The thrust of the Native American civil rights and self-determination movement in schools has been to reclaim Native cultures and languages and to rebuild self-esteem (Lomawaima, 1995). The primary vehicles to meet this aim have been culture-based schooling and culture-based curriculum. The culture-based movement has grown in the past 30 years to include Native American culture and language in public and tribal schools. The culture-based movement in Native American education has contributed to improving many Native Americans’ identity, self-esteem, and attitude toward schools (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997).

The debate between macroexplanations and microexplanations of failure has been revisited by many scholars (e.g., Erickson, 1987; Foley, 1991; St. Germaine, 1995). Is there something about a clash of cultures within the classrooms that causes Native students to fail? Or is the low socioeconomic status of many Native Americans the most significant factor in school failure? Although it is beyond the scope of this article to resolve this debate, I see the need to be aware of both microforces and macroforces at work within the school. I am concerned with developing a theoretical approach that is not prone to reinscribing cultural barriers as some interpretations of cultural discontinuity and learning styles theory do (Henze & Vanett, 1993). My approach does not assume that there are already fixed and tangible boundaries between cultures to be studied, but rather ongoing relationships that are always affected by the larger systems and structures of which they are a part (Levinson & Holland, 1996). In exploring the ways that Native students and white teachers work successfully in the classroom, I hope to gain insights into what else is going on besides “culture difference.” In what ways do successful white teachers approach the teaching of Native students? How does the teacher’s awareness of structural inequalities affect teaching? In my research, I explore the relationships between students and teachers, especially the teacher beliefs that support their particular practices.

METHODS

The methods for this study were ethnographic or, stated broadly, interpretive (Eisenhart, 2001; Erickson, 1986) and were generally influenced by
narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). These methods have been adapted to a Native epistemology (Crazybull, 1997; Hermes, 1998). Care was taken to follow Ojibwe cultural protocols and research priorities. For example, consistent with Ojibwe oral traditions, narrative methods in data collection and interpretation were used (Peacock & Miller Cleary, 1997). Data were gathered from the Lake Superior band of Ojibwe in a two-state area from September 1999 to August 2001. Four tribal schools were included as a representative sample of Ojibwe tribal schools in Minnesota and Wisconsin. In this article, two teachers at two tribal schools are discussed in depth. These individuals were chosen because they are both high school science teachers.

Community members and administrators were briefed on the research project and asked to nominate “successful” teachers. I did not ask for white teachers or for science teachers. These teachers were recognized as excellent science teachers, and in both of the cases included in this article, the teachers were recommended by an administrator and a respected community member. Also in both cases, the community member was a culture teacher at the school and a parent of children attending the school. For the nominators, I defined the criteria for “successful” as a teacher who taught for academic success, critical consciousness, and/or cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The nominators qualified their choices as teachers who met at least two—and in some cases, three—of the criteria.

Teachers were observed during six to eight teaching occasions throughout the school year; in-depth field notes were taken. A series of three in-depth interviews was conducted with each teacher. The first interviews were broad and explained the purpose of the study. Participants were asked open-ended questions about their position at the school, their classes, and their feelings about teaching Native students. The second interviews focused more on the teaching of Ojibwe culture and the teacher’s own cultural identity. The third interviews were generally reflections on the first two, with participants often rethinking previous statements and revising them. After reading transcripts of their interviews, the teachers were given the opportunity to make corrections or clarifications. On several occasions, I also informally interviewed individuals and small groups of students. Data were collected over a two-year period, transcribed, and then coded. After identifying and hand-coding themes, I interpreted the themes, and now, influenced by these themes as a frame of reference, I retell the teachers’ narratives.

RESULTS

Poverty: It’s Easier to Talk About Culture

When asked whether cultural differences between home and school were a contributing factor to student failure, most teachers thought that the
impact of poverty was a much more prohibitive factor to school success than culture. At Big Lake School, introducing my project to an administrator, I told him that I was interested in how culture affects schooling. His response was, “Well, that depends on which culture you are talking about, the traditional Ojibwe culture, or the culture of poverty. The culture our kids grow up in is not traditional Native American culture. It’s a low socioeconomic poverty culture.” This comment was common for nearly the entire first year of interviews. When asked about culture, participants raised the issue of poverty. The words of Agnes, a teacher at Native Peoples School, directly echoed the administrator: “More than being Native American, they are inner city/poverty influenced.”

Because teachers and administrators were anxious to talk about poverty, I wondered how I could have overlooked it. In fact, how could the whole of Native American education ignore it? Workshops and in-services on culture in the curriculum are abundant. American Indian education programs in the public schools often specialize in adding culture, developing culture-based material, and making things that reflect Native culture and values. But what about the fact that we are the poorest, least educated, and least employed minority in America? Surely, this is connected to Native success and culture in school. I feel as if I have stumbled onto a topic that is painfully obvious. The teachers hold open their hearts and point to it; they know it well. They make a plea to understand it, but academics, intent on culture and identity, seem embarrassed even to name it.

**Teachers Talk About Culture as Poverty**

Agnes has been a teacher at the Native Peoples School for three years. The school was born in the 1970s. A survival school located in the inner city, its mission is to build healthy self-esteem through educating Native students about their identity and heritage. It is called a “survival school” for the survival and revitalization of Native culture. The students come from many indigenous nations, predominantly Ojibwe and Lakota. Many of the cultural teachings at the school are drawn from these two tribes. Ojibwe language is offered and, at the time of the study, the lead culture teacher was an Ojibwe woman highly respected for her cultural knowledge and involvement in traditional ceremonies.

Joe is a fourth-year science teacher at Ojibwe Tribal School. Located on a small Ojibwe reservation in the north, the school is a couple of hours away from a major metropolitan area. Joe’s school was also founded in the 1970s and has a similar philosophy of teaching in a culture-based way. Many traditional subsistence activities are carried out at the school on a regular basis; for example, ricing (the practice of gathering wild rice), hunting, and sugar bush (gathering maple sap for syrup) are taught in a hands-on way at the school every season. Ojibwe language is offered throughout the K–12 level, but as a second language. Like other courses, it is scheduled a
few times a week for an hour or so. Important times at the school are marked by feasts. Community members and elders can be seen frequenting the school for these events.

Agnes and Joe teach at tribal schools where cultural traditions are taught. To them, poverty and socioeconomic oppression are larger day-to-day factors in students’ ability to concentrate and succeed in school than are the differences between Native American and white cultures. In May 2000, Agnes told me,

I say this was profound [the idea of poverty along with culture] because I could see where today’s questions [to the students] about “culture” seemed a bit abstract. I could sense there were so many pressing things, things they had no way to talk about. How abstract must the “baby in utero” sound when their basic needs are not met. Culture must sound nearly like a luxury—although all of them recognize it is important. In fact, they hold on to it like a mantra. Culture. They could not tell me what it was or where they learned it, or even why it was important to them, but they surely held fast to the belief that it is.

Both Agnes and Joe struggle with low attendance, lack of school readiness, and poor attention from students. They largely attribute these issues to poverty and factors beyond the students’ control. They struggle not to blame the students or their families because they see it as part of the history of oppression of Native peoples in the United States. Their beliefs are contradicted by the larger school systems and cultures that do hold individual students accountable. These teachers have adjusted, and do not hold students to the same behavioral expectations that they would in another setting; they put students’ needs first. They try not to lower academic expectations, but to adjust behavioral (nonacademic) expectations. Agnes said,

We were talking about it before—about how they have to survive every day. They have to find food, because they’re children of poverty, so they have to find a home and food, and I mean things so surprising to me, not having dealt with people from poverty. But to see when they open up their purse, they just don’t have a wallet and a comb in there, they have a toothbrush in there, because they don’t know where they’re going to spend the night and they want to have a toothbrush with them. I mean, that breaks my heart. So seeing them having to contend with helping to raise their brothers and sisters because they have an unhealthy home, or being homeless themselves, or I mean that stuff, that’s really hard to deal with . . . some of our expectations are just too high. You can’t expect them to have a pencil because they don’t have a home. You can’t expect them to have a notebook or to remember to bring it because they haven’t eaten a meal in twenty-four hours.

At the reservation school, Joe often talks about the secondary effects of socioeconomic oppression: drinking, drug abuse, fighting, and stealing. He sees these behaviors as coming directly from dysfunctional families and poverty, and as being in conflict with traditional Native values. Joe cites poor attendance and inability to concentrate as the main reasons for failure in his classes. He adjusts his teaching, remains flexible, and spends
much of his time catching up individual students. He has invented several systems of files, and teaches students to be responsible for what they have missed. In the example below, he directly links home and poverty to problems he has communicating with students.

It’s like you get beat up, or my father’s drunk, or you go without dinner or breakfast, and I’m sure that hurts. And they look at me, and you know I have everything. And I really wasn’t prepared for that. It’s a culture of poverty. The poverty, or whatever you want to call it, it’s difficult for me, but I’m getting better at it. When I see the student comes in and one day she’s just the best student you could ever hope for. And the next day she’s swearing at me and everything I say is wrong and whatever. And I’m starting to get upset, and I see that she has a bruise on her eye. No wonder she’s upset—someone hit her. Something happened that’s really tough. And those are the kinds of things that I guess really keep me coming back because that’s something I think I can help students with.

Acknowledgments of the effects of socioeconomic oppression greatly influence teachers’ decisions in responding to students, especially in terms of behavioral expectations. When they plan for and consider being responsive to students, the overriding consideration is the day-to-day struggles of their students. This means considering factors other than just Native American culture in a narrow sense; it means considering the historical circumstances that have resulted in low socioeconomic status and a myriad of related issues.

Native and Mainstream Culture and Change

Given this broad and critical understanding of the oppression of Native people in America, the teachers constantly question what they have come to think of as the norm for classroom expectations, about Native culture, and about their own whiteness. Their understanding of culture—one that is underscored by recognition of change as a constant—is a second unifying theme in these interviews.

Joe’s and Agnes’s understanding of Native culture is continually evolving. They both have a complex understanding of culture as something immanently important, always changing, and difficult to pinpoint. Further, they realize that their understanding of Native culture has been informed by experience and stereotypes. As noted, they have had to adjust their ideas of “culturally responsive teaching” to include socioeconomic circumstances. In other ways, they struggled to hold a notion of culture as something alive and changing. The teachers described culture as “everything and nothing.” They puzzled over the definition of culture in several interviews. Most often, they referred to examples from their tribal school teaching or from their own backgrounds to illustrate their definitions. Their difficulty in describing culture confirms the idea that they see it as complex
and not easily defined. In terms of teaching at an Ojibwe culture-based school, Joe attempted to describe culture this way:

And that’s just it, again—what is culture? If I teach a student how to do sugarbush—I learned one way. I learned that you go out to the farm and there are a lot of old Germans sitting around drinking a lot of beer. And there’s a huge tractor and you drive around the woods, and it’s like a farm and you eat—so that was sugarbush. Basically you end up with pretty close to the same product, but obviously the process is quite a bit different. The only way I can learn about the actual culture [Ojibwe] is to go out and do sugarbush with people that live in the area. I’m sure there’s a lot of different ways, you know, one Native American will do it a lot different than the next. And of course I can read about Nanabooshu and the story of the lazy people drinking the sap right out of the tree, that’s cultural too. There are many Native Americans today that have huge operations for syrup, which is a lot different than using a sumac with a file and birch bark.

I interpret Joe’s beliefs about culture this way: there is no one right way; culture is a process even within the same group of people, and there is variation across time and place. He does not expect one way to define tradition or hold one way as more authentic than another. He does, however, make a distinction between “traditional Ojibwe” and “mainstream” culture.

But then how is culture played out in everyday life? How they live at home, to me, is just much more mainstream culture than what they have at school. That I see is the same as a lot of whites, especially the pop or the recreational culture. They are huge football fans—they all love the Minnesota Vikings, and they all hate the Packers. They love rap music. They wear color in their hair. I mean, they keep up with what’s going on—which is mainstream culture. It is very important to them. In my opinion, it’s more important for them to keep up with that than the traditional [Ojibwe culture].

Joe raises the issue that mainstream culture complicates a clear dichotomy between home (as traditional) and school (as mainstream culture), which was assumed in early research in Native education (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981; Phillips, 1972). Both Joe and Agnes thought that most of their students learned more traditional Ojibwe culture, or at least cultural activities, from the school. Some parents work 40 hours or more and do not get the time off needed to participate in labor-intensive seasonal activities. On the other hand, some employers, like the school or the tribe, will grant time off for ricing in the fall, for example. In many instances, because of economic change, it has become the job of the school to teach Ojibwe hunting and gathering skills.

**Being White in a Native School: Not the Expert**

If teaching traditional cultural activities is partially the job of the school, then what is the responsibility of the white teachers? In responding to
students’ immediate needs, Joe and Agnes read this mission broadly. However, they both step to the margins when asked specifically about teaching culture. Joe described his position this way: “Probably the best way I can teach the culture is to have some respected community member come in and do it. That’s the way.” Joe holds the belief that he is not an expert on teaching Ojibwe culture. He sees himself as an outsider and an ally, someone who can best support cultural learning. He feels that it is not his place to directly teach cultural skills, but he does his best to enhance and support that learning in his science classroom. Agnes, the teacher at Native Peoples School, has a similar perspective on her position.

Culturally based curriculum ideally would be given in the Native language of that culture, whatever that would be, and the curriculum would relate to that culture. Because, to me, it would be cool if it could be an immersion-type program. But unfortunately what happens in schools, especially at the middle school and high school level, is you don’t find people competent in a specialized area that are also strong in that culture. So I’ve been put in the position of not being Indian, not being a Native person, and trying to incorporate some of the culture of which I know just a very limited amount into my science classroom, and that’s really difficult. It’s really a difficult thing to try to do—just because I’m not. I mean, I shouldn’t be doing this really, I shouldn’t. Really, it should be a Native person, an American Indian person out there teaching physics. Because they would know, they would know off the top of their heads how to relate whatever particular topic they’re speaking on to the culture. And I don’t. I have to stretch.

Although I do not agree that people of Native heritage would necessarily know “off the top of their heads” how to connect physics and Native culture, I think that Agnes’s admission that she is not the expert leads her to think of herself as an ally and not the sole source of information for her students. This position opens a space for discussion, direction, and self-reflection that is not always found in the more familiar stance of teacher as expert (Britzman, 1991). In an important way, it is this appropriate discomfort with and critical reflection upon their own whiteness that position these teachers as allies and underpin their success.

Both teachers talk directly of their whiteness. Their teaching approach is informed by an awareness of being part of the dominant culture. They have both been called “Whitey” and don’t particularly like it, but they understand that they are outsiders in a community that has been colonized by European Americans. They don’t expect every Native teen they meet to be at peace with that. As Agnes said,

You know, it’s really hard on the students to come from culture class, where they’ve learned this horrific history of their people done to them by white people, and then come up and respect me when I stand up and try to teach them physics. That’s a hard transition to go through.
More important than knowledge of Native culture is the awareness of how the history between Native Americans and European Americans affects the position of white teachers in Native schools. These teachers do not expect to be experts at teaching culture; they see their role as allies. They are there to teach science and to support culture. Their thinking about what it means to support culture is always changing, and in this area, they see themselves as learners. Although they are teachers, they do not assume that they are experts in every area, especially when it comes to Native culture.

**How Do Teachers Cope With All This Uncomfortable Information?**

Some people living or working in Native communities self-medicate. Some find extended families or other sources of support; others turn to traditional Native culture and spirituality. Work in communities that have endured generations of trauma is difficult. Peacock and Miller Cleary (1998) have written extensively about teaching in Native communities that have survived the devastating impact of oppression. I talked to Agnes about how she dealt with this.

Oh well, I cried every day on the way home from work. I mean, thank God I have like a 20- to 30-minute commute, because by the time I got home I was in some kind of frame of mind to deal with my family. But it's just heartbreaking. And then somehow I guess you just kind of get a little perspective of, I don't know...you can't let it keep affecting you that way because it's just too exhausting. So somehow you kind of put it aside.

Throughout this research, the teachers told me that they enjoyed talking to me. These interviews created an opportunity for support and critical reflection. As a Native person and a teacher who is not a community member, I had both a kind of insider and outsider status. I was an insider in that I have also taught and lived in Native communities, and I could deeply empathize with their struggles. On the other hand, I was not a community member nor a tribal member in the communities in which they were teaching, and so an outsider. I had no family connections nor an influence over their jobs.

Each teacher did find a person in his or her community to confide in. Each teacher created a friendship with a Native person who was at one time a teacher. That person was not a direct authority, but could be an internal support and critic. That friend was the person who referred me to talk to them for this study.

Teachers are busy, but these teachers saw it as part of their responsibility to take the time and initiative to create a friendship with community members. They would often turn to such friends for advice or to brainstorm ideas for lessons. If they had a conflict with a Native person, they could first ask their friend for advice on how to proceed. I believe that in
doing this, they display a sense of respect for the boundaries of local community and culture that in part comes from an awareness of their positions. Similar to their stance on not being the expert at teaching Native culture, they accept their own outsider status when dealing with personal issues as well. Figuring out their place in the community—what is a stereotype and what is real—requires a kind of community learning not found during the typical school day.

Although they were both exposed to stereotypes, Agnes and Joe have worked to see Native people as they see culture: complex, changing, and full of individual variation. Both teachers were openly reflective about what they have learned—and what they have had to unlearn—as teachers at their respective schools. Joe, for example, grew up in a town bordering the Menominee reservation in Wisconsin. He said that he could have ended up either way, as an ally or as a racist. He was fortunate to witness someone close to him working with Native youth in spite of the current stereotypes. He grew up in Shawano during the time that the Menominee reservation had been terminated by the government. The community members, supported by the American Indian Movement (AIM), had taken over a building in order to fight termination. Joe remembers,

Well, I just heard stories about how they [Menominee] went and had gotten horses and stuff, and were eating the horses in there because there was no other way to get food. And I can’t remember exact stories, but I just remember that there were some pretty bad things going on there, I had dreams that Indians were taking over our community—that’s how bad it was. I can remember having these dreams where I was hiding and Indians were coming. I’m sure it was from that experience on the reservation. You couldn’t drive through the reservation because you heard stories of someone shooting at cars. You would pull over and people were actually killed, so you’re never supposed to drive through there. On the other hand, it was my father who was the high school football coach, wrestling coach, and worked on the track. So a lot of the Native American students he knew very well, and I got to know them. I would just hang out with my father at wrestling or whatever, so I knew all these people and they certainly weren’t the ones you heard about. I mean, they sure weren’t the ones you were afraid of. So, luckily, I had that background. I think that helped a lot.

Joe and Agnes understand Native culture as changing, fluid, complicated, and as having survived colonialism. One of their responses is to position themselves as teachers who are not cultural experts, but supporters of culture. They are constantly working out ways within their particular contexts to do this. They resist the position of teacher as an isolated expert.

**DISCUSSION**

Two important and related ideas emerge from my interpretation of this data. First, the idea of discontinuity between home and school cultures is
not understood as the primary cause of educational failure as expressed by these teachers, nor does cultural difference alone inform their ideas about their students. This finding directly challenges the idea that cultural discontinuity alone can account for Native student failure. The teachers in this research bring the idea of low socioeconomic status to the forefront as they discuss how they go about meeting student needs. Second, my understanding of their narratives identifies them as allies with, not instructors of, the Native identity of their students. In the position as teacher/ally, they are simultaneously in the center (as teachers) and on the margins (as white community members). They are able to inhabit this delicate position because they are aware of their own identities in relation to the context of Native American oppression. Pushing the idea of culture-based curriculum, this finding suggests that non-Native teachers acting as allies can have a supporting role to play in the development of a positive Native student identity. I believe that this research provides insights into what Erickson (1987) called

Culturally responsive pedagogy . . . one kind of special effort by the school that can reduce miscommunication by teacher and students, foster trust, and prevent the genesis of conflict that moves rapidly beyond intercultural misunderstanding to bitter struggles of negative identity exchange between some students and their teachers. (p. 355)

These interviews detail the “special effort” made by white teachers in Native schools. More than just responsive to cultural differences, they are aware of the history that these differences are rooted in. They are aware that “difference” is only defined in terms of relationship meaning; they are aware of the relationship between European and Native America. There is a place for non-Native teachers within Native culture-based schools: as allies. This kind of movement requires reflection on the part of the teachers and a willingness to look at more than superficial cultural traits. Because whiteness is so often invisible to white teachers (Landsman, 2001), this type of reflection may be especially challenging. Both Agnes and Joe have found space for reflection with the careful construction of friendships within the tribal communities in which they teach. The teachers’ own identities and positions as “not the expert” serve them particularly well within this context.

The implication for the teaching of preservice teachers is clear: teaching about Native cultures in a narrow sense is not in and of itself enough. For the teachers in this research, more powerful than their knowledge of cultural difference is their knowledge of the big picture—the context of socioeconomic and cultural oppression of Native Americans. Looking at the bigger picture may help teachers not to place blame on students for their failure to come to class prepared. For example, a teacher’s awareness of outside pressures on students helps in not placing blame on the fami-
lies. The teachers in this research repeatedly responded to such circumstances by adjusting their expectations (Peacock, 1998). Furthermore, the decisions of Agnes and Joe to avoid positioning themselves as experts in terms of teaching culture were also informed by their awareness of the history of Native and white relations.

Peacock and Miller (1998) emphasized the need for a critical consciousness among teachers of Native students. In this research, the successful teachers (Agnes and Joe) were cognizant of oppression, cultural change, and their own cultural identity. Specifically for Native peoples, the socioeconomic change that has accompanied colonization has had a great effect on intergenerational cultural transmission. Policies of assimilation, termination, and removal, for example, have had a direct effect on the severe language and cultural losses that are now an everyday part of life for many Native students. Peacock pointed to understanding the complicated effects of oppression and internalized oppression as an essential part of good teaching for Native students.

The effects of European colonization on the indigenous people of America and the accompanying devastation of many American Indian tribes that resulted have adversely affected the harmony and balance of generations of individuals and tribes. To make conscious decisions in solving problems, teachers and schools need to understand the roots of overt, covert, and institutional racism and historic oppression. (p. 61)

In terms of theory, our understanding of failure in Native American education should be expanded to include both the contribution of critical theorists that structural inequality affects school performance and the suggestion by sociolinguists that inclusion of culture and cultural patterns of communication could help improve performance. The current study dramatically points out that the notion of differences between cultures alone is an inadequate explanation for failure. Building on the work of other scholars who are trying to bridge the macro-micro debate (Ladson-Billings, 1995), effective theory in Native American education needs to include the understanding of oppression as both cultural and economic. As attested to by the teachers in this study, often our students are not afforded the luxury of such artificial categories. The understanding and the critical consciousness of teachers must not be solely preoccupied with one culture or class to the exclusion of the other.

**CONCLUSION: EXPANDING CULTURE-BASED CURRICULUM THEORY AND PRACTICE**

Rigidly defining cultures and carving cultural boundaries in stone have proved less than accurate in the modern world, to say the least. Yet, if culture resists essentialism, how can it become the content subject within
a school? How can culture-based curriculum alone account for the devastating and traumatic socioeconomic change of the past 500 years?

The culture-based curriculum movement in Indian country is faced with these questions at this time. Some scholars and activists are looking toward language as a deeper signifier of culture, one that is a conduit, not an essence (Kipp, 2000). One tribal school in this area has completely redefined the idea of culture-based curriculum and will only teach the Ojibwe language, believing that transmitting culture will follow from teaching the language in a more natural way (Hermes, 2001). Other communities are working more closely with the elders and the language to understand indigenous epistemologies as embedded in the language (Lipka, 1991; Watahomigie & McCarty, 1994) and are building connections to the mainstream curriculum from that vantage point. Perhaps for indigenous people, making a cultural curriculum is more about bringing people together than it is about extracting knowledge from books (Archibald, 1990; Sheridan, 1991). How do we teach Native culture in schools? Will teaching Native culture remedy the many wounds of oppression? It is fitting that there is not one uniform response to such enormously important questions.

In challenging the theory of cultural discontinuity, I do not believe that we should abandon the culture-based curriculum movement. The evidence that showed us that the patterns of communication were different for Odawa children and teachers than for their mainstream counterparts fueled a popular movement to bring culture into Native American and public schools, and propelled us to reexamine assumptions about teaching. Teaching Native culture in schools has brought community members into schools, created an interest in the creation of culturally based curriculum materials, and had positive effects on self-esteem (Demmert, 1994; Dick, Estell, & McCarty, 1994).

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More than a narrow definition of culture must be incorporated into both the theory and practice of Native education. Ideas of culture alone can intersect with popular and prevalent stereotypes and acts of appropriation. “Culture” brought into schools alone to remedy the complex elements of failure is often essentialized (Levinson & Holland, 1996). The culture and history of Native American oppression together create the opportunity for critical awareness that is needed by teachers.

The teachers discussed in this research are successful because they are aware of the history, culture, and current circumstances of their students. Most important, they are aware of and comfortable with their own identities as white teachers. As outsiders and allies, they are able to find their place within the community. Beyond teaching cultural skills, they are able to support the identity and culture of their students by being aware of the complex interplay of class, culture, and identity. In articulating continuities and discontinuities, we point to layers of intersecting oppressions; in telling stories of teachers who struggle, we are moving beyond explanations
for failure and moving toward an understanding of how some teachers thrive despite the odds.

AFTERWORD

The teachers written about here are, like the concept of culture invoked in this article, complex, constantly changing products of their own culture. This means that they are not without internal contradictions. It would be wrong to represent them as one-dimensional. These teachers do offer us excellent models of teachers/allies and outsiders who act in support of Native cultures. They will also be the first to admit that they continually struggle with their own internalized stereotypes about both race and class. I do not mean to paint a picture of perfect teachers for all to aspire to; I mean to inspire all of us who struggle. For this time, I shine the light on their best words and work, and I write this afterword to acknowledge that working across differences is always a work in progress.

NOTES

1. All personal names are pseudonyms.

2. This is a reference to the time on the Menominee reservation when AIM members occupied a church abbey to protest the federal government terminating the tribal status of the Menominee nation.

REFERENCES


———. In press. “Ma’iingan is just a mis-spelling of the word wolf.” A case for teaching culture through language. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*.


Additional Resources

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