2013

Introduction from "American Indian Educators in Reservation Schools"

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Recommended Citation
Huffman, Terry, "Introduction from "American Indian Educators in Reservation Schools"" (2013). Faculty Publications - School of Education. Paper 109.
http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe_faculty/109

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Introduction

My rule in kindergarten was there is no such thing as "I can't." I'd say to the children, "Look at me! I'm just a poor, little Indian girl who walked up the creek every day, and look at my wall. I've got my degrees. If I can sit in this chair, you guys can, too."

—South Dakota elementary school principal and former kindergarten teacher

The earth meets the sky in this part of America. I had just passed through a village where but a small number of souls live in a few dilapidated dwellings in one of the most remote districts of a South Dakota reservation. Cresting a ridge a few miles outside the village, I could not see a person, a building, or even a tree. The emptiness of the landscape betrayed the notion a school should somehow be out here. The prairie, long since burnt over and brown by this early October day, presented a stark yet strangely compelling vista. It held a "lonesome beauty," an old Appalachian phrase to describe places of tragedy and legacy. Indeed, the very geography itself seemed to reflect the commingling of the heritage, the history, the heartbreak, and the hope of the people who live here.

The Northern Plains frequently hide surprises from the casual observer. At the top of yet another lonely ridge, a single sign, one of the few non-natural objects visible, pointed the way to the elementary school. I pulled the car onto to a poorly maintained narrow path of a road that led down the backside of the hill. As the road twisted its way downward, the terrain began to reveal lushness absent on the higher plains. Coming around a sharp turn at the bottom of the hill, a small bridge emerged that led across a creek lined by elm and cottonwood trees. In a pleasant gulch obscured from the prairie above, a school building sat beside the creek. Clearly constructed sometime in the first half of the twentieth century, the building appeared nearly square yet rather tall, rendering a top-heavy appearance. Later I would learn
the school is about seventy-five years old. Walking up steps and through the front entrance, I observed the boys’ restroom to the right with a sign over the door reading “Wicasa.” Directly opposite on the left side of the hall a corresponding girls’ restroom displayed a sign indicating “Winyan.” A considerable number of impressive murals depicting traditional tribal life adorned the school while inspirational quotes from American Indian leaders added to the ambience. The school is located in one of the most culturally traditional districts of the reservation and most of the educators are Native persons, fluent speakers of their tribal language, and products of one of the three tiny communities served by the school. As subsequent interviews with the American Indian educators would reveal, the school not only looks but also functions consistent with tribal values and perspectives.

Admittedly, in many important respects this school is not typical of the schools I visited during the spring and fall of 2010. Nevertheless, the school and the people I met there exemplify the spirit that consistently greeted me in my sojourn commonly known as research. Despite complex, pervasive, and enduring difficulties, these educators displayed an unconquerable optimism in their contributions to the future of their people. Ultimately, the American Indian educators who participated in this research project revealed a unique and ubiquitous conviction that they could and would make a difference.

NATIVE FAITH

This book is about research with twenty-one American Indian educators serving reservations on the Northern Plains. It reports findings on a number of important issues to Native teachers and principals. Among other considerations, I was interested in learning how these American Indian educators describe the primary roles they perform, the intrinsic rewards and prevailing challenges they experience, and their thoughts on teaching in reservation schools during the era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). In the following pages, I present the experiences and perceptions of the individuals who participated in this effort as faithfully and honestly as possible. But this book is more than a report of research findings. Ann Lieberman and Lynne Miller (1992) write, “A teacher operates out of a kind of blind faith that with enough in the way of planning, rational schemes, objectives, and learning activities some learning will take place” (p. 3). No doubt most teachers operate under this canopy of hope, yet the educators I met likely supplement the “blind faith” Lieberman and Miller refer to with another unique quality—a quality that can be termed “Native faith.”
I had stopped for gas at the same convenience store on a South Dakota reservation on a couple of occasions and the woman who worked there did not recognize me as any of the locals or from one of the border towns. She was curious as to why I was there on her reservation. I told her a little about my research on American Indian educators and mentioned that I was very impressed by the devotion displayed by the people I had met. She smiled and said, "Ah yeah, they have that Native faith." I didn't think much about it at the time, but the phrase stayed with me and I found myself replaying that conversation as I drove the many miles across the high plains from reservation to reservation and from school to school. I had never heard the term before and perhaps she simply invented it for the sake of our conversation. Whatever the case, I believe she meant that against the social and personal sufferings afflicting reservations, many American Indians remain optimistic about their people and tribal traditions. This simple yet profound expression described the educators I encountered during the research investigation. Even though burdened by the seemingly overwhelming challenges they face on a daily basis, they strive on with hope, dedication, and vision. This book reports a research investigation but is really about Native faith.

Like any research activity, this research contains three fundamental elements. First, research must have a focus. Essentially, what does the researcher want to know? Second, research must have a purpose. Namely, why is it important that a researcher examine a particular topic? Third, research has an intrinsic nature. Basically, how does the researcher search for the answers to his or her questions? Taken together, the three components—focus, purpose, and nature—form the heart of what it means to conduct scholarly research. The findings and insights outlined in this book derived from these three parts. I began with a focus, a set of questions to which I sought answers. I framed the questions against an important sociocultural and historical background. The purpose of the work is straightforward enough: many American Indian reservations are distressed and educators offer hope for the future. Thus, the findings have some currency, and are important to a variety of people for a number of reasons. And finally, the work behind this book took a specific nature. I set about to systematically seek answers to my questions by following certain distinct, required procedures. Let me trace a little about the focus, purpose, and nature of the research because these features will most assuredly inform the findings reported later on.
Many reservations are dichotomous places. They offer the best chances for language and cultural preservation (Figueira, 2006; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Robertson, Jorgensen, & Garrow, 2004) but they are also sites of severe social and historical trauma (Cornell & Kalt, 2000; Villegas, 2006). American Indian teachers ply their profession against this backdrop. Educators on America's reservations face ponderous challenges. As in many rural areas, teacher shortages plague reservations (Ballou & Podgarsky, 1995; Boyer, 2006; Osterholm, Horn, & Johnson, 2006). Reservation schools tend to experience higher teacher turnover rates compared to nonreservation schools (Chavers, 2000; Miller Cleary & Peacock, 1998). This pattern persists despite the tendency for reservation schools to offer higher salaries and lower student-to-teacher ratios than nonreservation schools (Erickson et al., 2008). Moreover, a shortage of teachers of American Indian heritage compounds these challenges (Boyer, 2006). Ultimately, few problems besetting reservation education may be more serious than the related issues of a shortage of teachers on reservations and the lack of American Indian educators.

Typically, researchers have investigated these issues using quantitative approaches to examine the extrinsic rewards related to teaching in schools enrolling American Indian children (Erickson et al., 2008). While these efforts have produced important insights, they are limited in their ability to probe into complex personal and cultural phenomena (Swisher & Tippecomic, 1999). As a result, the intricate connections between American Indian educator's intrinsic rewards, everyday challenges, and the self-defined roles they play with their students and communities remain largely unexplored.

It is intriguing that, despite the current emphasis on culturally relevant pedagogical practices, schools and educational policy still largely reflect the cultural mandates of mainstream society (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Forbes, 2000). Frequently, Native peoples find themselves culturally at odds with many educational practices (Cajete, 2006; Klug & Whitfield, 2003). Most notable in this regard is the near national obsession with standardized testing used to gauge student, teacher, and school performance. Standardized testing dominates the current educational climate in the United States (Beaulieu, 2008; Hess, 2008; McGuinn, 2006; Phillips, 2006; Ravitch, 2010). As a result, some suggest that the dilemma for a significant number of American Indian educators is not merely to be good teachers, but rather to be effective educators and still remain Indian (Ambler, 1999; Beynon, 2008; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006).
Thus, the focus of this research was to explore a number of complex issues including the self-defined roles, the intrinsic rewards, and the challenges identified by American Indian educators serving reservation students and communities. Additionally, I was interested in their views on the prominence of standardized testing mandated by NCLB and the possible implications for American Indian students and reservation schools. I interviewed a small sample of American Indian teachers and principals serving children attending reservation schools with the goal of answering five fundamental questions:

1. How do the participants describe their roles as American Indian educators serving reservation students and communities?
2. What do the participants identify as their most compelling intrinsic rewards and challenges in serving reservation students and communities?
3. Is there a relationship between the roles the participants self-describe and the intrinsic rewards and challenges they identify?
4. How do the participants regard the impact of No Child Left Behind, especially the emphasis on standardized testing, on their students and schools?
5. Will the participants report they recognize the need to build the cultural identity of their students as suggested by a specific theoretical perspective known as transculturation theory?

The Purpose: American Indian Educators Serving Reservation Students

The institution of education has a dubious history for many American Indian peoples. It was extensively used as a mechanism of forced assimilation (Reyhner & Eder, 2004). Yet today some charge that educational mandates represent culturally coercive policies that are insensitive, if not deliberately destructive, to the cultural integrity of Native tribes (Forbes, 2000; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). The combined effects of historical abuse along with culturally maladroit educational practices have produced a climate in which some Native people still regard schools as foreign institutions designed by and for non-Natives (Lipka & Mohatt, 1998; Peshkin, 1997).

American Indian educators have committed themselves to serving their people through an institution that is not always highly regarded and, in fact, is frequently viewed with suspicion (Deyhle, 1992; Ward, 2005). Yet they realize the importance of their work. Thus, this research is important for a number of significant reasons. Despite the obvious importance of American Indian educators to reservation communities, researchers have largely ignored them. Researchers have examined American Indians enrolled in teacher preparation programs (Bergstrom, 2009) and Native and non-Native educators
serving American Indian students (Erickson et al., 2008; Miller Cleary & Peacock, 1998). There has been little research specifically focusing on American Indian educators who serve reservation schools, however (Cherubini, 2008; Hill, Vaughn, & Brooks-Harrison, 1995). On a purely academic level, there is much to learn about the experiences and perceptions, and successes and failures of American Indian educators.

Certainly, the findings are important to those who train educators to serve reservation students as well as to American Indians who desire to enter the profession of education. The book outlines many of the challenges and the intrinsic rewards associated with serving as an educator in reservation schools. The challenges are significant, frequently tragic, and altogether inescapable. The rewards are powerful, often surprising, and ultimately sustaining. The experiences offered by these participants offer much to those willing to learn from them.

There are additional, just as compelling, reasons for studying this topic. The findings reported in this book are important to reservation communities—most notably tribal leaders and Native parents. Found in reservation schools are their neighbors, American Indian people, who offer their service, their gifts, and their sacrifice in order to prepare Native children for the future. They make enormously important contributions not only to individual students, but also to the reservation at large. Simply put, the voices of the participants in this study reveal how much they need and desire the support of the community, parents, and tribal leaders.

Finally, the research is important to Native educators. The general response to my invitation to participate in this research effort is revealing. A few examples of the replies I received include these:

I would be honored to participate in an interview. I would like to thank you for allowing me to participate. I would love to do the interview because it will benefit our people in some way and I would like to build awareness of the shortage of [name of tribe] teachers. Thank you.

I’m grateful for your research with Native people. This helps people like me in supporting American Indian students to succeed and go on to college—or whatever their postsecondary adventures might take them.

I have looked at your website and found this interesting and would like to help in your endeavors. I live here in [name of the community] and have been raised on the [name of the reservation]. I continue to live here and plan on staying here for the duration of my life. My family is here and I like to hope that I am making a difference in all of our children’s lives. Please let me know more information as you deem fit. Thanks.
About half of the educators I contacted did not wish to participate or were unable to do so. But those who did agree to an interview displayed a remarkable enthusiasm for the project. These educators had a story to tell and they wanted to tell it. The interviews generated a large amount of rich and nuanced information. I make no pretense of reporting all the findings in this book. Nevertheless, I want to relate the most significant insights produced by the interviews. By offering their voices, it is my intent that the book will authentically communicate their collective story as educators serving reservation children.

The Nature: A Research Journey

The appendix provides the technical details on the research methodology, analytical procedures, and theoretical framework behind the investigation. However, I need to outline the essential elements of the research in order to provide context for the findings reported in the ensuing chapters. Fundamentally, the objective was to learn more about the experiences and perceptions of American Indian educators who serve reservation children. Thus, I restricted the study to include only American Indian teachers and principals who were certified, working in schools located on a reservation. This parameter actually proved to be one of the most significant challenges in the investigative endeavor. Namely, there are few Native educators. Locating and contacting individuals who met the research criteria initially presented a significant problem. Nevertheless, using information provided on state educational associations and school websites along with the personal direction of tribal officials, school superintendents, and principals, I assembled a sample list of American Indian educators meeting the research specifications.

Ultimately, I conducted the research on five reservations located in Montana and South Dakota and engaged twenty-one educators in semistructured personal interviews. Eleven of the individuals were on Montana reservations and ten were on South Dakota reservations. The sample includes more women (fifteen) than men (six), and a greater number of teachers (fourteen) than principals (seven). The sample includes more participants in elementary schools (twelve) than in middle schools and high schools (nine). Additionally, the sample generally consists of veteran professionals. The average age for the sample is forty-seven years old (with a range of thirty-one years old to sixty years old). The average length of professional experience for the sample is eighteen years (with a range of three years to thirty-three years). Because I agreed not to reveal the specific reservations and to help protect the
anonymity of the participants who came from reservations with only a few Native educators, I will not disaggregate information on the respondents. Rather, I will present information and findings in either aggregate form or in general terms. I generally refer to a specific participant by only his or her professional position and state location.

In the process of conducting each interview, I worked from a set of guide questions in order to address the five research questions driving the investigation. I left room to explore unexpected issues that arose during the interviews, however. Thus, the research resulted in a number of important extemporaneous questions. Moreover, the interviews also produced an incredible amount of data. The appendix offers a detailed description of the data analytical procedures. Suffice it to say here that the analysis of the data essentially involved a search for “themes.” A theme represents a shared perception or experience articulated by the participants. I attempted to identify and describe important themes in some detail and dignify each with a label. In this book, I generally use an arbitrary threshold to identify themes. Usually, I present only the themes discussed by seven (one-third) or more of the participants. There was simply too much information to do otherwise.

In addition to the articulation of themes, throughout this book I identify a number of important theoretical constructs. Theoretical constructs are more abstract than specific themes. I conceive a theoretical construct as a conceptual umbrella under which are found several themes. For instance, the analysis of the data led me to conclude there are two types of educators, each defined by specific roles they perform. Thus, the type of educator is a general theoretical construct, and each of the educator’s roles that work to define the kind of educator is a specific theme.

TWENTY-ONE STORIES

Twenty-one people, twenty-one stories—taken together the educators had nearly four hundred years of experience with reservation students. They held a reservoir of knowledge and wisdom. It was my honor to meet, talk, and get to know these individuals. It was also a compelling experience for all of us. It is no exaggeration to say that about half of the educators broke down and cried at some point in the interview, so powerful were their experiences and convictions. As I reflect on the nature of the interviews, I ask myself, What is the most important sentiment, experience, and perception these educators conveyed? My answer is that they hurt and yet they hope.

The educators I interviewed—all of them—serve distressed communities.
To them the difficulties besetting their communities were not abstract social problems. On a daily basis, the sufferings of the reservation enter their classrooms and are projected in the lives of their students. For these educators, reservation social problems were personal and had a young face. Throughout this research, I found professional educators who cared profoundly for their students, people, and communities. So much so, in fact, that they carried a burden likely unrecognized by many people in their respective communities. I wonder if even many tribal leaders understand the emotional encumbrances weighing on American Indian educators. Indeed, the extent of the pain and stress is hard to imagine and difficult to express. One teacher told me that in thirteen years of teaching she had lost at least one student each year to suicide. The Indian Health Service estimates that approximately one-third of the students enrolled in a middle school I visited were afflicted with a sexually transmitted disease. Many of the participants told stories of visiting former students in prison and lamented the wasted potential.

Yet the educators also were filled with hope. I was amazed by their optimism and, frankly, I found it inspirational. The knowledge that they make a difference to individual students and contribute to the future of the community sustains them. They related many tremendous success stories. They could point to achievements frequently involving students who, by any rational estimation, should not succeed.

Every one of the individuals I met recognized his or her responsibilities as community leaders. These educators straddle a chasm between hope and despair. They offer vision and direction to students, they lead by example, and they make efforts that frequently make significant contributions toward preserving tribal traditions and language. It is true these educators carried a great deal of hurt, but they also were sustained by an efficacious hope. I believe a Montana principal spoke for all the participants when, with a resolute voice, he said, “When you have been here long enough they trust you. You can help so much here. And I think that is the thing. If you got into education for the kids, this is the place. Because we do have a lot of problems within the community. . . . The kids here see we are beacons of hope for them.”

LOOKING AHEAD

Chapter 1 outlines the findings on one of the key questions behind this investigation: the self-defined roles the participants articulated they perform as educators serving reservations. This chapter also introduces an important typology of two kinds of educators: affinitive educators and facilitative educators.
This typology is foundational to the study; throughout the remainder of the book I compare the two kinds of educators. Chapter 2 introduces the personal background and pathways into the profession of education among the participants. It also offers a description of their academic training, nature of their careers, and career goals. Chapter 3 outlines the prevailing challenges the participants identified as most perplexing, while chapter 4 reports important intrinsic rewards they described. Both chapters 3 and 4 compare and contrast the kinds of challenges and intrinsic rewards articulated by affinitive educators and facilitative educators. Together these chapters answer two of the fundamental research questions of this investigation. Chapter 5 presents the participants' experiences of serving reservation schools during the era of NCLB. Additionally, it delves into their perceptions on the impact of this policy on reservation schools and children. In chapter 6 I explore a number of interrelated cultural issues. This chapter identifies the participants' views on the need for American Indian educators as well as ways to increase the number of Native teachers and administrators. It also explores how some of the participants indicated that tribal cultural strengths enhance their professional effectiveness. Finally, chapter 7 uses the theory of transculturation to examine tribal identity issues and the nature of American Indian cultural education in reservation schools. It concludes by retracing the research questions and the most significant findings resulting from this investigation, along with possible theoretical and applied implications.