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Terry Huffman

George Fox University, thuffman@georgefox.edu

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Native American Educators' Perceptions on Cultural Identity and Tribal Cultural Education: An Application of Transculturation Theory

Terry Huffman

Native Americans display one of the highest secondary education attrition rates in the United States. Understanding ways to improve the educational experience for Native students is essential for the vitality of reservations and individuals. This paper reports the partial findings derived from a qualitative study using personal interviews as a primary data collection technique with 21 Native American elementary and secondary educators serving reservation schools in the Northern Plains. The research question posed in this paper is: Will the participants recognize the need to build the cultural identity of their students as suggested by transculturation theory? Consistent with the premise of transculturation theory, the educators regarded a strong cultural identity reinforced by culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum as critical to the success of their students. Additionally, they related the general opinion that reservation schools can and should provide significant contributions toward cultural and language preservation. Nevertheless, they identified significant barriers preventing schools and educators from fulfilling that role. The paper concludes by outlining a number of important scholarly, pedagogical, and policy implications derived from the professional experiences reported by the participants.

I don't know for sure what happened. I really think we just didn't handle it right. You know they say in order to know the language you have to know the culture. So did we take the culture away in school settings?

— South Dakota educator lamenting the cultural loss and the lack of tribal cultural education in schools
The South Dakota principal had served reservation schools for three decades. She spoke Lakota fluently and embraced the traditions of her people. She also was a highly respected and noted educator. If anyone had the vantage point of years of professional experience and tribal cultural knowledge certainly it was this individual. With the wisdom of a school leader and a tribal elder she described the current situation on her reservation:

I just talked to a man who works in the Tribal Education office about the culture and how we can have families learn the language. They surveyed people in the community and they don’t feel like they need to know the language. “Why would I want to know it?,” “It’s not going to help me get a job,” “No one to talk to.” We have a lot of work to do if that’s the thought in the community. And I was sharing with him that when I taught Head Start years ago, [name of community] was probably the most traditional community and hardly any of those kids are speaking the language anymore down there. And it hasn’t been boarding schools or anything like that that has taken it away. It’s just like, what happened? We would pick those kids up, little four year olds and they’d just be speaking the language. And no one ever said you can’t speak it. It was allowed. And there was some teachers who could speak the language too who could speak to them...It is sad to think that people don’t think it’s important to know the language.

This paper reports partial findings from research on the experiences and perceptions of Native American educators serving reservation schools. In the larger study I explored a variety of issues including the roles they performed as educators, the intrinsic rewards as well as prevailing challenges they encountered, and their experiences teaching in reservation schools during the era of No Child Left Behind (Huffman, 2013). However, here I focus on two specific issues. I apply transculturation theory as a way to consider the participants’ perceptions on their students’ cultural identity and the nature of tribal cultural education in their schools. Transculturation theory contends a strong cultural identity is essential for academic success among Native American students (Huffman, 2010). Specifically, I used transculturation theory as a conceptual guide to analyze the responses of the educators in order to consider their perceptions on the cultural identity of students and their views on tribal cultural education in reservation schools. By tribal cultural education I include a collection of interrelated efforts the educators discussed including culturally relevant teaching approaches and curriculum specifically designed to instruct about tribal history, traditions and language.

Transculturation theory is an established theoretical perspective found in Native American education literature. It is growing in usage among scholars and includes the influence from a variety of scholarly sources. Nevertheless it represents a relatively new theoretical perspective. As such, in this paper I review the scholarship that has specifically emerged from transculturation theory.
Transculturation Theory
Transculturation theory developed specifically as a framework to explain the higher educational experiences of culturally oriented Native American students. Moreover, this theory is unique among most theoretical perspectives in that it attempts to explain why Native Americans are successful in college rather than why they fail (Huffman, 2010). Essentially, transculturation theory maintains culturally oriented Native American students learn the cultural nuances found in mainstream higher education while retaining and relying upon their cultural heritage to forge a strong identity and sense of purpose (Huffman, 2001; White Shield, 2009). Ultimately, one’s cultural identity serves as a social psychological anchor enabling the tribally oriented individual to gain the confidence necessary to engage the mainstream institution without fear of cultural loss.

A key assumption of this framework is that individuals continually engage in cultural learning. Fundamentally, transculturation is a form of socialization and in that regard is similar to the more commonly used concept of biculutration. However, there are significant conceptual differences between transculturation and biculutration. For instance, many scholars treat biculutration comparable to a mathematical equation in which individuals add cultural elements from the dominant society makes alignments with cultural elements from their original cultural background and subsequently relinquishes unnecessary cultural ways. Ultimately, biculutration assumes a sort of cultural hybrid end product. However, this typical conceptualization has been criticized as little more than a variation of assimilation (see Henze & Vanett, 1993; O’Sullivan, 2007).

Transculturation theory, on the other hand, implies an ongoing process of cultural encounters and resultant expansion of one’s cultural repertoire (Sill, 1967). The individual never achieves the “end product” of biculutration. Rather, according to transculturation theory, the situation for Native American college students is analogous to a person on an international journey experiencing many different cultural encounters, some of which an individual can relate to, many others in which the traveler cannot. At first, the traveler is disoriented and finds little with which to relate. Each cultural element needs to be tested and evaluated. In time the traveler learns to relate to the new culture on its own terms. This does not mean, however, that the individual has surrendered one’s original cultural heritage. On the contrary, the international traveler broadens personal experiences and skills, but not at the expense of native ways (as commonly implied by biculutration). The point is transculturation as a socialization process assumes the cultural identity of the individual remains intact; nevertheless, new options now exist.

Transculturation is a process of exploring evermore deeply into a cultural context, testing out another culture, realigning with what is learned and making new discoveries. Therefore, it is also a journey into one’s own
culture. Each discovery about a new culture results in revelations about the complexities of one’s own cultural milieu. Thus, the notion of transculturation emphasizes the capacity for individuals to build on preexisting cultural knowledge (Lee, 2007). Put another way, transculturation is a process of learning how to learn a new and old culture.

Review of the Literature

A growing body of research supports transculturation theory. A complete discussion on how transculturated identities are formed is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a number of scholars have systematically examined the process of transculturation and offer detailed analyses of the results (see for example Huffman, 2008; Lee, 2007; White Shield, 2009). This review examines some of the most notable efforts which have specifically used transculturation theory as a conceptual framework.

Huffman, Sill, and Brokenleg (1986) were among the first to test transculturation theoretical assertions. They found a statistically significant relationship between identification with tribal culture and academic success among a sample of South Dakota Native American university students. Davis (1992) also used transculturation theory to guide her qualitative research with Montana Native American college students. The participants in her study reported tumultuous transitions to the university. However, they eventually drew strength from their ethnicity in order to successfully engage the college mainstream setting.

Okagaki, Helling, and Bingham (2009) used a comparative approach to examine Native American and white college experiences. A major component of their research included testing transculturation theory’s assertion that a strong cultural identity is associated with academic achievement. Thus, they analyzed the relationship between attitudes toward cultural identity and views on education among the Native American participants. Consistent with transculturation theory, they report strong Native American cultural identity is associated with a high regard for the instrumental importance of education.

I too documented the process of transculturation by examining the experiences of 21 Native American college students involved in a qualitative study over a five-year period (Huffman, 2001, 2008). While virtually all the students initially encountered extremely problematic situations, most of them successfully proceeded through college. A strong cultural identity proved the central factor in their success.

White Shield (2009) investigated the experiences of eight Native American undergraduate and graduate women. As part of her effort White Shield offers a distinctively Indigenous approach to scholarly research which she refers to as the “Medicine Wheel Culturally Intrinsic Research Paradigm Model.” In this method White Shield consulted with tribal elders on such research issues as the recruitment of participants, the interpretation of the data, and the implications of the findings. White Shield used transculturation
theory as the conceptual framework to guide the research and her theoretical assumptions. Her investigation documents the importance of cultural strengths to her participants. She also provides evidence that a strong cultural identity enables even the most traditionally oriented Native American person to successfully engage mainstream higher education.

In a quantitative study, I used transculturation theory to examine a number of factors associated with self-reported plans to live on a reservation following completion of college (Huffman, 2011). A strong cultural identity was one of the most powerful predictors of both career and residential plans. My findings indicate individuals more closely aligned with traditional culture tend to desire a career in which they can serve Native peoples and more likely to plan to live on a reservation upon completion of college.

**Theoretical Framework**

Scholars predominately use transculturation theory to examine the experiences of Native American college students. However, I reasoned transculturation theory could aid in understanding the experiences and perceptions of educational professionals who teach with one foot in the mainstream (e.g., schools largely based on mainstream standards and curriculum) and one foot in more culturally traditional settings (e.g., reservation communities). Transculturation theory rests upon the fundamental assertion that a strong cultural identity promotes effective participation in mainstream institutions. Operating from this premise I wanted to examine if the participants would identify a strong cultural identity as essential for the academic success of their students and whether they would regard schools as instruments to reinforce tribal culture. Thus, I identified a fundamental theoretical assumption to guide both the questions I posed to the participants as well as what to look for during the analysis of the data: The participants will emphasize the importance of a strong cultural identity among their students and the need for tribal cultural education to support the cultural identity development of students.

I intentionally did not include questions directly addressing this theoretical assumption on the interview schedule. For instance, I did not ask, "Is it important for students to possess a strong cultural identity?" While that question addresses the theoretical assumption, it is obviously leading and sure to generate specific responses. Who would say "no" to such a question? Instead, I offered a global question (and occasional probes) that allowed the educator to answer in whatever fashion the participant wished. Specifically, I asked, "Let's talk about tribal culture and language and schools. What issues, thoughts, and experiences would you like to tell me about regarding tribal culture and schools?" I reasoned the presentation of such an open ended question would allow the participants to respond in ways significant to their experiences as educators. Further, I had confidence in the strength of transculturation theory's assertion that a strong cultural identity is critical for
Native American students and felt the participants would likely gravitate toward this issue in their responses. Conversely, if the participants did not indicate these views or if they provided answers contradictory to the key assumption of transculturation theory, then the data analysis would reveal cultural identity may not be as essential in the estimation of these participants as the theory proposes.

Method

The project called for an exploratory, qualitative design with personal interviews as a way to document the perceptions and experiences of the participants. The research process consisted of four steps including gaining institutional approvals, sampling and contacting participants, the personal interviews, and data analysis.

I made initial contact with a number of tribal chairs and/or tribal councils throughout the Northern Plains and informed them of the nature and purpose of the research. Ultimately, I secured institutional permission from tribal authorities to conduct interviews on two Montana reservations and three South Dakota reservations. Next, I contacted superintendents and principals of various school systems on those five reservations and supplied them with information on the nature and purpose of the research.

The parameters required all participants be active educators (including teachers and principals), Native American, and currently serving in a reservation school. Unfortunately, the fact there are so few Native American educators frustrated the research effort and simply identifying the Native educators from each of the five reservations proved challenging. Using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques I assembled a sampling list of forty-five Native American educators. I contacted all individuals on the sampling list with an invitation to participate in the research. Twenty-five out of the 45 (56 percent) initially agreed to an interview. However, due to scheduling conflicts and unforeseen personal circumstances, I ultimately interviewed 21 (47 percent) of the educators included on the original sampling list.

Eleven of the participants were from the two Montana reservations while ten were from the three South Dakota reservations. Women (15) outnumbered men (six) in the sample and teachers (14) were more numerous than principals (seven). The majority of the participants were found in elementary schools (12) rather than secondary schools (nine). Further, the sample generally consisted of veteran professionals. The average age for the sample was 47 years old with the youngest participant 31 years old and the oldest 60. The average length of experience as an educator was 17 years for the sample with a range of three years to 33 years. Table 1 presents the essential characteristics of the sample.

During the semi-structured interviews I proceed from an interview schedule consisting of guide questions while simultaneously pursuing
Table 1. Characteristics of the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Professional Position</th>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Length of Experience</th>
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<td>secondary</td>
<td>35</td>
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</table>

important issues as they emerged. In fact, I provided a copy of the guide questions to each participant before personally meeting for the face-to-face interview. I felt compelled to do this for several reasons. First, I was more interested in the considered reflections of the educators than the spontaneous responses to “surprise” questions. Second, Native peoples have been subjected to some dubious research in the past that has resulted in unfortunate consequences (Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999). As such, I wanted the participants to see for themselves that the interview questions were not only personally inoffensive but could potentially produce significant information for reservation educators.

I recorded each interview with the permission of the participant. These recordings were later transcribed. Moreover, I kept detailed field notes on the general nature of the educators’ experiences and perceptions, and relevant observations on the reservations, communities, and schools. I took specific care to note anything that might prove theoretically significant. The data analysis approach involved a three phrase process of initial coding, focused coding, and thematic coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Maxwell, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the initial coding treatment, I sorted answers to each of the interview schedule questions (along with other extemporaneous questions) into tentative response categories. During this phase I employed an “in vivo” coding technique to create response categories. In the second phase I reviewed the initial coding
categories in order to identify similarities among the responses. Thus, I collapsed individual responses into a smaller number of common response categories. I continued this procedure until satisfied I could no longer reasonably merge categories. At this point I treated the finalized categories as themes. As part of the thematic coding I considered the themes for conceptual similarities and looked for theoretical connections between them.

Results

The research revealed rich, textured findings. I present the most relevant findings in two parts. First, I discuss the cultural identity issues described by the participants. Second, I outline the issues associated with tribal cultural education. A consideration of the findings in the light of transculturation theory follows the presentation of the findings.

Cultural Identity Issues

The data analysis revealed two significant findings related to cultural identity issues. A number of the educators contended their students face cultural ambiguity and require a strong cultural identity and almost an equal number related that a strong cultural identity facilitates academic success.

Generally, the educators in this sample recognized the importance of a strong cultural identity for their students. In fact, 11 of the 21 individuals specifically discussed the significance of their students’ cultural identity. Of particular concern was the lack of cultural identity among their students. For example, a Montana principal described his students as being lost without a cultural point of reference to anchor their lives:

I think our kids are lost in some ways. They’re searching for some kind of spiritual, higher calling and they’re searching for their identity, they’re searching for their culture, they’re searching for anything they can latch onto and it’s just not there. In some ways you are just a [name of tribe] and not really connected to your culture. And anybody that tells you different is really lying because it’s really not, because our kids don’t speak much language, they don’t have any sort of spiritual base to their traditional culture. They really don’t know a whole lot about it.

Two of the participants stated that some students reject tribal culture. One, a Montana principal, however, argued that educators can combat the cultural rejection of students by stressing the importance of tribal heritage:

At times it is even to where the kids are totally against it. Kind of rejecting their Native roots...I think part of the reason why kids are tagging things and part of the reason why they are getting into gangs is they have this idea that to be Native is bad. They get it from all over. I know that one of the things we have tried to do here is to say, “No, we are pretty proud of who we are and it’s time we need to clean this up and we need to do this because that is who we are.”...Just emphasizing the part that it’s okay to be Native American.
The other participant, a South Dakota elementary teacher, expressed concern over the severe cultural rejection she has witnessed among some of her students. In a poignant story she related a revealing encounter with a former student:

It is their identity. It's who they are. There was a young man one time and he came to the house and he was drinking. And he said, "Can I talk to you?"...He said, "I'm ashamed to be Indian." And I said, "Why? Why are you ashamed to be Indian?" "Because," he said, "they always talk about us being dog eaters and make fun of us being poor and living on the welfare system and being dumb." And I said, ..."I know what it is like when people make you feel bad and say things about Indian people that you know aren't true. That's out of ignorance. They don't know who you are. There is a lot of good things about you. We give to the people. People don't understand that." So when he came to me with that, it made me really feel bad because there are a lot of kids out there like that. So it's really important [to establish a strong cultural identity] because then they can succeed and make a decision to say, "Okay, I know who I am." They are not lost, trying to figure out that part of it.

Almost half of the participants, ten of the twenty-one, related that grounding in tribal culture leads to academic success. This perception is consistent with transculturation theory's assertion that a strong cultural identity equips Native students with the emotional and cultural means to academically succeed (Huffman, 2010). A Montana educator explained the relationship between tribal culture and educational success among the students at his reservation:

If you are taught your cultural values and your cultural history, I think we would see a lot more success in Indian communities educationally...I think in an Indian community there is a unique point of view. Often times that perspective is neglected by our education system and I think the kids would connect with it and connect with school a lot more if it was taught in a way that matched their worldview... I would like to see some more traditional values stressed in our school days and these kids understand that's it about community. It's about the people. You trace back Native names [of tribal groups] and translate those names and they translate into like "the First People," or "the Real People." That's their identity before they are individuals they are part of something that's greater than themselves.

Another Montana teacher related a similar perspective. In fact, his views are consistent with transculturation theory's assertion that culturally oriented Native American students achieve academically because they draw strength from their culture and identity:

There is more than a few that do speak their language and they follow their culture. But they come from solid backgrounds....Their families are culturally orientated. They speak the language at home. Those are the kids that succeed. Because right now we are almost like at a crossroad in our culture here. You can almost identify the kids that are going to succeed in life....And those are the types of kids I see that are succeeding, that have a
A strong background in their culture and their language.... And it's both sides. It's got to be our traditions and our cultural knowledge combined with educational knowledge. If you are armed with those two, you have your spear in one hand and you have your pipe and shield in the other hand and you walk down that road of education, I think you are going to succeed.

A Montana principal described her efforts to enhance the cultural identity of third grade students. This educator clearly embraced the vital connection between a strong cultural identity and the future success for her students:

"Have you ever seen a real Indian?" I asked that question of my third graders the last year I was teaching. I said, "Raise your hand if any of you have ever seen a real Indian." Every single one of those kids were Indian, by the way, three hands went up — three hands went up! And one kid raised and he said, "Wait, now, I think I did. Well, my uncle did" [laughs]. And I had a little mirror and I walked around and showed it to them. I said when you're looking in this mirror; you're looking at a real Indian. I said when you look at me; you're looking at a real Indian. And being Indian doesn't mean having powwow regalia — it's who we are. And so I worked all year long to instill that in them. And so at the end of the year, I said, "Raise your hand if you have ever seen a real Indian." And all their hands went up. "We see one every time we look in the mirror."

**Schools and Tribal Cultural Education**

Because I was working from the transculturation theoretical framework, which asserts a cultural foundation is critical for academic success, I was attentive to the participants’ perceptions and experiences on the nature of tribal education in their schools. Based on the premise of the guiding theoretical assumption, I reasoned if an educator considers a strong cultural identity as fundamental to the success of students, the participant would also regard the nature of tribal cultural education offered by schools is also vitally important. At the outset of the investigation, I assumed the educators would likely discuss issues directly connected to the cultural identity development needs of students. However, the respondents went beyond this focus and described how reservation schools can support the cultural needs of both their students and the larger tribe. Based on the accounts offered by the educators, tribal cultural education in reservation schools is filled with potential, complexities, and no small amount of frustration. Generally, the participants argued schools can provide tremendous service by helping to preserve or enhance tribal cultural traditions and language. A number of them also felt frustrated over the lack of leadership and commitment to tribal cultural education. Additionally, the pressure to meet educational standards in core subjects mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), in the estimation of some of the educators, has reduced the emphasis on tribal cultural education subjects and teaching approaches. Likely this pressure contributed to their sense of frustration.
The analysis of the interviews revealed three themes associated with tribal cultural education. First, the participants stressed the importance of general culturally relevant learning and instruction. Second, they related that schools can assist in the preservation of tribal culture and language. Third, a number of the participants conveyed their frustration with the lack of leadership required to guide tribal education efforts.

Sixteen of the 21 educators discussed the importance of culturally relevant teaching practices and tribal cultural curriculum. Some of the participants spoke of the natural and simple ways in which the educators at their schools make learning experiences culturally relevant for students. Other educators spoke of the need for curriculum specially designed to teach tribal history, language, and traditions. A Montana teacher related his efforts to infuse tribal history and traditions while teaching young students:

We do a lot of discussion and we talk about how there is a textbook history and I tell my kids there is a history that is for the most part unwritten for elementary kids. You can go to college and you can take Native American classes and you can find out that history but in our elementary school all that history is not there. So I try to bring as much of that perspective from my Native American studies background as I can to my social studies curriculum....

Likewise a South Dakota educator related her personal journey growing up in a culturally oriented family, leaving the reservation, and eventually returning as a teacher. Her experiences reveal the intersection between a strong cultural identity and the importance of tribal cultural education:

The identity is very important because you can really suffer as a Native American. It was real difficult leaving the reservation and going to a non-Native community and trying to get an education. Feeling the hardship of what it was to be Native...It would become so discouraging living in a non-Native society and how it was at that point...It was a hard teaching. But somewhere in there came a balance because I had seen my folks and grandparents being very Native and hanging in there. So it's a conditioning process as well having that Dakota way of life, being conditioned with traditions. Tradition and values are very important....Our language is us. It is our identity....History is very important to teach....There is a lot that goes into that and so just having your lessons based on those types of history is very, very important for us as educators to impart to our young people.

Five of the participants, however, specifically identified mandates associated with NCLB as frustrating their efforts to deliver tribal cultural curriculum. A South Dakota educator reflected on the changes she has witnessed over the past decade. For her the drive to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in her school has greatly diminished the emphasis on tribal history and language subjects:
When I first started there was a lot of integration of Lakota culture and language. We had grants where we had Title III staff and I had Title VII teachers who knew the language and they went into the classroom and they also worked with the teacher to integrate the culture. But that is gone. I mean almost every classroom had those types of teachers. Now in the district we only have four....But that hasn’t been our drive with NCLB. It’s been reading, math and making sure we do what we have to do. So we’ve lost that and now we have to try to bring it back somehow....You can’t just have kids sitting in rows regurgitating information it’s not going to happen....But like I said we lost that a little bit and when we found out we have to show performance. We kind of eliminated the language and the culture side.

A South Dakota principal too described the de-emphasis on tribal cultural education efforts resulting from the pressures of NCLB as a challenge. She particularly resented the outside interference in the education of reservation children:

As a Native leader I feel like I really know what Native children need and we have moved so far away from the culture and the language when we should have been looking more at where these kids are coming from when they come into the classroom. We should be setting up our schools for their culture not outsiders coming and saying, “OK, this is the culture. You have to perform and you have to produce.”

A large number of the educators expressed concern over the loss of tribal culture and language. However, a majority of the participants, 15 of the 21, argued reservation schools can serve their communities by assisting to preserve tribal cultural history, language, and traditions. A Montana educator reflected on the need for schools to help preserve the tribal history and language of his people. He compared his own personal educational experiences growing up on the reservation with the potential for schools to enhance the cultural learning of students:

One of the places where traditional culture, values, and behavior can be preserved is in our schools. We need like-minded educators who think along those lines and want to preserve tribal identity and tribal history so those kids can have a connection to their past and understand who they are and where they come from and why they are in a situation that they are in. Why do they live on a reservation? When we went to school, we weren’t taught that. We were not taught tribal history. We were given the textbook history and it was hard to connect to it because it wasn’t ours.

In the view of one South Dakota educator because the community and families are not teaching children tribal culture and language, schools must assume this responsibility. Regarding the status of the tribal language on her reservation she stated, “Because the parents don’t [teach the language]. The community doesn’t. It’s not like they are teaching the language, I wish they would, the community people. But it’s on our shoulders now. So I do it throughout the day. I teach the language.”
Another South Dakota teacher explained that it is imperative for schools to play a critical role in preserving tribal culture. Frequently, however, pressing personal and family challenges occupy parents’ immediate attention and energy with the result that cultural concerns seem small by comparison. As such, reservation schools stand in the breach of cultural loss:

They all have that beautiful background. They come from that heritage. So once you start talking with them about where they come from or the importance of what that value is, that cultural value of generosity, of humility, you are attaching the language and the meaning and how one carries himself. And that is what is missing. That is attached to all those ceremonies for us as a people. So much of that has been put on the back burner...So a lot of that is missing from their lives and they don’t even know it...Many times our families at home aren’t going to be able to say, “We come from a beautiful history. We come from a beautiful culture.” They’re trying to figure out how to pay bills. They’re trying to figure out how to put food on the table. So somewhere like here at [name of the school] we can provide culture and history and the beautiful things that we really come from and the sacrifices of the ancestors. It is important to pass that down.

While the educators recognized the potential for schools to assist in cultural preservation, unfortunately a few also indicated reservation schools fail to prepare students with adequate cultural education. For a Montana educator the combination of a lack of resources in the school district and the declining number of individuals fluent in her language pose serious threats to the cultural integrity of the tribe as well to the potential for reservation schools to assist with cultural preservation. She related, “I really fear for my people here because our language teacher in the school has retired and the people that speak the language, they’re getting older, and they’re dying. So it’s like, OK, who’s going to carry that on when they’re gone? It’s scary because our whole culture is in that language.”

Some of the participants indicated frustration over the lack of educational and political leadership to guide tribal cultural education efforts. Indeed, seven of the 21 participants identified the need for greater visionary leadership before schools can fulfill cultural responsibilities to students and the community. Perhaps more significantly, of the seven individuals who specifically discussed the lack of leadership on tribal cultural education, six were from South Dakota and only one was from Montana where the state’s Indian Education for All initiative mandates that educators infuse Native American history and culture into the curriculum. Indeed, a South Dakota educator put the matter rather bluntly: “It’s frustrating for us because that’s part of the district’s founding documents that we are going to respect the culture and language. But the district doesn’t do a very good job walking the talk.”

A South Dakota educator revealed her frustration with the lack of leadership to effectively use schools to enhance tribal culture and language.
For this individual, a general failure among classroom teachers and administrators has resulted in terrible consequences:

For so long the tribe depended on the schools to teach it and it didn't happen. We have kids in the high school and middle school who can beat other schools in the Lakota Language Bowl but it's just competition. It's not to speak the language every day. I would like to bring in the culture a lot more. And I think the more they hear the language and the importance of it, there might be people who say, "I want to go further and learn the language." Because we are really losing our students fast. Because we have lost that [traditional culture] I think they are looking elsewhere to replace it and we have so many gangs and the suicide rate is so high, and the hopelessness. It is a big challenge because it's not just a school challenge. It's a reservation-wide challenge.

Application of Transculturation Theory

The educators who participated in this research generally regarded a strong cultural identity reinforced by culturally relevant learning experiences as important to the success of their students. Their experiences suggest to them that students require a secure cultural foundation. Moreover, they also believed schools can provide cultural grounding for students while simultaneously serving the reservation by assisting to preserve tribal traditions and language. Their perceptions align with the assertions found within transculturation theory. Indeed, many of the participants addressed issues of cultural identity and tribal education presented in open-ended questioning in the manner indicated by this theoretical framework. This, of course, does not provide empirical evidence that students with a strong cultural identity reinforced by tribal cultural education are more academically successful. But it does demonstrate that a substantial proportion of the Native American educators in this study believed that to be the case.

While this investigation did not empirically test the validity of the perceptions offered by the participants, a number of researchers have reported findings supporting their views. Research over the past 20 years provide evidence for the importance of a strong cultural identity among Native students. Robert Vadas (1995) reported that identification with Native language, culture, and traditions is connected to a number of positive educational outcomes among a sample of Navajo middle and high school students. Although his findings on the relationship between adherence to tribal traditions and academic achievement are mixed, Vadas concludes a strong cultural identity enhances the self-esteem and sense of purpose among Native students.

Whitbeck, Mitchell, and Spicer (2001) explored a variety of factors associated with educational success among nearly 200 Native American children from three reservations located in the Upper Plains. They found identification with traditional culture is positively related to success in school. Similarly, using survey research with 240 urban Native American students,
Powers (2006) too found an important link between positive educational outcomes and cultural identity. She reported that culturally based educational practices affirming the cultural identity and heritage of Native students are associated with the perception of a safe, secure school environment, greater parental involvement, and instructional quality.

In contrast to the findings reported in these studies, Whitesell, Mitchell, and Spicer (2009) did not find a significant relationship between cultural identity and academic success in a longitudinal study with over 1,600 Native American students. These authors suggest that, "students with high American Indian identity might actually reject academic goals as not consistent with traditional American Indian ways" (p. 39).

The findings reported by Whitesell et al. may not be as contradictory to the conclusions reached by other researchers as they might at first appear. Likely both assertions are correct. That is, many Native students need a strong identity to succeed in schools but some students possessing a strong cultural identity reject schools as foreign institutions which do not represent their cultural values, worldview and identity (Peshkin, 1997). Indeed, I found culturally oriented college students diverge largely in the way they use their cultural identity (Huffman, 2001; 2008). In this study, one group, holding a strong culturally oriented identity rejected the university as representing mainstream values and worldview and dropped out of college. Another group used their strong culturally oriented identity to proceed through and eventually succeed in college. I believe a similar situation likely exists among precollege students in reservation schools as occurs among postsecondary students attending largely non-Native universities and colleges. Indeed, some of the educators who participated in this study discussed what one Montana teacher described as a "reserve racism mentality" that leads some students to dismiss academic success as for white students. However, other Native students use their strong cultural identity to confidently proceed through school:

Honestly I think there's like in our community a reverse racism mentality where education, doing good in school is for Whites. There's an attitude like that I believe and it kind of hinders kids that education is not important. As an Indian educator I have to combat that mentality and stress to these kids that education is important....Growing up I heard that in places where school and education isn't for Indian kids. And I think there are groups on the reservation who think that and their kids come to school with that attitude. And I think a lot of that stems from the early education of Native people and the boarding school system and the loss of language and culture where it was a negative experience for our elders. For some of them. And it taught them to not to value it because it wasn't important because there was a negative connection to education. I think that is changing. I think on the reservations there's starting to be peer pressure to go to college and do something.... It's not a whole lot of people right now but it's more than it was twenty years ago.
A strong cultural identity may be essential for Native American educational success, but of equal importance is the guidance offered by Native educators. As Miller Cleary and Peacock (1998) succinctly argue, "schools that acknowledge, accept, and teach a child's cultural heritage have significantly better success in educating these students" (p. 108). Brown et al. (2007) documented the importance of tribal teachers in shaping the cultural identity of adolescents. Although they did not specifically identify reservation school educators as tribal teachers, their findings are nonetheless relevant to the potential role schools may perform in this regard. They conclude that one of the most powerful factors in developing a tribal identity for adolescents is the number of adult tribal teachers from which to learn. Outside of families, adolescents are unlikely to have fewer or less persistent exposure to learning experiences than in schools. Their findings reinforce the potential for reservation educators to provide tribal education to students and, thereby, assist in efforts to preserve tribal culture.

Discussion

This article reports on the perceptions of Native American educational professionals. It is important to bear in mind that those perceptions are more than idiosyncratic impressions; they represent experiences born from years of service to reservation students, schools, and communities. As such, we can derive a number of important theoretical, pedagogical, and policy implications from the professional experiences reported by the participants.

The notion of transculturation served as a sensitizing concept guiding this research. The findings offer preliminary support for an expansion of transculturation theory as a useful tool in understanding phenomena beyond the postsecondary experiences of Native American students. Namely, the Native educators in this study generally indicated experiences and perceptions consistent with transculturation theory's fundamental premise that a strong cultural identity facilitates educational success. Closer examination of the issues, processes, and barriers associated with the cultural identity development of Native American students enrolled in reservation schools using transculturation theory promise important avenues for future research.

The findings suggest significant pedagogical implications. Generally, the educators I interviewed realized the vital importance of culturally relevant instruction. Others have documented valuable ways in which Native and non-Native teachers can develop and deliver culturally relevant instruction (Miller Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Zehr, 2007). However, the participants in this study identified something more than deliberately crafted classroom practices. They related the need for Native educators to infuse tribal values, worldview, and language, in substantial, natural ways into instruction. This goes well beyond simply using a few cultural elements as add-ons to current instructional practices. Rather their experiences argue for a natural integration of tribal culture delivered by teachers who truly understand and live those values and
worldview (Skinner, 1999). This suggests the need for transculturated Native teachers — individuals who freely and effectively move within and between cultural milieus. Researchers might more closely explore the cultural identity of Native American educators. Specifically, research on the likelihood of transculturated teachers serving in reservation classrooms would be intriguing.

The findings also indicate important educational policy implications. If pedagogy is how teachers teach then curriculum constitutes what they teach. Reservation tribal leaders must encourage and support their school leaders in developing tribal cultural education curriculum specific to their people. Tribal policy and educational leaders need to recognize that when it comes to cultural education, “one size does not fit all.” A “Native American” cultural education curriculum is not as good as a “tribal” cultural education curriculum. Certainly tribes have a shared history they can and should draw from, but the unique features of each individual tribe’s history, traditions, and language should not be ignored for a generic Native American curriculum. This will present numerous challenges and require great resources, especially for the many reservations populated by more than one tribal people. Nevertheless, the potential benefits derived from such curricular developments are likely inestimable in terms of student success, the development of reservation communities, and cultural retention.

The findings reveal the need for tribal leaders to recruit highly qualified Native educators who are conversant with good teaching practices, subject content, and tribal culture. Likely tribal colleges will continue to play a crucial role in these efforts. It only makes sense that tribal colleges are uniquely situated to equip educators to meet the social, cultural, and pedagogical needs of reservation children (Ambler, 1999; Boyer, 2006; Lamb, 2010). The development of teacher education programs in tribal college is crucial.

Finally, the findings reveal the participants recognized that reservation schools can and should be mechanisms helping preserve tribal culture. The widespread enlistment of reservation schools to assist in cultural preservation will require nothing less than a monumental shift in thinking and decision making. The participants frequently pointed to the indifference toward education on their reservations. Many indicted their tribal leadership as apathetic toward schools. A Montana teacher eloquently summarized his frustration with the lack of tribal political leadership on education:

> Community leaders, tribal governments need to stress that [the importance of schools]. On our reservation they have the most political influence...At some point the community is going to have to realize that education is the way that we are going to improve the state that we are in...But I think it has to begin with educated leadership. And from there, you get good leaders, you got educated people making good decisions then that’s going to help those kids out...Maintaining the status quo in Indian communities to me is not acceptable...There is some push towards
reform. It’s not really a big push now. And it can’t be up to the federal government or the state government. It’s got to be up to the tribal leadership. People that have a vested interest in the community....People have to step into roles and take leadership and say things that some people might not want to hear or haven’t heard before. Otherwise nothing is going to change, things will be the same. We’ve got a 47 percent dropout rate right now we had a 50 percent dropout rate when I went to school. If nothing changes in the next 15 years, half of these kids will not graduate. But I’m doing what I can and these kids see that. We have other good teachers doing what they can. If we get enough good teachers, we get enough support, they will succeed.

The suggestion that schools be used for cultural preservation is admittedly potentially controversial. For a variety of reasons there remains resistance to teaching cultural values and language in schools. For some tribes many culturally elements (and even language) are so scared that open discussion of these matters is regarded as unacceptable and some prefer tribal culture be taught privately within appropriate tribal relationships (Mondragón & Stapleton, 2005; Peshkin, 1997; Woodrum, 2009). Nevertheless, as it currently stands, for many tribes, schools may well be the most underused resource in the struggle to preserve tribal traditions and language. How ironic it would be if the institution of formal education once a destructive force aligned against tribal cultures ultimately proved itself as an instrument of cultural preservation for Native peoples.

Terry Huffman, Ph.D., is a Professor of Education in the Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership at George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon. A more complete treatment of the research leading to this article can be found in American Indian Educators in Reservation Schools, University of Nevada Press.

References


