

2018

# Tribal Strengths and American Indian Students (Chapter Three of Tribal Strengths and Native Education)

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## 3

## Tribal Strengths and American Indian Students

I belong to a unique set of people who are survivors! We are still here. I love being Native!

—Montana middle school student responding to the question, “What does it mean to be American Indian?”

It takes no small amount of courage to teach middle school students. Tammy has the necessary courage and a lot more too. On one of my visits to her class, I wanted to know what her students believe it means to be American Indian. So I asked.<sup>1</sup> When you ask a group of middle school kids a question, it is hard to tell what answers you might get in return. In this case most of the responses revealed just how important the question was for this class of young Native students. They generally appeared to deeply consider what to say, with several writing down their responses before responding verbally. The seriousness of the answers underscored the significance of the question. The themes surrounded notions of relatives, history, and respect. Consider a few of the typical responses.

Being Native to me means that I am proud of who I am and who my relatives are. My family means so much to me. I love my grandparents who take care of me. They try to teach us all about our traditions and to live in a good way. I hope I can do this for my own kids someday. We go to celebrations, and it is good to be with other tribes. I think the main thing is to respect each other and all the living things. Otherwise we won't have much left. Being Native means to honor our living and our dead.

Being Native means to me going to powwows and going to sweats and honor our loved ones that have passed away and respect our elders and other people. Native means to me that I won't be called anything else but Native or Indian and that we have big families that care for us. Being Native means everything to me. Being Native makes me happy and glad because I'm just like everyone else.

Being Native means being proud of being from a group of people who were here in the land before anyone else. We lived with the animals and all living things with respect. We only ate what we had to. We didn't cause harm to our mother who takes care of us who is called Earth. We hunted and used all the animal parts and [did] not waste any part of it. With hides we made our homes and clothes. The meat we ate. The bones we used as tools. I think that it must have been a hard life but a good one. We should try to go back to some of the old ways. But I think I will miss my iPod!

Perhaps the most powerful comment was offered by a young girl who simply said, “I belong to a unique set of people who are survivors! We are still here. I love being Native.” Although the majority of the students provided thoughtful responses, I wish I could say that all the students in the class that day articulated such clear and decisive feelings about being a Native person. Some were quiet and a few flippant (they were middle schoolers after all). Later conversations with Tammy revealed her concerns over the cultural ambivalence of some of her students. She explained, “Honestly, most of them really know who they are. They don't have deep, deep roots. I wish they would know more about their ethnicity. They know who they are. They know what tribe they are, they know where they're from, but it's not deep rooted. This is on the surface. So we try to bring that out more. We do respect our elders and what they say. But it's not so much what I say, I think. It's how I act. Because kids, they know if you're a fake or not.”

The conversations with Tammy and the other educators regarding American Indian students remind me of a discussion I had with a Native woman some twenty years or so ago. When conducting interviews with American Indian students attending a predominately non-Indian college, one of those students, a middle-aged student, related an account of her preparation to go to college.<sup>2</sup> Just before she left the Cheyenne River reservation of South Dakota, an older woman, considered one of



the tribe's elders, took her aside and recounted a story of two little sisters. According to the student,

She told me about the little girl, two little girls that were playing outside, and one had a red dress on and the other had a blue dress on. And they were playing hide-and-seek, and their father told them not to go too far, you know, or not to hide where they can't be found. But they kept on playing and didn't pay too much attention to what he was saying. So it was the little girl in the red dress, it was her turn to hide, so she went to hide. But she went off too far. And her sister in the blue dress went to find her, but she couldn't find her. She looked all over the place, and she couldn't find her sister. So she started to get scared, and she called for her but she wouldn't answer. So she ran back and told her father, and he went out and her mother she went out to look for her. They spent two days looking for her. Finally they gave up on her. Then one day not too long after that her father was out hunting. He was walking along the river and he looked up and on top of the bluff he could see something waving on a shelf of a cliff. So he climbed to the top of the bluff, and there he found the little girl's red dress in an eagle's nest, and all that was left was her bones and part of her red dress.

This sad tale is a metaphor, a warning to the student. As she explained, "My grandmother was warning me not to go too far, to be careful and not forget where I come from, or I might lose who I am." The story is an obvious caution against the dangers of assimilation. What is remarkable, as well as disconcerting, is that the elder needed to make this counsel at all late in the twentieth century. Yet, it is undeniable that for scores of American Indian students, both at precollege and college levels, mainstream education has necessarily been regarded with concern as a potential threat to one's ethnic identity.

The story of the sisters told by the college student and the exercise among the Montana middle school students on what it means to be American Indian go to the heart of an important issue, namely, concerns over the tribal identity of Native students. Discussion on the nature of tribal identity for American Indian students has been a favorite topic for a long time among scholars of American Indian education studies. The concept itself is referred to by different names—cultural identity, ethnic identity, native identity. In my own work, I have previously referred to the idea interchangeably as cultural identity or ethnic identity (Huffman, 2001, 2008, 2010). However, here I use the term "tribal identity."

As explained in chapter 1, the reason for the deliberate use of this label is because I have a specific theoretical notion in mind. Tribal identity is the social psychological dimension of tribal strengths and refers to an affinity with and appropriation of the cultural attributes and historical heritage of one's tribal nation. I prefer the term "tribal identity" because it replaces a generic conception of an individual as "Indian" (e.g., cultural or ethnic identity) and instead locates the person as a member of a specific nation and owner of a unique cultural legacy. In this conception, the tribal strengths offered by a particular American Indian nation or nations (as is the case for those with multiple tribal heritages) are potentially the inheritance of any member who claims them for himself/herself. Additionally, it is critical to reemphasize that tribal identity is conceptualized as providing the self-definition and self-confidence needed to function effectively in both tribal and mainstream contexts. While these processes are important for anyone, they are especially crucial for Native young people.

### Perspectives from Scholars

The nature of the academic experience for American Indian students has been an area of examination among scholars for a long time. There are so many themes on this topic in the literature that it is difficult to know where to begin. The literature can be overwhelming. Yet, with that said, when it comes to the tribal strengths for Native students, two areas of scholarly focus tend to stand out. First, researchers have offered considerable discussion on the challenges in forming a tribal identity for American Indian students. Second, they have produced numerous examinations on the connection between a person's tribal identity and academic achievement. This latter consideration in particular has been the basis of a great deal of debate, disagreement, and contradiction among scholars.

#### TRIBAL IDENTITY OF AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS

All young people seek and need a personal identity. Eminent psychologist Erik Erikson (1950, 1963, 1968, 1980) spent a major part of his career attempting to understand the developmental dynamics associated with crafting a personal identity. Erikson argued that failure to achieve



a fully developed identity during adolescence could lead to an identity crisis. The term “identity crisis” has since become part of popular culture nomenclature, frequently used with comedic overtones. For Erikson, however, identity crisis involves a state in which the individual is incapable of facing adulthood with emotional and psychological confidence and security.

Much of the subsequent work on the identity development for adolescents built on Erikson’s seminal theoretical effort. For instance, identity status theory is especially helpful in understanding identity formation among adolescents (Marcia, 1966, 1980). I should note here that the basic premise and fundamental assumptions of identity status theory are generally consistent with the way in which tribal identity (as an important dimension of tribal strengths) is theoretically conceptualized. Thus, this theory holds potential in understanding the identity formation challenges facing Native youth.

Incorporating Erikson’s concept of identity crisis, identity status theory asserts adolescents continually search, test, and reevaluate the core aspects of their identity, namely, their personal values, attitudes, relationships, and self-definitions. As such, adolescents alternate between conditions of identity crisis and identity commitment. More specifically, identity status theory regards an individual’s identity as involving four potentially different statuses during the course of maturation (Marcia, 1966, 1980). It is important to understand that these statuses are psychological stations in life, not a series of sequential stages. Thus a person can, and does, move in and out of the various statuses until one status becomes more or less dominant in adulthood. The first status is referred to as “identity diffusion” and is a state in which the adolescent does not possess a secure sense of values, attitudes, relationships, and self-definition. As such, the youth is not willing or capable of committing to a specific personal identity. In “identity foreclosure,” the second status, the adolescent is willing to conform to the values and attitudes expected from others, such as those imposed by parents or peers. “Identity moratorium,” the third status, involves a crisis in which the adolescent actively explores various values, attitudes, relationship choices, and self-definition but has not committed to any set of ideals. It is notable that in the context of identity status theory, a crisis is simply a time when an individual is willing to critically evaluate his/her values and beliefs.

An identity crisis does not necessarily involve a traumatic episode in a person’s life (although it well could). Finally, the fourth status, “identity achievement,” includes a condition in which the adolescent has gone through a crisis and subsequently can truly commit to values, attitudes, relationships, and self-definition that provide a consistent, stable personal identity. Ultimately a well-developed identity achievement status offers the person a sense of his/her strengths, weaknesses, and unique distinctiveness (Hardy & Kisling, 2006; Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010; Marcia, 1966, 1980; Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, & Orlofsky, 1993).

Scholarly work on identity development of adolescents, such as that offered by identity status theorists, has consequently expanded to the issue of ethnic identity development. As difficult as personal identity formation may be for nonminority youth, given the added racial and/or ethnic component, scholars regard identity development as even more complex for minority youth (Ogbu, 1978, 1981, 1987, 2003; Phinney, 1989, 1990, 2000; Tajfel, 1978, 1981). For instance, minority adolescents frequently must contend with identity formation pressures from both in-groups and out-groups (Ogbu, 1987; Tajfel, 1978, 1981). This is the basis for the so-called acting white dilemma for many minority youth and especially for African American young people<sup>3</sup> (Buck, 2010; Fryer, 2006). Yet, for minority youth, the development of a strong sense of ethnic identity is fundamental for healthy self-esteem, emotional security, and racial/ethnic pride (French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998; Toomey & Umaña-Taylor, 2012; Umaña-Taylor, 2011).

Tribal identity for Native youth is especially critical as it serves to personalize one’s ethnicity and locates the individual socially, culturally, emotionally, and perhaps even spiritually. It is hard to conceive of any aspect of the maturation process more powerful than the development of one’s very identity for a Native young person (Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Stiffman et al., 2007; Werito, 2013).

The development of a tribal identity for Native youth can be enormously complex. Native youth are increasingly required to locate their identities in a local-tribal context, a national context, as well as part of Indigenous peoples of the world and, thus, a global context. As a result, Carol Markstrom (2010) asserts that tribal identity must be understood



as forming and operating within at least three conceptual levels: the local level, the national level, and the global level. She argues that any conceptualization of tribal identity which ignores the intricate emotional, social, cultural, and political complexity that contextualizes its development is seriously misguided. As such, she identifies what she considers the three salient levels that provide a framework for understanding tribal identity development among today's American Indian adolescents. As Markstrom explains:

The local level . . . encompasses, in part, knowledge and understanding of one's group, experience, actions, and choices . . . There are currently 564 federally recognized tribes and numerous other bands and tribes encompassing an array of languages and customs. Therefore, more general themes apparent across various cultures are addressed, but specific illustrations are interspersed to bring substance and specificity. In addition to identity formation at the local level, American Indian adolescents must negotiate the complexities of living in the broader and influential national context of U.S. society . . . Social contextual influences on identity also occur according to the less physically proximal global level . . . [G]lobalization has contributed to growing indigenous rights and identity movements that bridge across first-peoples worldwide. Hence, the global level is centered on indigenous youth of the world. (p. 520)

This complicated process may be filled with tremendously beneficial rewards and opportunities, but it is also fraught with perplexing challenges. Indeed, Vincent Werito (2013) refers to the process by which Native youth must establish and maintain a tribal identity as "negotiating the multiple and contested terrain of identity" (p. 58). Regardless of its complexity, just as a strong ethnic identity is important to all minority young people, tribal identity specifically is vital to the sense of security, emotional well-being, and healthy growth for Native youth. Among other benefits, research evidence demonstrates that a strong tribal identity is connected to positive self-esteem, feelings of belonging, a sense of purpose in life, and a lesser chance of substance use and abuse (Herman-Stahl, Spencer, Aaroe, & Duncan, 2003; Huffman, 2011; Kenyon & Carter, 2011; Kulis, Napoli, & Marsiglia, 2002; Marsiglia, Kulis, & Hecht, 2001). Moreover, a number of studies also report that the spirituality derived from one's tribal identity is an especially salient factor in preventing suicide attempts among American Indian young people

(Garoutte et al., 2003; Hill, 2009; Johnson & Tomren, 1999). Notable in this regard is the sense of community and a feeling of belonging associated with a strong tribal identity<sup>4</sup> (Kenyon & Carter, 2011).

#### TRIBAL IDENTITY AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Researchers have expended much effort attempting to ascertain how the tribal identity of Native students is related to their educational experiences. Not surprisingly, the assumed connection reflects the prevailing social attitudes of the time. When assimilationist assumptions dominated scholarly thinking, researchers generally reported that a strong tribal identity among American Indian students was associated with academic difficulties (Berry, 1968; Miller, 1971; Scott, 1986). More recent scholars typically regard a strong tribal identity as facilitating educational success (Davis, 1992; Horse, 2005; Huffman, Sill, & Brokenleg, 1986; Okagaki, Helling, & Bingham, 2009; White Shield, 2009).

Many scholars treat the issue as an either-or scenario, that is, a strong tribal identity is either associated with academic failure or a strong tribal identity is related to academic success. However, a closer look at the findings reported in the literature reveals a more complex picture. Ironically, a strong tribal identity is connected to academic difficulties for some Native students, and at the same time, it is connected to educational achievement for others. Thus, the relationship between a strong tribal identity and educational success and lack of success is not an issue of either-or but rather one of being both. For instance, in a quantitative study involving 1,607 American Indian and white middle and high school students, James, Chavez, Beauvais, Edwards, and Oetting (1995) operated from essentially assimilationist assumptions. They presented their working hypothesis by declaring, "It seems reasonable that Indian students with relatively high Euro-American cultural identity should succeed better in, and be less likely to leave, mainstream schools than those with relatively low Euro-American cultural identity" (p. 185). Yet they found that Native students embracing either a strong "Euro-American" cultural identity or a strong "Indian" cultural identity were less likely to leave school and more likely to do well academically. It was those students who displayed a weak affinity with any cultural identity who were more vulnerable to academic difficulties. Their findings suggest that ambiguity in one's cultural identity is the real difficulty in



realizing academic success. Thus, the critical variable was simply holding a strong cultural identity (whether Euro-American or American Indian) for their sample of students. Comparing their results with past research, the authors appear somewhat puzzled and concluded by offering two likelihoods: "Thus, we have two alternate possibilities from past research: that higher levels of Indian cultural identity will have a negative relationship to school success, while higher levels of non-Indian cultural identity will have positive relationship to it; or that both types of cultural identity will have positive relationships to school success" (p. 186).

As the James et al. study was quantitative, the authors had little basis to understand the complex reasons that may account for this pattern in the data. I was fortunate enough to have an opportunity to conduct a qualitative study spanning five years and involving an unusually large sample of sixty-nine American Indian students attending a predominately non-Indian university (Huffman, 2001, 2008). The major focus of this study was to understand how tribal identity is associated with the college experience. I found virtually all students possessing a strong affinity and identification with traditional tribal culture experienced a great deal of alienation and frustration with the mainstream college. However, in time they tended to divide into two groups. One group refused to surrender their tribal identity and assimilate to what they (not unreasonably) regarded as the mainstream cultural mandates of the university. Typically, this group left the college soon after their arrival on campus. Few rarely stayed more than two or three semesters. I referred to this group as "estranged students" because of their severe alienation from the university. For many of these individuals, the decision to leave college was a cultural survival strategy. While some dropped out of college because of academic difficulties, a significant number left the university as a way to resist forces they saw as culturally assimilationist and thus a threat to their tribal identity.

The second group also did not desire to assimilate to the mainstream. However, unlike the estranged students, they dug deep into the strengths offered by their cultural background and, in so doing, forged a strong tribal identity. This identity eventually created a sense of confidence and self-assuredness that allowed them to engage the university on its own terms without fear of personal assimilation. In effect, they were able to move across and between cultural worlds because their cultural repertoire

of skills and knowledge had been broadened. The key point here is that they did not surrender any of their tribal cultural skills and knowledge, they simply added new cultural abilities. I referred to these students as "transcultured students." This group, rather than leaving college as a means to protect their tribal identity, used their tribal identity to facilitate their academic goals,—that is, they used their tribal identity as a source of confidence and as an anchor for their values, orientation, and purpose. As a result, most of them had successful college experiences.

The point here is that a strong tribal identity combined with a salient tribal cultural orientation is actually related to both academic attrition as well as academic achievement. The outcome largely depends on how an individual regards and uses his/her personal tribal identity. With this realization, a growing number of scholars and practitioners are working toward ways in which Native students can utilize their tribal strengths and tribal identity as a means to gain educational success. A good example of this is the Success Academy created as a joint effort by the Flandreau Indian School of Flandreau, South Dakota, and South Dakota State University.<sup>5</sup> Essentially, Success Academy was designed to introduce Native students to the world of higher education. It held as a goal the preparation of not merely some but all of its students for post-secondary education (Lee, 2013). But the initiative did not stop there. It also sought to educate the academy, in this case South Dakota State University, on the unique needs of Native students. A major focus of the effort included ways in which the university and its staff would reorient itself to honor and affirm the tribal identities of Native students. MaryJo Benton Lee of South Dakota State University, one of the primary founders of Success Academy, offers this description of the initiative: "What occurred through the birth of Success Academy was a reorganization of the culture of schooling at two institutions. What occurred was systematic change. At the Flandreau Indian School that has meant the adoption of a comprehensive school reform model aimed at preparing all students for postsecondary education. At South Dakota State University this reorganization has involved developing ways in which American Indian identity is affirmed, honored, and incorporated into the institution's culture" (p. 30).

According to Lee, the combined efforts of the Flandreau Indian School and South Dakota State University have met with impressive success.



After twelve years of cooperation, the program could count among its accomplishments a greatly enhanced high school graduation rate, a general boost in high school academic achievement, increased numbers of students enrolling in college, building the capacity of South Dakota State University's effectiveness in serving American Indian students, creating a more diverse university campus, and strengthening the American Indian community at South Dakota State University. Lee also reports that the effort served to affirm and honor American Indian identity into all aspects of the university. She contends, "Programs like Success Academy are a way for the institution to rethink how best to work with American Indians. To succeed, Native students should not have to leave their identities parked outside the university gates. Rather the university needs to develop a broad range of programs, activities, events, and curricula that celebrate Indian ways of life" (p. 155).

### **Voices from the Reservation Classroom**

Undeniably, tribal identity is one of the most crucial factors to consider in the education of Native students. I wanted to explore this issue with the six veteran American Indian educators and hear their perceptions surrounding the tribal identity of their students. It turned out they had much to say on this topic. Generally, the discussion centered around two themes. First, the educators articulated what they considered to be the prevailing tribal identity issues facing their students. There was no shortage of concern over these issues. Second, they contended that students' tribal identity is an especially powerful dimension of tribal strengths. They were convinced that a strong tribal identity will not only bring academic rewards but also is essential to prepare Native students for success in life.

#### **TRIBAL IDENTITY ISSUES AND CONCERNS**

Regarding the tribal identity of reservation students, perhaps Justin best summarized the general perception among the educators when he remarked, "You got kids from homes where they're from a group that is maintaining the culture and has been able to preserve some things, and then some kids don't really know hardly anything about their culture . . . I think a lot of these kids with a strong identity, their Indian identity

comes from home. I don't know that in our community there's a whole lot of discussion or dialogue about what it means to be an Indian person." The educators saw tremendous complexity and variation among their students regarding their personal identities. Some students hold a strong personal tribal identity, and the educators were optimistic about them and their future. But many others do not possess a strong tribal identity, and clearly the educators were concerned about these students. According to the participants, a significant number of their students, perhaps the largest group, know who they are racially but lack real cultural depth, and thus they are left dealing with ambiguity. All the educators mentioned that these students seem to be looking for direction but are frustrated by the lack of guidance. Then there are those students who are simply ambivalent about a tribal identity. Many of these students have turned to other identities, such as gang affiliation or hip-hop culture, as a way to define their lives and values. There are also young people who seem not only to have rejected a tribal identity but also actually parrot many of the more common negative stereotypes of American Indians. Thus, based on the interviews with these educators, Native students are arrayed along a range of dispositions toward their tribal identity.

While the educators recognized that many of their students possess a strong tribal identity, they were concerned for the majority of their students. They perceived a great deal of tribal identity ambiguity among the young people of their reservations. A lack of cultural depth was a consistent theme during our conversations. Like a number of the educators, Justin pointed out that superficial aspects of tribal culture have become normative among many reservation people, yet students in his estimation also need to appreciate more substantial tribal values and beliefs. He reflected, "There's kind of a modern cultural identity is how I would see it. Then you have kids that grow up and they don't have any experiences with their traditional culture . . . They might say things like going to powwows, going to sweats, going to Native American church, the activities, going-around dances, feasts. They'd probably mostly talk about the activities that they recognize as part of their culture. I'm not too sure that many of them would say the values, and talk about the values. They know they're Indians. But as far as knowing what that means, some of them would have a better understanding than others." Corresponding to the absence of cultural depth, the general loss of tribal culture concerned



the educators. Lori spoke specifically to the issue of cultural loss and its impact on the tribal identity of students:

You know, we've got to instill those values or go back to those values that were so important to us and teach and model it to our young people, and I think that's where we're at right now . . . We're almost to the point where we're losing our language completely. And in our schools we're also losing the culture. Our students don't have much of a tribal identity anymore because there's no language left. Hardly at all; you don't hear the language being spoken. There's a lot of surface stuff that's done in the schools, but not the deep culture. So I don't think our students know who they are as tribal members. So we're struggling now to try to bring that back into the schools . . . I really think that our students have lost that identity. The whole reservation, I think, is struggling. We met last year several times with the tribal members of our reservation through the college, through the Tribal Education Department, and we had committees, subcommittees. One that was just going to deal with the language, one that was just going to deal with the culture, and one with the history. And we were using the staff at the college to do the historical part of it. But it was so overwhelming for everybody. It was like, they didn't know where to begin because we know that the language is almost gone. So we had good, deep discussions about it. They want the schools to teach the language, but who do the students go home and speak it to? Because there are no speakers in the home anymore. They don't hear it in the community.

The educators identified the absence of cultural guidance on the reservation as a serious issue. Indeed, all six of them referred to the lack of teaching on the tribal legacy of their people. For some this involved a concern over the aging of traditional people who are fluent in the tribal language and few younger people to replace them. Others were concerned about what they regarded as the general ambivalence toward traditional culture and language pervasive on the reservation. Justin talked at length about his distress over the lack of cultural guidance for his students.

It's kind of sad, you know? We've been assimilated enough that the identities, unless you go out and find it, nobody's going to give it to you. You've got to go get it on your own. I hope to bring some of that to these guys. It's a tough thing to do, especially if you've got kids who are like, it's not a priority of theirs. It's either got to be ingrained, or when you're older it will become a point of interest, or something that will motivate them to learn about themselves and where they're from. I don't know

if just our community is like that or if it's something common across Native communities. I would think we have a shared history. We're all different cultures, but our commonality is we have a shared history. That assimilation, those boarding schools, they took a lot out of Indian people. Indian people didn't want to be Indian people because they were taught they were lesser human beings. I think that oppressive mentality is something. Indian people went through traumatic experiences. Even if our generation isn't going through that, we feel the effects of it. Before there's any healing and before things start to get back to that sacred circle of life, before that gets healed, it needs to be understood. And right now I don't think that in Indian country it is completely understood. It's understood by some individuals, but as a culture and as a whole, it's not.

Ben identified a number of interconnected issues when he talked about the lack of cultural guidance. His comments had an urgency that reflected the recent tragedies which had befallen his school and reservation. With tremendous passion he said,

We have some kids whose families do lead a very traditional lifestyle. And the thing that we find is it works good if you get kids who know the language and the customs and the culture. And with that comes the respect and all those character traits . . . The expectation is the school is going to teach them their language, which is part of our responsibility, but it's not all of our responsibility . . . with the culture and the traditions comes a spiritual base, comes this idea of right from wrong, this idea of treating your parents and your grandparents the way that they should be treated. But it doesn't happen a lot. Right now we're sort of a community living in fear. I think every day we live in fear. We have a lot of drama in the community, but we don't have anything that our kids can call their own in terms of culture and traditions . . . I still think that the fear of us having and needing the culture and having the identity and raising our kids with the language and everything is something that we need. But I don't think we know how to get there. I don't think we know because it's been so long. There's not a lot of people left anymore that are tied to the culture. I think it's a missing link in all of that.

Even among students who do understand the need for a tribal identity, the educators perceived a lack of depth in their cultural understanding. Tammy acknowledged as much when we asked her middle schools students what it means to be a Native person. Tammy realized that while her students recognize their ethnic identity, the identity itself does not necessarily impact their lives due to the lack of substantial cultural meaning.



As noted at the beginning of this chapter, her observation is a powerful one, "Honestly, most of them really know who they are [racially]. They don't have deep, deep roots [lack cultural grounding]. I wish they would know more about their ethnicity."

Four of the educators, Justin, Ben, Tammy, and Lori, lamented the appropriation of other cultural identities among some of their students. In particular the appeal of hip-hop culture and, more menacingly, youth gangs compete with tribal identity among students hungry for a sense of self and direction in life. In Lori's view, the reservation is presented with a challenge. She saw a real desire to revive the culture, but serious barriers stand in the way. Much of the challenge connects directly to the rival identities that compete to define reservation youth. As she put it,

You know, families want to learn the language, along with their child. We go into the communities. You're going to start slow, but maybe slowly it will build and it will build and pretty soon we'll hear the language again. And I think that's kind of the drive of the reservation now is to try to get the language back and the culture back. So there are more cultural activities that are happening in the community. But our youth have chosen a different culture, and it's the hip-hop or all the other cultures that they see in the media and stuff. They don't have that pride anymore. We had a speaker speak to our staff at the beginning of the year, one of our traditional Native American resource people. We did a video of him and we asked, "What is it that you want the schools to do?" He said we made the mistake of forgetting these important things like the values that we live by. He said that's what our children need. So, yeah, I think it's so, so crucial that we start talking to our kids and having them understand historically what has happened to our tribe, to our people, and where we are now and where we want to go. We need to understand what the barriers are and why there's been such a cultural breakdown. We need to understand why people have turned to different cultures because they didn't have that identity. And now the media is out there, so there's so much for them to grab onto. I was at a presentation last week. We were talking about the Lakota language and I said, 'When you walk down the streets you don't hear a lot of English with these young kids.' You know? Not good English. You don't hear the Lakota language. You hear a different language, and it's all the hip-hop and that type of stuff that you're hearing out there.

Justin and Ben voiced concern over the negative side of the alternative identities adopted by some of their reservations' young people. Justin

commented on the cultural inconsistency between some to the adverse values espoused within certain aspects of hip-hop culture and traditional values of his tribe. With a great deal of perception and wisdom he related,

I don't think that these kids know where they're from. They don't know why they're here. Their textbooks don't teach them that. Their textbooks are from a Eurocentric point of view. That's something that I try to correct. We started talking about it and I showed them a map that was all Native people, and I said, "When do you think this map is from?" They're fifth graders. They aren't going to know everything, but some of them were saying 1900s, 1800s. They didn't understand that 1491 is a significant date. They don't understand that they're from people that have this rich history and culture. They don't know about it. So they end up adopting aspects of the mainstream. And a lot of it they pick up on are negative things. There's a gravitation towards hip-hop culture. Some hip-hop has a positive message, but a lot of hip-hop is about degrading females and being dramatic, trying to establish yourself as the big dog. Those are things that go against the traditional cultural values where people are trying to take care of everybody else as opposed to using other people as a stepping stone for their own status. That's what's taken over because their culture isn't there right now.

Ben had more to say on this subject than any of the other participants. With unblinking honesty, he outlined the nature, complexity, and danger of a gang identity replacing a tribal identity for Native youth. Of special concern to him is the acceptance of negative stereotypes of American Indians by some students.

We've been concerned about gangs and communities of gangs for a number of years because we knew our kids weren't attached to their culture, identity, where they came from. And we knew that a lot of parents didn't live that life. And it gets to the spirituality end of things. A lot of our parents with Native kids, there is very little of that traditional sense of upbringing. And I think it's primarily because somewhere along the line we lost it. I didn't have it in my life growing up. A lot of our kids here don't have it. So what's happened the last four or five years is we have seen a real increase in the amount of gangs. A lot of gangs. And, of course, we knew that was going to happen. We knew it was coming because these kids don't have anything to call their own. They don't have anything to steer them in the right direction. And that's what the identity, culture identity would provide for them. I think they're proud of a lot of the history. But I think somewhere within there, things change and being proud of who you are turns into sort of, "Yes, I'm proud of who



I am, but I really don't know who I am. I'm proud of being an Indian." Then along with that, "Well, what is an Indian?" Nowadays you ask a kid what an Indian is, he might tell you, "It's someone who sits on the street and gets drunk" because we have so many of them. They might tell you, "It's someone who abuses grandparents and parents and girlfriends and wives." They might tell you, "It's someone who doesn't work." There's a whole wide range. But I think the crux of the issue is they are proud of who they are. I think they are. I think there's a lot of history and a lot of tradition there that makes them who they are. I don't think they would want to be anyone else. But in the same breath, I don't know if they know who they are.

Ever the optimist, Lori saw opportunity in the challenge presented by cultural loss. She believed that pressing social and personal difficulties are causing people on the reservation to appreciate the value of their tribal strengths. As she explained, "You know, living on the reservation is a struggle. It's survival because of the poverty. So much of that has gotten in the way that they've lost a lot of our culture. People are starting to talk about what happened. I think it made people wake up and say, 'You know we're not doing something right.' Now I think they're realizing that."

#### ESSENTIALITY OF TRIBAL IDENTITY

The educators value a strong tribal identity in their students but see few who possess such an identity. They believe a strong tribal identity supplies students with a solid and spiritual foundation, a coherent worldview, and a sense of purpose and direction. Justin, Ben, and Lori even mentioned that possessing a strong tribal identity, and in particular embracing the spiritual significance of that identity, is an essential part of the solution to the social problems confronting reservations. As Ben put it, "I think the culture, the identity, I think it's a definite cure to a lot of the issues that we have. One thing you notice right away is those kids whose parents have raised them traditionally and have a lot of the culture are good families. They dance, they attend powwows, and there's very few of them, but they're good families. Their kids are always really respectful, good kids. They just seem to be happier. They just seem to have a sense of where they're going, not just kind of floundering. And I think it goes with spirituality because a big part of our culture and who we are is spirituality."

Justin voiced a view almost identical to Ben's. He too believed that holding a strong tribal identity is associated with a strong value system. Like Ben, Justin also has confidence that students possessing a tribal identity will make significant contributions to the community. "You see people who have traditional culture. You can see which families are doing a job of raising their kids to be respectful. Even some families, their skin is lighter but their behaviors are more in tune with a traditional worldview. You put the others before yourself, there's that self-sacrifice, and then things take care of themselves. The kids are taught to observe, and listen, and learn, and not to be disagreeable, and to have self-control. They're the ones who are more likely to go somewhere and do something, and then hopefully, bring something back here."

All six of the educators contended that students possessing a strong tribal identity do better academically than those Native students lacking a strong tribal identity. Confidence, self-assuredness, and a salient value system work together to enable the student to engage and achieve in school. But all those attributes derive from a strong sense of their tribal identities. Justin went even further to argue that students with a strong tribal identity and who rely on the tribal legacy of their people are better equipped to take control of their futures and resist many of the social problems besetting their communities. He asserted,

I think they need that awareness. It goes into that self-identity, who you are, where you come from. It gives you a certain amount of pride. You take pride in being a Native American. There's a race of people that was almost exterminated. It's a tragic history. All these kids don't understand that they're from a group of survivors, human beings who have survived a cultural assault. You understand that you're coming from those people, it makes you want to do more. You don't want to be a victim. You want to take control of your own destiny and your own future. You establish that confidence and then you can realize that these drugs and all these problems that we have here, it's not who we're supposed to be. It's kind of like us continuing that oppression, that state of mind. Then you fall into victimhood. Then you're blaming everyone for the problems and not realizing that if things are going to change, the people have to take control and change them. If you want to make a better life for the next generation, then the generations who are in control need to be changing things. A lot of it is values. There's a lot of values that go with the culture that have gone by the wayside. I think the kids that do have that cultural grounding, they have something more than some of the other kids who



don't have it. There's that culture that they have; it's not just an identity, but maybe it is a strong value system.

The two educators from more traditional communities, Donna and Rachel, did not evidence the same level of concern over the tribal identity issues of their students as the educators from less traditional communities. Donna, for instance, regarded the tribal identity of students as a natural product of their rearing and socialization. She did not see struggles with tribal identity among her students but also acknowledged that students from less traditional districts of the reservation do not have the same cultural continuity as the families served by her school. As she recounted, "It [tribal identity] is embedded. I mean, my students that come here, I don't really think of it as an issue for us. Because that's the way we're raised. I mean, we know who we are already, so to me in this area it's not an issue. But in the other districts when I go to the other schools, it is an issue. Because some of the students, they weren't raised in a traditional sense. Culture is who we are, that's the only way we were raised." Rachel, however, pointed out that there must be consistency and authenticity when modeling and teaching reservation youth. She noted, "They have a strong identity; identify real strong with the songs—the Flag Song. And even here, they have the Flag Song in the morning . . . I think they have to have that connectedness. They have to have that part of themselves. I think you can read it out of a book and say, 'Okay, I'm teaching you generosity. How to be generous.' But if you don't live that way of life, it's hard for you to teach it. I think it's really important that they have that grasp of who they are."

Nevertheless, Rachel also recognized the difficulties culturally traditional students face once they leave the community and go beyond the reservation to college. Often at the mainstream college, students do not have a sustaining, nurturing support system. As a result, some students become discouraged and leave campus for the more welcoming setting of home. As Rachel recounts:

I still think cultural grounding is important. It may or may not help them academically. It depends where they're at because every place else doesn't nurture that [a tribal identity]. The [tribal] college here nurtures that; our families nurture who they are, their identity. But out in the world, it doesn't. And it's sad because a lot of times they get lost and they get confused. They don't know who they are anymore, because they

end up coming home. They can't succeed out there. But it's because they don't have that support system. They're going to struggle. They really will struggle because they don't have that support system. And they're used to having support. They're used to having family.

### People Who Are Survivors

"They're used to having family." In many respects this statement summarizes the tribal strengths associated with having a strong tribal identity for American Indian youth. *Tiyospaye* is the Lakota word for family, and its meaning includes deeply textured nuances.<sup>6</sup> *Tiyospaye* is more than one's immediate and extended family members. Its meaning includes a place of dwelling, sense of belonging, and deep-rooted connection. It includes obligations, responsibilities, morality, and spirituality in relation to others as well as to oneself. Among the Siouan peoples, *tiyospaye* locates a person's sense of self in a web of relationships that is greater than the individual person, and virtually all other tribal nations hold similar notions (Lakota Dakota Nakota Language Preservation Summit, 2014).

Tribal identity does not develop in a social vacuum, and it only has meaning within a cultural-historical context. It is at once and the same time a personal expression and a collective possession. As the Montana middle schooler so aptly put it, "I belong to a unique set of people who are survivors! We are still here. I love being Native!"

If all these things are true about tribal identity, then they beg the question, how do Native educators practice their craft in such ways to build the tribal strengths, including tribal identity, among American Indian students? Just as important, what obstructions stand in the way of Native educators cultivating those strengths? To these questions, the six American Indian educators had much to say.