

# A New Native Teacher Corps: Integrating Culture and Language in Schooling

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*From a tribal and Native American professional perspective, the creation of lifelong learning environments and meaningful educational experiences for both the young and adults of a tribal community requires a language and cultural context that supports the traditions, knowledge, and language(s) of the community as the starting place for learning new ideas and knowledge. There is a firm belief within many tribal communities and (among) Native educators that this cultural context is absolutely essential if one is to succeed academically and to build meaningful lives as adults.*

(Demmert & Towner, 2003, p. 1)

Within educational systems structured around local knowledge, culture and language, teachers are viewed as the key link between the community and schools. The nature of the relationship between American Indian students and their teachers can be a critical factor in academic performance and is a determinant of whether students will persist or not. Swisher and Tippeconnic conclude: "We believe that a good teacher is a good teacher, but when there is a good Native teacher, the relationship between Native student and teacher is enhanced" (1999, p. 302).

Situating education within the context of the Native student's culture and language works best when the teacher shares that student's culture. However, this is seldom a reality. In

1993-94, nearly half of all American Indian and Alaska Native students were enrolled in either BIA/tribal schools or public schools with high Indian enrollments (HIE) where they comprised from 57% to 98% of the total student body. Thirty-eight percent of all the teachers in BIA/tribal schools were American Indian or Alaska Native with 95% of these teachers reporting they were tribally enrolled. Only 15% of the teachers in HIE public schools were American Indian or Alaska Native. All other Native students attended public schools with low Indian enrollments where they represent on average 6% of the total student body (Pavel 1999). In low Indian enrollment schools, Native teachers are even less visible.

## **The Importance of Language and Culture in Native Education**

The President of Chief Dull Knife College, Richard Littlebear, acknowledges that it is often difficult to explain why preserving and strengthening endangered Native languages and cultures is so important. He speaks of the power of the language to,

make the speakers of that language...whole in a very real sense. American Indian languages transmit and strengthen our cultural and individual identities, and any splintering of these abilities to transmit or to strengthen does irreparable harm to American Indian psyches. (2003, p. 81)

This perspective, which is prevalent throughout American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian communities, has informed the content and context of many community-based, indigenous educational programs in existence today. In Maryville,

Washington, where the Lushootseed language and culture are "folded" into every layer of the curriculum, an elder explains, "You have to know your language before you can know your tradition, your culture. It is spiritual. It is gifted [given to us]. It is important to learn our language so we know who we are.... We have nothing if our language has been taken" (Novick, Fisher & Saifer, 2002, p. 89).

## **Building a New Native Teacher Corps**

While increasing the number of Native teachers has long been a priority among Native communities and educators, recognition of this critical need in President Clinton's 1998 Executive Order on American Indian and Alaska Native Education provided an impetus to fund a new teacher corps initiative. Over the past four years more than 1000 individuals across the country have completed or are currently enrolled in Native teacher preparation programs funded by Office of Indian Education (OIE) professional development grants. There is hope that these new elementary teachers will become the vanguard in a movement to indigenize schooling for Native students.

In the fall of 2001, when more than 500 students were already enrolled in the first generation of the new professional development programs, a study was launched to follow their progress. It encompassed 27 OIE funded programs plus six programs in Alaska and Hawaii that served Native students. The Native Educators Research Project, based at the Center for Indian Education at Arizona State University and funded through the Office of Educational Research and Improvement and the OIE, sought to

understand the dynamic interplay between the programs and the individual experiences and attitudes of the persons enrolled in them. The first year of the study yielded a profile of the new teachers, including their attitudes about the place of language and culture in the classroom, and identified elements of the individual programs that prepared the new teachers to effectively situate their teaching within the cultural context of their students' lives.

The new teachers are predominantly female (81%), and 51% are below the age of 30. Forty-eight percent of the respondents have had prior experience as instructional aides. More than half understand their Native or tribal language but only 45% speak it. Concerning their own Native/Tribal cultures and traditions, 89% report they are somewhat to very knowledgeable. Ninety-five percent of the respondents feel Native/tribal language should be included in the schooling of Native children, and 97% feel Native/tribal culture should be included. When asked "How well prepared are you to teach your Native/tribal language?," 21% said they feel "somewhat" to "very well" prepared, 64% feel "not at all" to "somewhat" prepared. With regard to their preparation to teach Native/tribal culture, 33% feel they are "somewhat" to "very well" prepared and 38% feel "not at all" to "somewhat" prepared.

In 2003, case studies were launched to examine the experiences of eight new teachers, who favored the inclusion of language and culture and felt that they were prepared to accomplish this, in their schools and classrooms. These case studies reveal that efforts to situate learning within the local context are often thwarted by factors within the teaching environments. The specific situations underlying this issue range from community dissonance regarding the place of Native language and culture in the school, to a lack of pedagogical knowledge, methodology and teaching materials, to the conflicting demands and pressures of state standards and federal mandates.

Certain other issues also emerged as prominent. The most frequently cited were the need for orientation, induction or formal mentoring at the

school sites and the need for strategies to increase parent involvement and enhance communication with families. They additionally identified issues around discipline, motivating students, and lack of spare time, problems that are common to new teachers anywhere (Whitaker, 2001).

As the case studies proceeded, the researchers moved into the role of mentors to the teachers. Utilizing reflective journaling. Mentors helped teachers with exploring issues of pedagogy and curriculum significant to their experiences and identifying personal bias as well as dissonance or congruence they were experiencing in their teaching environment. Participants reported that this process had great value personally and professionally. The experiences of the novice teachers, as well as the success of the mentoring exercises, carry important implications for the professional development of Native educators.

### **Implications for Native Teacher Training**

The findings from these case studies suggest three areas of consideration in planning indigenous teacher preparation programs:

#### **1. If Native teachers are expected to integrate Native language and culture in their teaching, they must be well informed about issues surrounding these topics and equipped with the methods and pedagogic techniques to accomplish this.**

The mission statements for each of the 33 Native teacher preparation programs included in this study stress their intent to prepare teachers to be responsive to the needs of Native students. Many specifically articulate a focus on Native language and culture. However, the course content and requirements often do not reflect this intent. Many of the programs have general diversity education or multicultural education requirements and purport to integrate Native or tribal values and perspectives into all course work. However, only six of the programs located in state universities, nine in tribal colleges and one in a private institution specifically include course requirements in the areas of Native language, culture and history.

Just twelve of the programs offer or require courses in Native languages, ESL or bilingual education; eight of these are in tribal colleges.

It is important to note that two of the programs stand alone as exemplary with regards to their preparation of teachers to integrate language and culture. Both programs utilize Native language as the language of instruction, employ indigenous faculty almost exclusively and situate learning in the context of local knowledge, values and traditions.

#### **2. Instruction should be "indigenized," allocating more time and resources to promoting critical thinking around issues that address the needs of Native communities and learners, such as parent involvement, authentic assessment, teaching strategies congruent with Native learning styles; modeling culturally responsive curriculum and teaching; and providing Native faculty to mentor and guide their professional development.**

If their own learning experiences are presented in context and via processes that are congruent with Native worldviews, the new teachers will be inclined to transmit knowledge to their own students in the same way.

#### **3. Mentoring and support must be extended as a constant feature throughout the teachers' induction year.**

In their study of novice teachers, Lally and Velera noted: "In all too many cases, the tremendous support surrounding the student teacher throughout his or her practicum comes to a screeching halt as soon as the degree is conferred" (2000, p. 106). It has been suggested that this could be attributed to "Praxis shock," an unsettling response that occurs when their university preparation confronts K-12 classroom realities in their first teaching position (e.g., Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2001). This was experienced to some degree by all eight of the Native case study teachers. However, mentoring activities supported them in identifying issues, prioritizing goals, resolving problems and developing a reflective practice that respond to the unique needs of their Native students.

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destruído.” “After a long, hard, and hot day in the field, under the implacable rays of the Father of Life, my muscles ache and my bones hurt and crack as though they were crystals breaking. I’m dirty, thirsty, and hungry. My body is so tired and sore that I fear it might crumble like an old building being torn down.”

#### 4. Life in a Gang: Frank Rosas.

“Most things about being in a gang are bad, but there are some good things, too. It is good to be able to talk to or get advice from your gang. Before we were a gang, I was hanging out with this group of friends to relieve me from the pain I had. My family had a problem because my dad was with another woman. So I looked for friends to talk to and I really trusted one friend in this group. I think that’s one of the reasons people join gangs.”

#### 5. Fitting In: Andrea Martínez.

“I am a Zapotec india [Indian female]... The dialect we speak is Zapoteca... When we first moved, I felt alone here. My mother would leave to work [in Yuma, AZ], and it was really hard because my stepfather only speaks Spanish. I couldn’t talk to him because I only spoke Zapoteca.... The hardest part for me when I moved was the language. I couldn’t speak Spanish, and I didn’t know English.... It’s not that I’m the

only one, but when I moved to the US, I hadn’t gone to school, and I couldn’t communicate at all. Now things are better because I have friends. ...Since I have been here for a while, I now know what it feels like to be Mexican.

Needless to say, Atkin’s book can be viewed as an important tool for teachers of upper elementary, junior high, high school, and college students. As we shared some of the stories and photographs with students in upper elementary grades and in adult ESL classes, we found a strong interest in the book, despite the students’ still developing English. They were very engaged in reading the stories, as we did individual, small group, and whole class reading together. During pre- and post-reading conversations about the poems, stories, and photos, students found many connections between the children’s lives and their own lives. Motivated by the readings, students found satisfaction and purpose in reading them. In sum, this is a book that both students and teachers like a lot, because of its honesty, its authenticity, and its heart, among other things.

Finally, this small volume has received many “starred reviews,” awards, and special recognition. Some of the comments about Atkin’s book have focused on the very essence of the book, and for this reason, they have been included here.

“So much optimism and so much heartbreak are crammed into these stories that they defy summary, but their message is clear: education and communication are the tools for which there are no substitutes.” (*New York Times Book Review*)

“For too long, migrant children have been known only for their labor in the fields. In *Voices from the Fields*, we listen to their aspirations, their dreams, the daily struggle in their lives. Every time we put food into our mouths, the voices in this book will remind us of the workers and their families who make our nourishment possible.” (Rudolfo Anaya, author)

With the very personal style of photographs and narratives, author Beth Atkin has given readers of all ages and in all walks of life a deeper understanding and greater compassion for migrant farmworker children, and, indirectly, for all children everywhere who find themselves in such challenging circumstances. Her book will undoubtedly be required reading for students, teachers, administrators, community members, public employees working with migrant workers, and for anyone who is sincerely interested in hearing the voices of working children. **NN**

## A NEW NATIVE TEACHER CORPS

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The new Native teachers are teaching us much about what is important if they are to influence the movement away from ineffectual assimilationist systems of education toward indigenous models that will honor Native languages, culture, traditions, values and knowledge and will improve academic outcomes for Native students. While many of the components of an indigenous teacher training model are coming into clear focus, Kathryn Manuelito reminds us: “From a Native perspective, no event or process is completely finished; it is always in a state of changing and becoming. So, too, in the case of Native education, and particularly Native teacher preparation programs” (2003, p.2). **NN**

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