

## Leadership Embracing American Indian Ways of Educating: Restoring Culturally Imbedded Practices while Building Pathways towards Student Success

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### ABSTRACT

American Indian cultural traditions and practices are presented for their merit in promoting student learning within the K-12 educational system. Specific culturally imbedded practices are provided as examples by which student learning can be enhanced while honoring First Nation's teaching and learning practices. Five developmental theorists noted in this concept paper speak to pedagogical practices

that are in alignment with American Indian cultural orientations and that support their inherent value for application in the classroom. This paper asserts that by valuing and promoting American Indian culture and practices in the K-12 curriculum, that the United States would make greater strides in not only affecting the achievement gap, but in taking steps toward equity and achieving social justice goals.

Educators in the K-12 classroom who seek to engage the minds and hearts of American Indian students should first consider this population's experience of public education and the history of Indians' traditions, values, and experience. Under the pretense that American Indian ways of educating were inferior, U.S. education policies directed that "education was presented to American Indians as a value system to be substituted for their traditions and as a mechanism to destroy traditional Native American ways" (Grinde, p. 29, 2004). This historically embedded devaluation and persistent attack on their worth have negatively impacted American Indian communities (Ball, 2004; Loewen, 1995; Ogbu and Simmons, 1998; Sanchez, 2007). The assumed inferiority of American Indians has perpetuated negative stereotypes and images to those who have come to call the United States their home. When children in

public schools learn about American Indians in textbooks, they are exposed to harmful perceptions "represented by distortion, omission, over-representation, romanticized portrayals, and tokenism" (Barclay, 1996; Caldwell-Wood & Mitten, 1992; Costo & Henry, 1970; Sanchez, 1996).

Countering this historically embedded legacy requires concerted effort in extricating the persistent devaluation, negative images, and practices from our curriculum and pedagogical practices. Furthermore, educators can reverse this toxic legacy by creating and implementing curriculum and pedagogical practices that not only respect American Indian culture, history and traditions but appreciates how this orientation may benefit all students in the classroom.

This conceptual paper offers several examples of American Indian cultural traditions and makes a call for

schools to be inclusive of curriculum and pedagogy that incorporates American Indian cultural values. These are offered as a starting point by which to consider alignment of curriculum with cultural practices and knowledge that would further engage American Indian students in our public schools.

Despite the disparagement of traditional American Indian value systems, there are developmental theorists (Crain, 2011; Erikson, 1959, 1963; Froebel, 1887; Hart, 1979; Montessori, 1948, 1966, 1969) who promote an educational philosophy that is in alignment with culturally grounded American Indian worldviews. In learning to value American Indian orientations and way of education, the common themes from these developmental theorists are discussed as their orientations underscore the value of not only how "children grow and learn on their own" but emphasize children's capacity for "inner growth and spontaneous learning" from an environmental perspective (Crain, 2011, p. 1).

The authors examine the psychological and cultural disconnect for American Indians in our current educational system, engaging the reader by describing the main elements of five developmental theorists and how they align with American Indian cultural values.

### **Psychological and Cultural Disconnect**

The U.S. Department of Interior and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) estimate that there are 564 tribal entities that are recognized and are eligible for direct funding and services from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) by virtue of their status as Indian tribes (Department of the Interior, 2010). California alone has 112 federally recognized tribes and an overall Native American population of 1.9% (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011).

Most American Indian children attend public schools where disparities occur both at the K-12 and at the post-secondary levels. During the 2010-11 school year, there were 378,000 American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) students in the U.S. public school system, comprising 0.7% of the total public school population (Aud, Hussar, Johnson, Kena, & Roth, 2012). In comparison, during this same time period, there were 49,152 students in Bureau of Indian Education Schools (Bureau of Indian Education, 2011). The high school dropout rate for Native American students is alarming and in previous years has reflected a rate as high as 50% (Herring, 1992).

More recent research indicates that American Indian enrollment, retention, and graduation rates are lower than any other ethnic group (Harrington & Harrington, 2012). While estimates show some improvement for AI/AN having earned a high school diploma or equivalent, the figures still speak to their trailing behind their Euro-American counterparts by 12% (BIA, 2011). Also in 2008-2009, 40% of AI/AN students as compared to 33% of white students attended a school that did not meet adequate yearly progress (Ross, Kena, & Tahbun, 2012).

Between 2005 and 2011, the achievement gaps between AI/AN and non-AI/AN fourth graders and between AI/AN and non-AI/AN eighth graders did not change for reading, but widened in the subject of mathematics. The breakdown of figures in 2011 indicate that 66% of AI/AN students at grade four and 55% at grade eight performed at or above the basic level of mathematics; however, the overall percentages of students that advanced increased by 1% (Institute of Education Sciences, 2011). These persistent outcomes reflect significant disparities that need to be addressed within our educational system. Doing so, however, requires an awareness of the underlying historical factors that exacerbate the constant psychological tension for American Indians children in order to correct it.

Despite the fact that American Indians existed upon this land thousands of years before the United States existed, the U.S. education curriculum is remiss in recognizing their contributions to the development and identity of the United States. An example of specific content that should be included in the K-12 curriculum relates to the Iroquois Nation who demonstrated an early form of leadership directly related to the formation of a confederacy. In the years prior to the existence of the United States, "Franklin called on the delegates of the various English colonies to unite and emulate the Iroquois League, a call that was not heeded until the Constitution was written three decades later" (Weatherford, 1988, p. 136). Although major components of the Iroquois Nation's governmental structure and philosophy were emulated, borrowed, and adapted to create the United States' governmental system, the attribution is rarely noted. "The standard works regarding the United States Constitution and the Articles of Confederation do not credit the American Indians with having contributed to their origins" (Payne, 1996, p. 605).

This was one of the earliest developments of leadership and governance yet is not mentioned in K-12 curricu-

lum. In light of historical cultural invasion, the omission of First Nations history, culture, and contributions persists (Freire, 1995). The failure to recognize American Indians at all, underscores the psychological experience of American Indian students who are one of the subgroups most represented in the Achievement Gap (Institute of Education Sciences, 2011).

Other factors contributing to the cultural and academic difficulties among the American Indian students are described by Huffman and Ferguson (2007). The authors explored the communities' disposition towards education based on the historical trauma enacted upon the American Indians during the conquest and colonization of the people who first lived on the land now called the United States. Historically, the federal government, in the attempt to strip away Native cultures, created an educational system for American Indian children that included boarding schools which did not honor or value the child's culture, language, and traditions (Ball, 2004; Grinde, 2004; Huffman & Ferguson, 2007).

One of the reasons for the adverse psychological reaction to U.S. education is due, in part, to the boarding school experience in which American Indian children were forcibly removed from their homes. The teaching of American Indian languages was banned, their cultural context and style denigrated, and many schools outright disgraced and dismissed the Native community and their cultural beliefs (Robinson-Zanartu & Majel-Dixon, 1996). These experiences negatively impacted Native communities as the historical trauma still informs tribal communities' perceptions of mainstream education (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998). Additionally, many of the school personnel in the boarding schools were extreme in the mistreatment of children and denigration of their home culture. This, in turn, fomented a distrust of the educational system in which many American Indian families perceived education as harmful and as a place that did not allow Native students to feel valued or accepted (Grinde, 2004).

### **Developmental Theorists: Native Worldview Alignment**

In order to better understand the value for adopting and implementing American Indian orientations we examine the frameworks promoted by the following developmental theorists whose orientations reflect an alignment with American Indian world view. The themes that

are derived from each of these developmental theorists are their emphasis of learning and being in relationship with nature as well as relationships with others. The value of "existing in the natural world" is referenced earlier in this paper as well as the value of collectivism. These are inherent values in traditional American Indian culture. The table is followed by an examination of the first listed theorist, Froebel, who focuses on the benefits of engaging children learning within the natural world.

#### *Friedrich Froebel*

Developmental theorists repeatedly emphasize the inclination and the benefits of children learning and engaging within our natural world. German Educator, Friedrich Froebel (1887) "believed that children had a desire to comprehend the extent and diversity of the world in order to better comprehend their own place within it" (Hart, 1979, p. 336). Froebel explores the need for "the harmony and unity of the natural world and a child's desire to grasp this unity in order to develop a sense of inner unity." In other words, connection to the natural world creates balance with oneself. This forces us as educators to ask: How does a child perceive the world and how would a child's natural inquisitiveness be heightened by a greater relationship to the natural world? Froebel intones that children develop a greater use of critical consciousness and thinking when the child relates to the world. This relationship, in turn, enhances the child's sense of self in the world while deriving value and worth from their conscious and acknowledged presence. The next theorist to be examined is Maria Montessori who also stressed the benefits for children to learn within natural settings.

#### *Maria Montessori*

Maria Montessori, an Italian physician and educator, is one of the most renowned developmental theorists whose teachings have produced a host of schools throughout the world. The curriculum she created to promote the innate learning capabilities of people was founded on exposure to learning environments attuned to four different developmental stages that she referred to as "planes of development" (Montessori, 1969). The curriculum design was intended to respond to internal characteristics that Montessori perceived to be universal. These characteristics include "Activity...Orientation...Exploration... and Manipulation (of the Environment)" (Montessori, 1966).

During the stage of development that encompasses ages 12 through 18, Montessori valued children's learning to occur in a manner that promoted their engagement with the environment. Subsequently, she called for schools serving this population to be situated in the country and close to nature.

Her observations of children just learning to walk and who are encouraged to explore and study nature have multiple levels of growth when allowed to foster this intimate engagement with their surroundings. Montessori offers from her observations of children in their earliest stages that "nature seems to fill a vital emotional need" (Montessori, 1948). While this theorist provided ample reason for vitality in learning that would fulfill the needs from a developmental perspective, she also observed that the direction taken in modern life "separates children from nature so thoroughly that their powers of observation and feelings of love for the world just wither away" (Crain, 2011, p. 86). As we examine the nature of learning that tends to take place in most public school settings, there is a tendency to not only confine the child within the restraint of four walls but a large scale movement is underway in which children's learning is being encouraged through the use of electronic mediums (Baskette & Fantz, 2013).

While there is no doubt that competence in computers, tablets, and other devices is vital for anyone living in and engaging in the global market and arena, foundational development and an appreciation for nature are neglected when children are denied access to the natural world. Montessori's observations of children's optimal learning conditions prompted her to "articulate ways in which contact with nature helps children develop, suggesting it increases children's powers of observation and gives them a sense of unity with the world" (Crain, 2011, p. 389). To this end, Montessori ensured that her schools made room for children to have access to nature. This is similar to American Indian culture in that nature was the first learning environment to teach tribal children. From those early teachings about the relationship to earth, children learned their responsibility of taking care of the planet. When referring to mother earth the relationship of connectedness is significant since a high value in Native culture is placed on the circle of life.

*Heinz Werner*

Children's optimal learning conditions are discussed by Austrian Psychologist Heinz Werner who poses the concept of eidetic imagery. This ability which is often found in children reflects a heightened ability to recall or reproduce visual images with vivid memory. Furthermore, children have an expansive capacity to perceive the natural world from a physiognomic orientation. This capacity reflects a reaction to the dynamic, emotional, and expressive qualities of the natural world that is generally applied to interpreting the emotions and behaviors of other human beings and animate objects. For children, however, their physiognomic abilities apply to the world, including that which is inanimate, as "full of life and emotion" (Crain, 2011, p. 102). A sense of relatedness with the earth, including stones, trees, land, etc. enhances one's personal connection to the world. This relatedness being an implicit value imbedded in traditional Native America culture in which the concept of interrelatedness with the world, animate and inanimate, stems from a physiognomic orientation. Subsequently, a sense of reciprocity with the world implies a stewardship: "When we show our respect for other living things, they respond with respect for us" (Arapaho Proverb, Cleary, p. 16).

Similarly, a physiognomic orientation also demystifies and endears us to the world in which we live. Children's eidetic capacity as well as their physiognomic orientations can be further enhanced rather than diminished by opportunities to engage with the world around them. This sense of familiarity with the world promotes a personalization that fosters stewardship and a pro environmental and ecological orientation. By developing children's innate capacities in these two areas, the vastness of our forests, oceans, lakes, valleys, and mountains may be viewed not so much as just a "resource" to conquer and exploit, but more so as limited and irreplaceable forms of life that deserve protection and respect. This sense of familiarity and personalization is conveyed in the following quote, "For the Lakota there was no wilderness. Nature was not dangerous but hospitable, not forbidding but friendly" (Luther Standing Bear, Lakota Sioux, Cleary, p. 17).

While Luther Standing Bear and Werner lived in different parts of the world and in different times, they both value a personalized relationship with nature so as to develop a sense of care which is then translated to one's relationship with all living things. In development of this

relationship the consistent theme of trusting children's innate capacity to grow and learn is only enhanced by access to nature. The following theorist who also explored the value of connectedness and interdependence is Erik Erikson. As a developmental theorist Erikson delineated various stages of life from birth to death while learning from his observations of child rearing practices of various Native American communities.

#### *Erik Erikson*

The Stages of Life that were defined from a psychoanalytic theory of development and created by Erik Erikson expands on concepts that allow us to further understand how the child encounters the social world in which they live. Erikson's research of Native American communities enabled him to make cross cultural comparisons. In particular, Erikson's observation that the United States "values emphasize independent achievement to such an extent that people become exclusively involved in themselves and their successes and neglect the responsibility of caring for others" (Erikson, 1959, p. 97). This sense of "care" would be reasonable to expect of people as they emerge into the 7th of the 8th stages delineated by Erikson which is Adulthood. However, in the 5th Stage, Puberty, which is when children are attempting to establish an identity, the innate need to develop their place in the world can create extreme behaviors that are not only exclusionary but cruel to others who are not like them. Here, perceptions of people are based upon a "worth" that lends itself to not only quantifying others but of fomenting the devaluation of humanity and a form of objectification.

One example of valuing others was observed when Erikson surmised that, in comparison to Euro-American culture, the Lakota culture raise their children with a "long and indulgent period of nursing" in which they seek to promote their children's capacity "to trust others and to become generous themselves" (Erikson, 1963, p. 134-140). This quality of relatedness with others is not encouraged in United States culture, where independence is highly valued and free mobility away from one's family and place of origin is encouraged. As adolescents are developmentally striving to find an identity in the larger social world, the cultures that promote connection, in all forms, provide value in how our children can learn to relate to one another and to the larger world. Erikson observed that "In the United States in particular, our values emphasize inde-

pendent achievement to such an extent that people can become too exclusively involved in themselves and their successes and neglect the responsibility of caring for others" (Crain, 2011, p. 294). This concept of relatedness and care for others is further expanded upon by theorist, Margaret Mahler. The last theorist to examine focuses on the sense of belonging and the child's learning environment.

#### *Margaret Mahler*

Hungarian by birth, Margaret Mahler espoused the position that children should have opportunities to develop "rootedness" with natural surroundings in order to promote a sense of belonging. With experiences that connect children to the environment, in its' most naturalistic setting, they can see themselves as part of something greater, outside of a social context, that enhances their sense of well-being. Subsequently, belonging in nature provides a place in which children can seek refuge for a budding ego that seeks validation, acceptance, and nurturing. The belonging that is derived from a oneness with nature was evident from studies in which children were observed in natural settings (Crain, 2011). Mahler's theme of "belonging" which is derived from a relationship with nature is in alignment with American Indian beliefs of respect for the natural world. It is important for all children to feel a sense of belonging, and when examining American Indian student success in the classroom, this becomes a more critical component. A curriculum that includes culture by respecting tribal communities allows for acceptance to a population that has been hurting for centuries.

All five of these theoretical frameworks provide a rationale for student learning that would be enhanced by aligning curriculum and pedagogy with American Indian orientations. In order to meet the needs of American Indian students, it would be ideal to understand their cultural background. Specific examples that could be instrumental in eliminating the cultural disconnect are offered as new approaches which need to be included in the K-12 educational curriculum. For this reason, we examine the benefits of integrating First Nation orientations within our mainstream curriculum and pedagogical practices which would enact restorative justice initiatives, so that the practices of storytelling and other culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum would engage student interest in the classroom. The next section will further develop and explore the importance of American Indian storytelling

Table 1  
*Developmental Theorists*

Theorists	Description	Cultural Ties to American Indian Orientations
Froebel	Harmony and unity to the natural world.	Enhances child sense of self in the world
Montessori	Curriculum designed to take place in the natural world.	Learning in nature produces greater learning outcomes
Werner	Enhancement of children’s perceptual capacities.	Relational capacities with the earth translates to relational capacities with humans and animals, building on relationships
Erikson	Disadvantage of extreme individualism.	Collectivism and Interdependence
Mahler	Sense of belonging derived from being in nature.	Oneness with nature

and how this could be a teaching technique for the classroom.

**Including American Indian Cultural Practices in the K-12 Curriculum**

*Storytelling*

A primary cultural practice significant to many American Indian tribes relates to early teachings and verbal histories handed down to each generation. Storytelling encapsulates this tradition and is a culturally imbedded practice familiar to American Indian students. This pedagogical approach has always been one significant way in which Native elders share life lessons with their children, while also modeling the value and art of communication.

Many of the lessons shared by elders affirm cultural values and traditions while also acknowledging the historical connectedness to the land. For example, hundreds of years ago ancestors of the Sierra Miwok found a flat meadow in the wooded foothills, near grinding holes used for acorns with distinct petroglyphs. This area known as Chaw-se Grinding Rock (State Park) is one example of tradition that forms a historical connection to the land (Eagle, 2008). Through the sharing of these stories, all children would feel connected and have a sense of related-

ness to the earth, stone, and trees which enhances ones connection to the world as conveyed by Werner’s recommendations for best practices for engaging children’s learning capacities.

Prior to colonial contact the bulk of education in American Indian cultures was communicated through oral story-telling, and was to be remembered, and passed on to the next generation (Grinde, 2004). Grinde indicates that:

Native Americans had educational systems long before 1492, with Native teachers and scholars imparting knowledge to children and adults on a day-to-day basis both before and after white contact. Elders as well as people knowledgeable about specific ideas and techniques instructed members of their societies about a broad range of topics including history, religion, arts and crafts, literature, geography, zoology, botany, medicine, law, political science, astronomy, soil science, and theater. Since American Indian models of instruction centered on oral tradition, Europeans often typified Native American education as “primitive,” defective, or nonexistent. (p. 25).

In contrast, the written form of communication is relatively recent. When speaking with elders and other members in the community they all share the same value when communicating about the importance of storytelling as it has played a vital role in passing down knowledge. Another important value inherent to Native culture is learning from and respecting elders. This mode of learning is already being utilized in Canada; community elders share their knowledge and wisdom in classroom teaching and learning. This is an example of cultural synthesis (Freire, 1995), the antithesis of cultural invasion, in that it not only embraces Indigenous orientations but is regarded along with Euro-western theory, research, and practice (Ball, 2004). These efforts provide a model for mainstream educators in the United States to discuss American Indian culture, and to also be inclusive of these traditions in their methods of instruction in the classroom setting.

Freire's banking method of education refers to the fact that students are not called upon for what they know, but rather are expected to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher (p. 80). This pedagogical approach inhibits creative thinking. Freire also refers to education as the practice of freedom and promotes the idea that students learn best when they are challenged and when content is interrelated so as to better understand the world (p. 81). One of the most significant approaches in understanding life's lessons is from prior experiences which is inherent with the use of storytelling. This form of teaching has been used by many Native tribes for centuries, and was an early form of sharing information which challenges student's thoughts and promotes creativity. Using storytelling as a method of transmitting localized knowledge enables students to be pro-active in problem solving as well as to develop their critical thinking skills. The use of this medium enhances student's ability to view all perspectives from a holistic orientation that promotes informed decision making. Storytelling, an early form of teaching, allows us to draw from lessons of the past and apply them to the present. The knowledge that is delivered through storytelling is stored in the "core mentalizing network (ToM)," which aids in the process in the recovery of information (Mar, 2011).

### **Sharing of Collaboration and Knowledge/Shared Vision**

Another area of cultural tradition that should further be explored for its' added value is the importance of com-

munity in relation to the child and family. Generally, when there is a family or school issue it becomes a shared concern within the American Indian community. This is also a preferred approach towards leadership and decision making, and also relates to the area of collaboration as well as the integration of shared knowledge. "One foundational value, of leadership from the American Indian perspective, is a shared vision and responsibility. Although there may be individual or tribal differences among familiar groups, this perspective is a consistent cultural view" (Portman & Garrett, 2005, p. 284).

Many American Indian communities believe that unity is critical to the success of its people and students. Recognizing the history related to the mass destruction that much of the Native population encountered, would promote an understanding that American Indians survived by working collaboratively. Overcoming concerted efforts to annihilate an entire population called upon their resilience in the face of adversity. It is because of this shared purpose and vision for all to live in harmony, that tribes are still resilient today. Collaborating became essential for collective survival and when applied regressing to pedagogical practices, collaborative learning is a basic technique that can be valued and applied in the classroom. As offered by multiple researchers (Grinde, 2004; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) countering the negative perceptions of American Indian's requires exposure to American Indian forms of teaching. This entails utilizing Native tribal forms of collaborative teaching which exposes children to early forms of Native traditions in which elements of science, engineering, and math are evident. For example, the beadwork and the construction of the ceremonial dance house are both important aspects of tribal traditions. Through the course of life it was best to learn in natural settings and to teach each other within the community; as a member within the tribal community stated, "Nature is your true teacher" (Martinez-Alire, 2013). It is with this understanding that children and community members developed problem-solving skills.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The aforementioned developmental theorists have studied practices and learning contexts that enhance children's learning. The common themes point to an alignment with values inherent in traditional American Indian culture. Subsequently, the development of culturally responsive

curriculum and pedagogy would serve the dual purpose of enacting restorative justice initiatives while implementing curriculum and pedagogy that promotes greater learning outcomes for all children. Educational leaders who are willing to serve a community that has been marginalized after years of violent oppression must also seek to engage the scholarly community to enact transformative educational practices and policies. Standing on the foundation of American Indian orientations, supported by the recommendations of educational theorists, and moved by the need to create learning environments that promote the best in all children's outcomes is a goal that not only minimizes the Achievement Gap but one that promotes healing of our nation's historical violations.

Educators are positioned to transform the experience of "education" for all children by promoting inclusive curriculum and pedagogical practices that promote equity for all students. This entails acceptance and inclusion of tribal histories so that all students can feel validated in our classrooms. To this end we know that "Education is a strong value and is a source of future hope for Native children and communities. In sending children to public schools, American Indian communities have entrusted that future systems will respect the children they serve and that these systems must assume a new role in locating and contradicting the source of disrespect in order for students to feel accepted" (Robinson-Zanartu & Majel-Dixon, 1996). Once educators have forged partnership with American Indian communities and sought their input, they will have taken first steps in modeling respect for their culture. In doing so, the public school system will create conditions that will foster student success in the classroom which will lead to transformational change and outcomes within mainstream education.

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