

## **What Educational Leaders See as Important for Improving the Education of Indigenous Youth**

Joseph Martin, Richard Manning, Larry Steeves,  
Josephine Steeves, and Jon Reyhner

Despite costly efforts to close the gap between Indigenous students' test scores and U.S. national averages—including those funded by the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001—a disparity continues to exist (*Native Americans*, 2013). These efforts often failed to consider the lived experiences of teachers and school administrators who have worked with Indigenous students and communities. Earlier studies that sought the input of professionals experienced in Indian education largely reported these professionals emphasized the importance of utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy, curriculum and school leadership approaches that have proven effective to advance academic performance of Indigenous students (Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Huffman, 2008, 2013). This chapter builds on this knowledge and reports on findings from interviews with five experienced Navajo educators in the United States and four experienced First Nations educators (one non-Indigenous) in Saskatchewan, Canada. These interviews provide information on mainstream American and Canadian perspectives for educational reform as compared to the views about the types of instruction and curriculum Indigenous students need according to these nine experienced school administrators working with schools serving Indigenous students.

North American Indigenous students lag academically behind their non-Indigenous peers (*Native Americans*, 2013). This trend shows no sign of reversal unless changes are made to how Indigenous students are educated. Leadership within schools is an essential and vital component to student success, regardless of demographics or other factors like access to resources. As research on Indigenous student achievement is still a limited subject of study, we must look for ways to build on the knowledge we have. Experienced Indigenous educational leaders and teachers have a wealth of knowledge about how to educate their people. The study reported in this chapter builds on previous studies that sought the knowledge of Indigenous educators to learn what is needed to improve education for Indigenous students in North America (Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Huffman, 2008, 2013). Five experienced Navajo educators in the United States and four experienced First Nations educators—including one non-Indigenous educator who had worked extensively within Indigenous education—in Saskatchewan, Canada, were interviewed about student achievement and their experiences within Indigenous education structures. We approached this study with a recognition that Indigenous education—as recognized by Tribal Crit theory (Brayboy, 2005)—is burdened by a history of colonialism and needs to be decolonized by listening

Cite as from J. Reyhner, J. Martin, L. Lockard & W.S. Gilbert. (Eds.). (2017). *Honoring Our Teachers* (pp. 19-33). Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University

## *Honoring Our Teachers*

to Indigenous peoples, including experienced Indigenous school administrators who know what is important and needed for their children's education.

This research project began with a literature review of previous studies focused on examining the knowledge of practicing Indigenous educators and Indigenous leadership styles (see e.g., Aguilera-Black Bear & Tippeconnic, 2015; Goulet & Goulet, 2014). Then interviews were conducted with nine school administrators in Saskatchewan and the Navajo Nation. Five participants were Navajo school administrators in Arizona and the remaining four were senior educational administrators from Saskatchewan. With the exception of one school administrator from Saskatchewan, all participants were Indigenous. The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the University of Regina and Northern Arizona University and individual interviews were done by Dr. Larry Steeves in Canada and Dr. Joseph Martin and Dr. Jon Reyhner in the United States.

### **Clery and Peacock's *Collective Wisdom Study***

One of the largest previous studies examining what educators have learned from teaching Indigenous students was reported in Linda Miller Clery and Thomas D. Peacock's (1998) *Collected Wisdom: American Indian Education*. Their study drew upon interviews with over 60 Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers of Indigenous students working on or near nine reservations located across the U.S. and in two cities with high Indigenous populations. It also involved more than 50 other teachers in Australia and Costa Rica. These teachers reported that teaching styles coming from the dominant culture often failed to meet the needs of Indigenous students. For example, one non-Indigenous teacher stated:

We're basically bussing them into a white school, teaching them all of our history and our language and our culture, and then tossing them back out and expecting them to get a job and conform and be exactly like us. (Clery & Peacock, 1998, p. 70)

This perspective was reinforced by the findings of the *Seeking Their Voices* (2014) study in Canada where the interviewees described sub-oppression—the continuing tragedy of internalized oppression—that affects adversely students who struggle with identity issues, self-confidence, and self-destructive tendencies (see also Freire, 1990). Students struggling to find balance and harmony in their traditional teaching—should they be lucky enough to have intact teachings—can see school as a place for becoming white. In other words, these students felt like they were losing their Indigeneity (Peshkin, 1997). The tragedy of boarding and residential schools remains current; parents rightly associate state-sponsored education with losing their traditions and forced assimilation. This impacts a parent's willingness to support education and their ability to instill its worth into their children (Child, 2014; Reyhner & Eder, In Press).

Another manifestation of oppression discussed by Clery and Peacock (1998) was the pressures schools put on students to culturally assimilate into

## *What Educational Leaders See as Important*

the dominant culture, which can lead to delayed adolescence, attendance issues, anger, hopelessness, fear of success, passive aggressive behaviors, and low self esteem. All these pressures can work against the efforts that dedicated teachers can make to create the conditions for these students to empower themselves.

Teachers interviewed by Cleary and Peacock described how to make the experience of living in two worlds—“white” and “Indigenous”—less destructive and how to build bridges between these two worlds. Teachers were able to better meet the needs of their students by knowing the environments their students came from each morning. Some Indigenous students grow up in very traditional families—especially in rural areas—while others grow up in families who have been largely assimilated into the dominant White culture—especially in urban areas. Some Indigenous students and families may not be interested in their own traditional culture, having grown up away from the more traditional teachings of their tribes. All Indigenous students need to be inspired to develop their own sense of purpose and worth, without regrets based on decisions made by or for their ancestors.

Teachers discussed the impact of Indigenous language loss, and that “if a language dies, the culture also dies because the language contains and perpetuates the depth, subtleties, and nuances of culture” (1998, p. 125). Language issues include privacy and exclusion rights in order for a cultural group to preserve their religious freedom. The Hopi do not separate their language from their religion; instead, language provides the very structure of religious preservation. Bernita Humeyestewa, a Hopi teacher, stated:

Its got to be valued at home. And that’s why we have so many conflicting opinions about where it should be taught. I knew I was getting into a delicate situation this year by teaching it but I was really surprised that no one complained. (as quoted in Cleary & Peacock, 1998, p.143)

Indigenous students can have difficulties learning in school “because the ways children learn at home conflict with the ways schools teach” (Cleary & Peacock, 1998, p. 156). Based on their interviews, Cleary and Peacock recommended teachers emphasize group work with lots of dialogue in contrast to competitive classroom strategies as competence and self-assurance are vital issues with many Indigenous students. Therefore it is important to remove the pressure to perform and be singled out from those students who are threatened by competition. However, this does not mean that all Indigenous students are going to conform to this profile.

Teachers also emphasized the need for relevant reading material, the problem of student labeling in remedial programs, dialect interference, the influence of oral tradition, the need for explicit lessons in writing, and cultural differences in thought (see also Cleary, 2008). For example,

People from oral traditions contextualize their articulation of thought; they depend on shared knowledge of the people who will be listening

## ***Honoring Our Teachers***

to them and do not necessarily articulate what others already know. People from literate traditions tend to decontextualize thought, to add the context that a distant audience will need to make sense of speech or writing. (Cleary & Peacock, 1998, p. 188)

The teachers Cleary and Peacock interviewed found that incentives used by mainstream schools often do not work with Indigenous students, and they summed up what they learned from the educators they interviewed, writing “The key to producing successful American Indian students in our modern educational system...is to first ground these students in their American Indian belief and value systems” (1998, p. 101).

### **Huffman’s *American Indian Educators Study*<sup>1</sup>**

A second seminal study was done by Terry Huffman (2013) and reported in his *American Indian Educators in Reservation Schools*. In it he summarized the results of interviews with 21 American Indian educators (14 teachers and 7 principals) on five reservations in South Dakota and Montana with an average of 18 years’ experience. Half had attended tribal colleges and 12 are described as affiliative educators, most interested with personal relations with students, and nine as facilitative educators, most interested in effective instruction, with both types supporting the teaching of tribal cultures. This book was a follow-up to Huffman’s 2008 study reported in *American Indian Higher Educational Experiences: Cultural Visions and Personal Journeys*. In it, he also found Indigenous educators highlighting the importance of Indigenous cultures and languages.

An Indigenous school principal interviewed by Huffman lamented:

No Child Left Behind has changed teaching so much. I mean, assessment is the drive and it’s like we are forgetting the child.... We are leaving the child behind because we have forgotten teaching styles and, like I said, the language and the culture. That has all been put on the back burner when they should actually be up front. (2013, p. 95)

Huffman noted how this principal’s view of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 reflected the view of most of his interviewees. Her views also mirrored the findings of the National Indian Education Association’s study, *Preliminary Report on No Child Left Behind in Indian Country* (Beaulieu & Sparks, 2005), which found that federal government’s effort through NCLB to improve the education of ethnic minorities in the U.S. was deeply flawed, and its focus on English language skills and math led to the devaluing of other knowledge, including Indigenous cultural knowledge.

The academic achievement issues faced by many American Indians and other students do not end with teachers and what goes on in their classrooms, which have been the focus of most recent educational reforms. “Virtually all the challenges identified” by the Indigenous educators Huffman interviewed “were related to larger social issues in the community,” including poverty (2013, p. 74).

In fact, increased pressures on teachers to raise student achievement, as well as making students pass high-stakes examinations for graduation, and threats of job termination have aggravated long-standing problems of teacher morale and turnover and made teaching a less attractive profession. Teacher shortages are being noted today not only on Indian reservations, but nationwide in the United States (Will, 2016).

Huffman's (2013) interviews and comprehensive review of the literature on Indigenous education highlighted the historical use "of formal education ... as a weapon in the assault on indigenous cultures," helping lead to a "general disregard for education" and "persistent indifference on reservations toward education" by some Indigenous people (pp. 27, 69 & 115). Huffman (2013) found that due to this historical trauma it was common for "some families to actively discourage the academic success of their children" (p. 61). Schools serving Indigenous students can be places for becoming white, leading to "academic apathy" (Huffman, 2013, p. 65; Peshkin, 1997). Schooling often separates Indigenous children from their parents and heritage rather than strengthening Indigenous communities and helping students build strong and positive identities (Bishop & Berryman, 2010; Milloy, 1999; Reyhner, 2015).

Huffman (2013) found the educators who participated in his study "generally regard a strong cultural identity reinforced by culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum as important to the success of students" (p. 140), and he found these findings support transculturation theory that contends that a strong sense of Native identity helps Native people to be academically successful. In order for many Indigenous students to find success within "mainstream institutions," including schools, they need to develop a "strong cultural identity," which they can rely upon for strength and stability as they learn to navigate these institutions (p. 159).

### **Nine 2016 Navajo and Saskatchewan Interviews**

Our current interviews sought to find out what some experienced school administrators thought was needed to improve the academic performance of Indigenous students and to see how their ideas compared to the results of Cleary and Peacock's, Huffman's and other studies. One of the main themes that came out of these new interviews with educational leaders was the importance of place consciousness/cultural competence, attention to tribal and First Nation education needs, knowing the community that students come to school from as well as the students' families, and a perceptive knowledge on how best to instruct Indigenous students, particularly for those attending schools primarily serving Indigenous students. This includes knowing the community's history, the tribal cultural and community dynamics, and the impact of poverty as regards to students' readiness to learn. In addition it is useful to know whether family members attended residential in Canada or boarding schools in the United States and may have passed down negative attitudes towards schooling. Many American Indian and First Nation people who attended boarding schools experienced personal trauma and according to research most lacked knowledge on how to cope with the emotional

## *Honoring Our Teachers*

stress they endured and passed on negative aspects of their experiences without understanding the impact on their families today (Colmant, et al., 2004). Knowing a community's possible divisions, such as among practitioners of traditional tribal religions, Native American Church members, and members of different Christian sects is also important. As one of the Navajo school administrators noted:

Not only the community external of the school, but within the school itself. Usually the school community is kind of independent of the community. When I first stepped in there, I saw that it was kind of isolated from the outside community itself, and even the teacher housings are separate from the community itself—gated, right now, in fact. We tend to look at the school as that one entity within the community, and I think that the first thing that needs to happen is for both communities to come together and share, share their outcomes, their desires, their goals, their dreams, not only for the students but for the staff, the families, like you said, the school board, the administrators, and the teachers. I think there needs to be a sharing both ways.<sup>2</sup>

He continued to speak about the different types of students that can come to school:

A lot of times, I see two different kinds of teens coming into the high school. I see the teen who has been very much supported by the family, by the school system, and overall just has a general positive outlook about their whole experience. The second teen I see coming into the high school are those that experience very traumatic events, no support, and I mean no support from family and school, for some reason they have a negative experience based on some of the educators they encountered, some of the schools they've been in, in our district, and some of the relationships they did or didn't have. So I think it's really important that the well-being, the mentality of the student, the social, emotional well-being of that child from K12 really needs to be examined and supported in order for them to be successful in their learning....

You push the limit too far on Indian-ism dealing with people, parents especially, there could be Navajos, Navajo families who are not so traditional who expect a little bit different opportunities for their kids. For example, college bound kids. They're not going to want to hear about cultural philosophies of learning.

They're going to want to hear... 'Okay, you're the principal of the school. You're getting my child ready for college, that we're about reading to spend a lot of money on because we make too much money and the Tribe isn't going to give us any money. How are you getting

my kid ready for college? I want these high standards, I want these high expectations.”

So, trying to deal with them in a Navajo way is not going to work. You’re going to have to (finger snap) switch gears and adjust and say, ‘Okay, we’re talking now about the real aspect of education now.... This is probably a family that’s probably typical in those communities now. They’re wanting to know how we’re going to prepare their child for college. And that could be a drawback if you kind of go back to a different approach that way.

A Saskatchewan interviewee noted how a school’s curriculum needs to mesh with the history of the community that the students come from:

Well, you need to know your communities. You need to know your culture and your knowledge. You need to understand treaties. Treaties are important to First Nations, even though, let me be blunt, treaties like a big fog, comes rolling in and everybody says, there’s the fog but nobody knows exactly what it is. And a lot of times with treaties people don’t understand what they’re talking about, but they’re still important. And the thing is the mainstream has to understand the importance of treaties as well because in international law you don’t sign treaties with a village. You don’t sign treaties with a town. Treaties are nation to nation. They sign treaties in Canada so you can’t get around it.

### **Building Relations**

Several interviewees emphasized the need to build relations with the Indigenous community, including extended families and tribal government and religious leaders. Having an educational leader listen to community members and their staff, letting them know who you are and what you believe, and taking time to think things through before taking action were among the leadership skills often mentioned to build relations. However, owing to high staff turnover and the hard-to-staff school conditions, some schools find it very difficult to forge those relationships on an ongoing basis. A Canadian educator discussed how efforts at school improvement were:

being spearheaded by the focus on building relationships, I think that’s critically important... recognizing that there is something to a cultural way of learning, way of knowing that differs and respecting that is another thing that’s absolutely critical. Good teachers and good administrators will create an environment that welcomes a student and recognizes them is strength based, builds on what they bring and tries to help them expand that. If we don’t do that, it’s very easy to turn people off, and that’s what I think oftentimes happens. Then the school, the culture, the bias, the prejudice, the racism has a tendency to turn kids off.... I would think in some cases I would say we see large numbers

## *Honoring Our Teachers*

of Indigenous kids who are a little less secure, and it's really easy, it can be really easy to turn them off and turn them away from the school. There's a lot of cultural influences in that, you know the perception that the parents have that the residential schools, all of those things have a tendency to pull them, could pull them back from school. . . . But in order to be successful, you're going to have to build the relationship with the kids. You're going to have to understand what connects with them, how do they learn, what are the rewards that they see as important to them, to help them gain confidence and strength and be willing to try.

He also used the metaphor of good sports coaches to describe effective administrators. He shared how coaches:

have always been able to find ways to use the talent they have and make it work, you know, for the betterment of the whole team. A good school administrator and a good teacher, will find ways to do the same thing. They'll look at the students as individuals, they'll begin to understand their culture, they'll validate their culture, their way of learning, their way of knowing, they'll try to engage their parents, they'll seek support and try to get everybody on the same team to help the student learn. They won't expect the kid to come to school, school ready, they'll go to kid and say, "hey, we're here to help you.

These findings on building relationships as the foundation for a successful experience are similar to those found in Martin's (2015) research. Based on his research he recommended:

- Get to know everyone—from teachers, students, and parents, to bus drivers—on a first-name basis and personally, if possible.
- Let teachers, parents and others know who you are. Don't hide behind your title or desk. Several respondents advised first-year principals to share with colleagues who they are, what they believe in, and what they consider their "non-negotiables."
- Get out of the office. Walk around the building often at different times of day. Visit classrooms and be present in the lunchroom, playground, and staff rooms. Get out into the community to discuss the school's priorities.
- Recognize the multiple relationships that exist in the school and realize that much gets accomplished through these networks. Communication and power do not operate vertically in schools; schools are, in essence, horizontal communities.
- Don't let a computer screen block communication with coworkers. Respondents seemed to mean this both figuratively and literally. E-mails should not substitute for face-to-face conversation, especially when the teachers are right down the hall.



### **Parent/extended Family Involvement**

The interviews indicated that the goal of knowing the community, including key stakeholders, is to get parents and the students' extended families to work with the school and become more involved in their children's education. Yet, promoting familial involvement had been problematic in the past. Families did not trust the system to have their children's best interests at heart as they knew schools to be a tool to assimilate their children into Euro-American culture. Families can see themselves as not welcome in the schools. The interviewees shared that parents and indigenous leaders wanted administrative personnel and school board members to manage the curriculum in ways that promote not just state and federal education standards, but also tribal or First Nation and local community and parental priorities. One Navajo school administrator said:

I think one of the issues as far as parent involvement is that many of our teachers...have a concern that we don't see enough parent involvement from Native American parents.... There has been this belief that education is the responsibility of the schools where education starts in the home and the parent is a key ingredient to a student's growth and education. So, I think we have to restore the belief and the value of parents and we have to get the parents to believe that. And that's the challenge, especially when Native American policies haven't shown that, historically. It's going to take a lot more than just what we're doing now. I think as soon as we gain an understanding of that as an institution: making things more parent-friendly, upholding their opinions, making them feel like they're part of the solution, part of the equation, I think we're going to continue to struggle with parent involvement.

Another Navajo administrator noted:

I think in my experiences, first and foremost, I'm learning that, not only is it important to involve parents, but parents want to be involved. They want to be aware of, not only policies, but why decisions are made. I think that the message parents convey most strongly is they want to know about everything that is happening in the school. So, I think being at a reservation school and considering our location, and considering technology today, one of the challenges I'm finding is, as opposed to anywhere else, by email you could certainly send out with just a touch of a button notices. Or you could call cell phones and leave messages.

Our district does have the One Call system, but that's been a challenge for us because I've learned that not every parent has access to email because they don't have internet at home. And not every parent has a cell phone, so you have to stop and rethink what is the best way to get hold of these parents. To send notices home with the intent of keeping parents abreast of what is happening in the school has been one of the

## *Honoring Our Teachers*

most important aspects of creating positive relationships with parents. I've found the most effective way is going back to the good old way of just sending paper notices home to parents.

### **Pedagogy**

The most common reason given by students dropping out of school is boredom (Bridgeland, DiIulio & Morison, 2006; Reyhner, 1992). The National Indian Education study reported that the dropout rate is exacerbated by inequitable educational opportunities and resources, access to highly qualified teachers and access to proper pedagogy and pedagogical resources (NIES, 2011). Teaching methods that actively engage students in their learning work better than having students sit passively reading textbooks or listening to a teacher's lecture (Cleary, 2008; Cummins, 2000; Reyhner & Jacobs, 2002). A Navajo educator noted how in her efforts to improve student performance her school has,

gotten away from the lecture type approach that was here when I first came to the junior high, the lecture and notetaking, because we have varied learning styles. So, we're trying to cater more to the difference in those learning styles. We're trying to incorporate people who are more hands-on, or more visual – I tend to be a very visual learner. And so those tools would provide the teachers more strategies to use and we've incorporated this school-wide, under the leadership of our academic coaches that have been instrumental in rolling this out into our classrooms....

The scientific method is very hands-on and that, in and of itself is a strategy in some of those tools that we use. I was just observing a lab in a seventh grade science class the other day and that was a tremendous opportunity for the students to get in there, work with the materials hands on. The way they were grouped, the teacher gave careful thought into who was grouped together so that the students could learn from students. It wasn't all teacher to the student, the information translated from student to student as well, so everybody had the opportunity to get involved in the learning process.

Another Navajo school administrator interviewed noted:

Yes, I guess in the very beginning, the textbook way I learned it was very frustrating for me because, I hate to say it but, the non-Indian way, it was a list, like that, like the way you describe. So, when I came into a principal's position it was, "Well you've got to get this done, then this, then this." So what I've learned now...is that very idea, is that everything's working together, kind of like in a round-about way, and if you touch one thing and effect it or impact it, it's going to have a dramatic impact on everything else in there, like a ripple effect. But if you have just a list of things, if you're putting things vertical like this,

## *What Educational Leaders See as Important*

and you touch this one here, it's not really going to...how's it going to impact this one down here on the list? So, building the idea in your head that everything effects everything, in life, you're taught that when you're Navajo. That's why you don't mistreat animals, or that's why you're supposed to keep water sacred.... All this stuff.

One of the other Navajo administrators interviewed observed,

The models that our teachers, or even what I was dependent on: using a textbook, we rely too much on textbooks, because the sequence in there [and] will tell you what to do every single day, it was just rather robotic: 'okay, you go from here to there to there.

Both teachers and school administrators need ongoing professional development. However, it is critically important that professional development be more than just building a knowledge base concerning school improvement approaches; on the whole they are more effective if they're targeted on how to affect change particularly within curriculum and instructional practices (NIES, 2011). One of the Navajo administrators we interviewed spoke of how "the NIEA [National Indian Education Association] provided me a lot in terms of support in understanding Indian education, and the Indian child." Teachers and school administrators working near tribal colleges can draw on them for a lot of information about the local community.

### **Discussion**

The participants of this study presented diverse perspectives on educating Indigenous students and reducing the gap between their test scores with national averages in the United States. While educational leadership only represent one perspective on this complex challenge, their wealth of experience and knowledge of Indigenous education is often missing in current educational literature and research. The majority of literature that does focus on Indigenous student achievement points to the importance of educators taking into account Indigenous ways of knowing and cultural values when teaching Indigenous students (see e.g., *Seeking Their Voices*, 2014). The outcomes of this study supports those findings, and presented some new insights worth exploration.

Participants stressed the importance of individualized approaches to teaching and learning; Indigenous students represent a very diverse socio-cultural demographic. Far too often Indigenous students are treated as a homogenous group in policy discussions and academic research. There are important religious, cultural, and socio-economic divisions that need to be known about and respected within the different communities for policies or interventions to be successful. In order for teachers or educational leaders to find success in teaching and inspiring Indigenous youth, they need to spend the time in the community to "get to know" the nuances that exist.

## *Honoring Our Teachers*

School principals who serve children living in high-poverty tribal and First Nation's communities have the unique responsibility of developing learning communities capable of meeting the specific needs that arise when a large number of the children attending school live in difficult situations brought on by poverty. You cannot increase student achievement in these areas until you address the barriers created by poverty by helping staff to go beyond traditional job expectations and by making sure they have the necessary skills to develop deep commitments to meeting the challenges of all students and making decisions in the students' best interests (Martin, 2015).

Both Navajo and Saskatchewan school administrators in this study stressed the importance of using culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum to provide the foundation needed to improve test scores among Indigenous students. The material and way they learn—even if it is culturally relevant—must appropriately prepare those students who wish to continue on to post-secondary education. As one participant noted, there are “Navajo families who are not so traditional who expect a little bit different opportunities for their kids. For example, college bound kids. They're not going to want to hear about cultural philosophies of learning.” Tradition and culture were presented as keys to unlock learning instead of a focus in themselves.

Schools serving tribal and First Nation's communities need high quality educational leaders who are properly certified, but they need also to be appropriately trained to lead a struggling school that requires leadership that can reverse the downward spiral of a low-performing school or turn a troubled school around. In our rapidly changing world, technical-rational approaches may be beguilingly attractive, yet in reality are unlikely to result in improved schooling for Indigenous students unless accompanied by an understanding of the difference between being an effective Indian school leader in a tribal or First Nation community and being a leader who is merely concerned with high-stakes tests, school performance report cards, accreditation standards, or sanctions for inadequate yearly progress. In addition to being results-driven, they must have a vision that is greater than simply improving test scores; they must also have a vision that is targeted for promoting tribal or First Nation sovereignty, self-determination, and nation-building. Increasingly principals and other school leaders working in schools serving Indigenous students need to serve not only as educational leaders but more broadly as community leaders and partners in tribal/First Nation community development efforts.

### **Conclusion**

Getting to know the community, particularly the tribal or First Nation community dynamics, was viewed by the participants in this study as more than simply getting to know the family of students in the school and classroom. Extended families in particular were singled out as important factors in students' lives. Good leaders were seen to build relationships and dialogue with the community and school staff, explaining what the school is trying to do for its students, including the financial, legal, and policy constraints (e.g., the cross-jurisdictional

policy issues among state, federal and tribal or First Nation policies) the school must work under. Communities themselves are diverse and require a significant investment of time and energy to master the intricacies of relationships to help support the child as best the teacher or educational leader can.

When a teacher or educational leader commits the time necessary to build relationships with the community and the family of the child, they are better able to connect the lives of the child outside of school with what they are learning in school. Participants in this study argued that education needs to encompass the whole child, and not just his or her test scores. Education is a process of socialization that can enable or disable people; attention must be paid to the child's physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental health.

We find it interesting that the advice we got from practitioners in our interviews did not resemble the long lists of standards and performance objectives studied in principal preparation programs—standards on which many principals are formally evaluated. We also found differences between the United States and Canadian interviewees in regard to the role of standards based education. The United States interviewees commented the impact of federal and state standards-based reforms on their students. They referenced how new content standards delineate more challenging curricula, while new performance standards outline how well students must learn the content, and new assessments measure their learning. Students, teachers, and school administrators were all being held accountable with students in jeopardy of being held back in grade to learn required material and teachers and administrators in danger of losing their jobs if students did not meet academic standards.

With respect to the United States context, several of the American Indian educators supported the notion that a standards-based approach holds promise for American Indian education. They thought they may help create a more common curriculum among schools within states and clearer learning expectations across states. In the United States, this could prove helpful to Indian educators in meeting the needs of the many students who transfer between schools. For example, Bureau of Indian Education schools chose to adopt the content standards of their individual states, thus providing a curriculum that has more in common with nearby public schools. Second, because the content standards drive the curriculum, educators, parents and students can refer to them to provide increased focus for teaching and learning. Third, new content standards can help improve the quality of instruction for Indian students. The constructivist approach promoted by national and most state content standards allows for a more holistic, real-life, active-learning sort of pedagogy, which is more consistent with traditional Indigenous ways of teaching and learning (Estrin & Nelson-Barber, 1995; Fox & LaFontaine, 1995).

In contrast to the United States emphasis on standards, the Canadian respondents discussed the role of relationship, of knowing the community, and the importance of cultural understanding. One interviewee commented:

## *Honoring Our Teachers*

I think to me the bottom line is always back to how is this going to improve the child's education?... And every community's different, you know... like you can't take stuff that's being developed on a Navajo community and put it in a Cree community or you can't take a Cree and put it into a Dene. I mean sometimes you have difficulties taking what's done in a Cree community like Shoal Lake and moving it over to Red Earth, which is 40 miles away. And so a lot of it is so community dependent.... You really need to get the communities to buy in somehow....

Another Canadian respondent summed many of the comments by indicating, "I view this in a traditional sense, as moving with caution and humility." The Canadian spent time discussing ways to build student success based on First Nations cultural understanding and values. The concept of standards, as viewed from an United States context, was noticeably absent in their reflections. In addition, there were comments that we believe were offered in the context of their work having to implement a standards-based education that not every school is the same, concerns about basing student achievement solely on external tests, or emphasizing particular goals or objectives without critically considering their relevancy or purpose from a perspective of a tribal or First Nation education priorities

It goes without saying that principals and others desiring to work schools serving Indigenous students need to concentrate on the most substantive qualities of leadership, those that focus on relationships. Those of us who create myriad lists and rubrics must realize that many essential traits of being a good principal rest in the heart and mind and cannot be measured by separate, quantifiable behaviors. The necessity of building relationship networks that many of our respondents stressed stands in stark contrast to organizational charts that diagram a vertical flow of power from the principal down to subordinates. Perhaps successful principals realize that power, control and information do not flow from the top down, but move through more horizontal and complex connections that exist in any human community.

In closing, it was clear from the research that the nine experienced educators that we interviewed had a wealth of knowledge that is critical to helping erase the discrepancy between Indigenous student and national test score averages. Although not entirely relevant to the topic here, there was also a strong focus in the interviews on the need for a clearer concept of how Indigenous leadership models can help implement these necessary changes within K-12 school systems. It speaks to the need for graduate educational leadership programs that better prepare school administrators to work in Indigenous schools (see e.g., Aguilera-Black Bear & Tippeconnic, 2015). Changes to the way educational leaders are trained could instill some of this knowledge in them earlier in their careers. Further, there is limited research and literature relating to Indigenous styles of leadership. This study was only able to capture brief outlooks relating to leadership within Indigenous communities and schools, and it is clear more work needs to be done.

**Note**

<sup>1</sup>A version of this section appeared in 2017 in Volume 40, Issue No. 1 of the National Association for Bilingual Education's magazine *Perspectives* on pages 22-23.

<sup>2</sup>All the quotations in the remaining part of this chapter are from the nine interviews carried out in 2016 by Joseph Martin, Larry Steeves and Jon Reyhner.

**References**

- Aguilera-Black Bear, D., & Tippeconic III, J. W. (Eds.). (2015). *Voices of resistance & renewal: Indigenous leadership in education*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Beaulieu, D., Sparks, L. (2005). *No Child Left Behind in Indian country; Preliminary report of findings of hearings*. Washington, DC: National Indian Education Association and the Center for Indian Education Arizona State University. Retrieved from [http://www.narf.org/nill/resources/education/reports/29.23.NIEANCLBreport\\_final2.pdf](http://www.narf.org/nill/resources/education/reports/29.23.NIEANCLBreport_final2.pdf)
- Bishop, R., & Berryman, M. (2010). Te Kotahitanga: Culturally responsive professional development for teachers. *Teacher Development*, 14(2), 173-187.
- Brayboy, B. (2005). Toward a tribal critical race theory in education. *The Urban Review*, 37(5), 425-446.
- Bridgeland, J.M., Dilulio, Jr., J.J., & Morison, K.B. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Retrieved from <https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/Documents/TheSilentEpidemic3-06Final.pdf>
- Child, B. J. (2014). The boarding school as metaphor. In B. J. Child, W. J. Bauer, Jr., B. Klopotek, J. Borrows, M. Castellanos, M. Bianet, & M. E. Garcia (Eds.), *Indian subjects: Hemispheric perspectives on the history of Indigenous education* (pp. 267-284). Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press.
- Cleary, L. M. (2008). The imperative of literacy motivation when Native children are being left behind. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 47(1), 96-117.
- Cleary, L. M., & Peacock, T. D. (1998). *Collected wisdom: American Indian education*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Colmant, S., Schultz, L., Robbins, R., Ciali, P., Dorton, J., & Riveva-Colmant, Y.. (2004). Constructing meaning to the Indian boarding school experience. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 43(3), 22-40.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power & pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Estrin, E. T., & Nelson-Barber, S. (1995). Bringing Native American perspectives to mathematics and science teaching. *Theory Into Practice*, 34(3), 174-185.
- Fox, S., & LaFontaine, V. (1995). A whole language approach to the communication skills. In H. Gilliland (Ed.), *Teaching the Native American* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) (pp. 189-200). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Freire, P. (1990). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Goulet, L. M., & Goulet, K. N. (2014). *Teaching each other: Nehinuw concepts & Indigenous pedagogies*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

## ***Honoring Our Teachers***

- Huffman, T. (2008). *American Indian higher educational experiences: Cultural visions and personal journeys*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Huffman, T. (2013). *American Indian educators in reservation schools*. Reno: University of Nevada Press.
- Martin, J. (2015). Getting the right leadership: Ten things we learned about being a first year principal. In D. Aguilera-Black Bear & J.W. Tippeconic III (Eds.), *Voices of resistance & renewal: Indigenous leadership in education* (pp. 142-160). Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Milloy, J. S. (1999). "A national crime" *The Canadian government and the residential school system 1879 to 1986*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.
- National Center for Education Statistics (2011). *National Indian education study 2011*. Washington, DC: U.S. Office of Indian Education, U.S. Department of Education.
- Native Americans: A statistical profile*. (2013, Dec. 4). *Education Week*, 33(13), 35.
- Peshkin, A. (1997). *Places of memory: Whiteman's schools and Native American communities*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Reyhner, J. (1992). American Indians out of school: A review of school-based causes and solutions. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 31(3), 37-56.
- Reyhner, J. (Ed.). (2015). *Teaching Indigenous students: Honoring place, community and culture*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma.
- Reyhner, J., & Eder, J. (In Press). *American Indian education: A history* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Reyhner, J., & Jacobs, D. (2002). Preparing Teachers of American Indian and Alaska Native students. *Action in Teacher Education*, 24(2), 85-93.
- Seeking their voices*. (2014). Saskatchewan Instructional Development and Research Unit, University of Regina. Retrieved from [http://aerc.usask.ca/research-projects-planning-activities/Seeking%20Their%20Voices\\_Nov%202014.pdf](http://aerc.usask.ca/research-projects-planning-activities/Seeking%20Their%20Voices_Nov%202014.pdf)
- Will, M. (2016, August 22). Help wanted: Teacher-shortage hot spots. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/08/24/help-wanted-teacher-shortage-hot-spots.html>