

Cultural Differences of Teaching and Learning

*A Native American Perspective of Participating in
Educational Systems and Organizations*

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I am a researcher and graduate student of American Indian descent (Stockbridge-Munsee/Mohican). I have always been very aware of the absence of other American Indian students in postsecondary education programs; have noticed the shortage of American Indians employed as educators, professors, or administrators; and am acutely aware of the number of American Indian populations excluded from qualitative or quantitative data sets as part of mainstream research agendas that are published on the state or national level.

This is the beginning of my dissertation research journey, and the data that I have studied thus far demonstrates a ten-year failure of the traditional, Western, and public educational system in Wisconsin to nurture, graduate, and utilize Native Americans from birth through adulthood. This historical failure in the Wisconsin educational systems and organizations has left the First Children and the First People of this country far behind as compared to their other minority and white counterparts (Bowman 2002). The extent of how far and why they are behind is what I am determined to discover.

Anecdotally speaking, I knew in my heart that the few Indians who did survive school accomplished this despite many barriers or whatever politically correct legislation was the popular rhetoric at the time. But in my head I needed to ascertain, scientifically document, and understand the factors that were responsible for this shameful record regarding the education of Native American students and their underrepresentation as professionals within the educational community. In a time of attempts to abolish affirmative action and hearing the promises of leaving no children behind, I have diligently tried to set aside time to conduct research

and reflect upon these complex issues so I could better understand the history and causes of these persistent, systemic educational problems. For the past twelve years I have struggled to find, let alone comprehend, why I have experienced little or no sense of urgency or empirical evidence in the mainstream educational and scientific community about the following issues:

- How can we even begin a discussion of “Closing the Gap” (North Central Regional Education Laboratory 2002; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 2003; Wisconsin Cooperative Educational Service Agency #8 2000; and Wisconsin Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development 2002) to raise Native American achievement when research shows that we are completely left out of the very educational systems that profess that they will not leave us behind? (In other words, there are very few Native or non-Native educational research scientists or organizations studying Native Americans or using Native American data sets for experimental or quasi-experimental research designs at the kindergarten through graduate level.)
- How can the educational system reconceptualize the meaning of “statistically significant data” to create methods of culturally relevant research and evaluation so that it better fits Native American communities? (Please note that I am making an ostentatious assumption that the academe and educational organizations are interested in culturally valid and appropriate research strategies for the purposes of increasing Native American achievement and activity levels within their respective organizations. This supposition is based on valid and reliable outcome data that will be revealed later in this article.)
- How do we as an educational and scientific community define Native Americans, for attainment and achievement purposes, given the myriad of ways Native Americans are defined across tribal and nontribal communities, peoples, and organizations? (Of particular note here is that Native educators, scholars, or policymakers have not even agreed on a universal definition based on the diverse philosophies within Native American communities—let alone non-Native peoples.)

Given this, I must share that as an educational scholar and Native Ameri-

can person, I am both frustrated and motivated by the underrepresented population of high-achieving Native American students and professionals in our prekindergarten (PK) through postsecondary educational systems. I am frustrated because of the inflexibility of the system and the administrators in charge of the system (at all kindergarten through graduate levels) to cultivate students and professionals from Indian Country.

The motivation that supports the continued process of my research in a constructive direction comes from a desire I have to create a comprehensive baseline for Native American achievement data, which currently does not exist. Through research and evaluation methods that are culturally relevant, this database could accurately document the educational history of Native Americans in the public school system. Based on qualitative and quantitative scientific data and methodologies, this baseline could inform the educational and scientific community on culturally relevant strategies to further investigate and empirically document the systems, policies, and practices that have given Native American students and professionals the opportunity to be successful within educational systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROBLEM STATEMENTS

Within the literature there was notable concern about the researcher's common worry of valid or reliable research based on data sets and on research design. Also, there are economic barriers to attending postsecondary institutions (Wells 1989). There was common agreement that there is a lack of mainstream Native American research concerning PK-20+ institutions and more quantitative research is needed (Demmert 2001). Issues for Native American students were the difficulty of adjusting to school/campus culture, a lack of mentors (Brokenleg 1990), and discrepancies between Indian worldviews and postsecondary worldviews as manifested through philosophy, pedagogy, and other factors in postsecondary institutions (Hankes 2002).

On the successful side it was suggested that Native American students needed educational institutions to engage in the following activities: individualized learning within the context of a community of learners (Lipka 2002); building cultural identity; building cultural capital (Delpit 1995); providing student-centered and experiential learning (Cajete 1994; Deloria and Wildcat 2001); making formal and informal academic integration

(Pavel and Padilla 1993); building a climate with a holistic approach across stakeholders (State of Colorado 1995); and utilizing bicultural (Yazzie 2000) and culturally pluralistic approaches (Reyhner 1990).

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

When conducting research I take into consideration both context and content. Sources of information are very important for my work so that there is a good balance of Native and non-Native citations. Finding Native research published in non-Native sources is very time consuming and difficult to achieve. Using Native and non-Native sources is one way that some Native American and non-Native American scholars utilize culturally relevant (CR) research strategies. Using CR research strategies from conceptualization, to design, and through the implementation and analysis of the research project provides for more valid and reliable findings.

Throughout this article you will see me use the word “mainstream” with regard to organizations, people, resources, etc. These represent any non-Indian entities that are frequently represented, led by, and/or part of the majority. These mainstream organizations have the highest representations of majority populations, are always published, and run most systems that are germane to the educational circles that educators, administrators, policymakers, researchers, and the like frequently utilize. Examples are the American Educational Research Association and the Institute of Education Sciences.

On the other hand, “Indian sources” will be the other term I use. Indian sources are organizations, systems, people, or other resources that are owned by or primarily led by Native Americans. Examples of this would be the National Indian Education Association, sources written by Native authors and organizations, and the Journal of American Indian Education.

The primary difference between Indian and mainstream resources is that mainstream sources are the most frequently used, are most widely accepted and recognized, and therefore have the most influence to shape educational research, policy, and practice. Indian resources are often absent, require an exorbitant amount of time, and have a unique cultural process that is very different than the processes used by PK-12 and postsecondary organizations and systems. The concluding point for your consideration is that Native authors, educators, researchers, and

policymakers need to be a regular part of the Indian and non-Indian educational sources to have the greatest impact on research, practice, and policy affecting Native American students. The specific culturally relevant research methods that informed this article are:

1. *Process and Concept*: When doing literature reviews on Native Americans, a multifaceted approach needed to be used. These are some of the culturally appropriate sources/strategies used: traditional sources, nontraditional sources, published and unpublished elder sources, and oral sources.

2. *Mainstream Data Sources (1987–2002)*: *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), The College Board, University of Wisconsin School of Education, National Library of Congress, American Educational Research Association (AERA), Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED), U.S. Census, and American Council on Education (ACE).

3. *Traditional Data Sources (1987–2002)*: *Journal of American Indian Education*, Indian Education Research Database, Native Education Directory, National Indian Education Association, American Indian Graduate Center, Full Circle Organization, American Indian Studies Department resources and faculty within the University of Wisconsin system, Tribal Colleges, Indigenous Educational Institute, Wisconsin tribal elders, and spiritual, educational, or cultural leaders within Native communities.

NATIVE AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT DATA

The PK–12 and postsecondary data for Native American achievement, graduation, and persistence rates continue to be an area in dire need of research. The absence of Native Americans in mainstream data sets and research studies is primarily due to concerns of valid and reliable data (Wells 1989) and the need for more experiential and quasi-experimental studies (Demmert 2003). Consider the discouraging educational statistics for Native Americans attending the public PK–12th grade systems in Wisconsin (see table 1).

It is evident that Native Americans receive weak foundations from their

TABLE 1
K–12 Student Achievement Data

PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT	NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS	STATE OF WISCONSIN
Proficient/Advanced Math (8th gr.)	23%	51%
Proficient/Advanced Math (10th gr.)	19%	48%
Proficient/Advanced Science (8th gr.)	38%	68%
Proficient/Advanced Science (10th gr.)	29%	53%
Middle School Retention Rates	2.6%	.45%
High School Retention Rates	16%	5%
High School Graduation Rates	73%	94%
Average Overall ACT score	18	22.2
ACT Math Score	19	22
ACT Science Score	20	23
Passing Advance Placement Test	34%	66%
Postsecondary Plans	48%	70%

Source Note: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 2003 and Wisconsin Cooperative Education Service Agency #8 2000.

earliest educational systems. This certainty is further compounded when you look beyond the Wisconsin PK–12 system and into postsecondary data. The statistical manifestation becomes even more daunting for Native Americans when you begin disaggregating the data by whites, all minorities, and Native Americans. Table 2 reveals the postsecondary statistics from the University of Wisconsin system.

My interest then turned to a more longitudinal perspective on Native Americans within the University of Wisconsin system. Surely over the long run we must have gotten better, right? The University of Wisconsin System Office of Policy Analysis and Research (2003) concluded that over a ten-year period from 1991 to 2001, Native Americans received

- 971 of 200,762 bachelor degrees—0.48% (-0.04% change)
- 243 of 49,176 master’s and education specialist degrees—0.49% (-0.01% change)
- 29 out of 8,197 PhD degrees—0.35% (+0.09 change)
- 90 out of 5,279 advanced professional degrees—1.7% (-.27% change)

Last, I wanted to go beyond the achievement, graduation, and persistence data to see if Native American students and professionals found a way to contribute to education beyond the formal system. Turning to the

TABLE 2

University of Wisconsin System Headcount Enrollment and Degrees Granted in 2000

	UNDERGRADUATE AND SPECIAL HEADCOUNT ENROLLMENT	BACHELOR'S DEGREES CONFERRED	PERCENT CHANGE	GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL STUDENTS ENROLLED*	GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL DEGREES CONFERRED*	PERCENT CHANGE
Total Student Population	136,002	20,001	-85.29%	20,974	5,996	-71.41%
White and International Student Population	125,388 (92% of enrollment)	18,200 (91% of enrollment)	-85.48%	19,153 (91% of enrollment)	5,431 (90.5% of enrollment)	-71.64%
Total Minority Student Population**	10,614 (7.8% of enrollment)	1,242 (6.2% of enrollment)	-88.29%	1,794 (8.5% of enrollment)	536 (8.9% of enrollment)	-70.12%
Native American Student Population	903 (.66% of enrollment)	104 (.51% of enrollment)	-88.48%	138 (.65% of enrollment)	29 (.50% of enrollment)	-78.98%

*Represents graduate, graduate special, and the professional degrees of law, medicine, veterinarian, and pharmaceutical.

**Race/ethnicity for all groups was based on self-identification through the enrollment process.

Source Note: University of Wisconsin System, Office of Policy Analysis and Research 2003 and University of Wisconsin 2001.

AERA, I found that over ten years the Native American membership increased by less than 1% (AERA 2003). Other AERA data included:

Total Membership: 0.70% American Indian, 77% white

Total Council and Committee Members and Chairs: 0% American Indian, 90.2% white

Total Editorial Boards and Published Authors: 0.56% American Indian, 87% white

DATA ANALYSIS AND CONSTRUCTIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

What do I deduce from this data? Per capita, Native Americans continue to experience some of the lowest levels of graduation (secondary) and persistence rates (postsecondary) compared to their minority counterparts *and* their white classmates. Native Americans also experience the widest levels of PK–12 achievement gaps in all primary content areas per capita in the state of Wisconsin and across the nation. Native Americans are the most underrepresented group in higher education and continue to be virtually voiceless and/or are represented by non-Indians in mainstream research agendas and literature reviews.

Beyond this data, the literature does inform us about some of the *underutilized* systemic strategies that have been documented to work with Native American students and their learning environments:

- collaborative learning and more inclusive and diverse learning environments
- creating multiethnic research and evaluation teams (Bowman 2003)
- using culturally relevant pedagogy, research, and evaluation processes (Bowman 2003)
- multicultural education that is integrated into systemic classroom practices and policies
- need for mentors of color—that is, Native American
- cultural capital, competencies, and philosophies need to be understood and embraced by all races in the classroom and through pedagogical practices
- policy changes directed toward embracing diversity and addressing low socioeconomic status

FUTURE RESEARCH

Through this research study, we have already defined the achievement of Native Americans through the policies, systems, and instruments of a Western, non-Native research process. Future research studies would explore how educational achievement is defined, performed, and evaluated by Native Americans and within Native American communities. I would have a research agenda that investigated and completed the following “IF-THEN” statement:

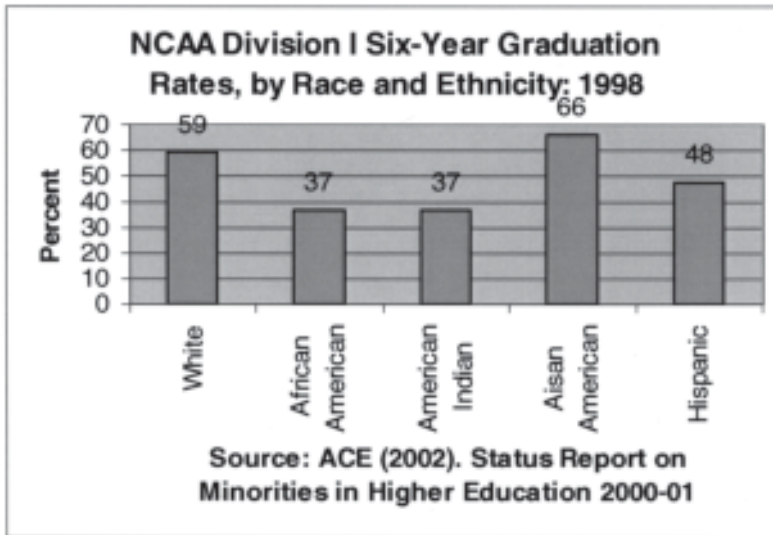
- IF non-Native American achievement is defined and influenced by the
 - Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001: No Child Left Behind
 - Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
 - Wisconsin Information Network for Successful Schools
- THEN Native American achievement may be defined and influenced by
 - elders, teachers, and students from the eleven tribes of Wisconsin
 - tribal education departments, personnel, and resources
 - tribal legislation and policy
 - other national tribal organizations and resources

The instrumentality and methodology informing this future research study may be guided by

- ethnographic case studies
- mixed methods such as surveys, interviews, site observation, and achievement data
- use of critical race theory and culturally relevant research strategies
- recognizing the importance of defining context as well as content during this multiyear research study
- using a sample size of four school districts in Wisconsin (Green Bay, Menominee Indian, Shawano-Gresham, and Bowler) and each district’s representative tribal communities

Future research would have the primary goal of finding what is common between cultures to build a new Native American learning theory that builds on culturally relevant pedagogy, research, and evaluation strategies, which would ultimately inform kindergarten through graduate-

Graduation Rates



level educational policies, departments, and organizations. This concept is visually represented by figure 1.

In summary, the conceptualization of what culturally relevant pedagogy, research, and evaluation are in this holistic and three-dimensional manner is much more culturally congruent to traditional Native American ways of thinking and living. Culturally relevant pedagogy, research, and evaluation cannot be defined just in terms of “what” it is. It must also be defined in terms of why, how, and if as well. CR pedagogy is circular, multifaceted, and multisensory. Defining something in one absolute way reflects a more Western view of research. This must be addressed by the Native and non-Native educational community, however, so that pedagogy, research, and evaluation is both scientifically and culturally rigorous. It is my belief that through these culturally relevant processes, we will be better able to provide comprehensive and consistent programming for Native American students and increase the presence of Native American professionals within the mainstream education and research organizations.

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