

Understanding Native American Education: Preservice Teacher Focused Practices

Zoey Michlig

Faculty Sponsor: J. Scott Baker, Department of Educational Studies

ABSTRACT

This article examines the current state of Native American education at one Midwest university and how teacher candidates can be better equipped to teach their future students. Indigenous college students were interviewed, as well as educators working with Native youth and those educating preservice teachers. Participants shared personal experiences and best practices when teaching Native students. Participants reported a lack of quality education for Native Americans, while providing realistic steps for educators to improve. Creating a more inclusive environment and teaching students the age-appropriate factual history will benefit students of all backgrounds. Poetic inquiry is used to highlight the overarching main topics in an engaging and creative way. Results are centered upon creating relationships with Native students, becoming more informed, and using resources available. **Keywords:** teacher candidates, Native Americans, cultural education, Poetic Inquiry

INTRODUCTION

Given that the Native American belief system and Christian dogma have historically been in conflict, it is ironic that my first experience and open conversations with Native American individuals was in this context. A partnership, and later friendship, between the church I regularly attend on campus and the Native American Student Association (NASA) resulted in a joint accompaniment trip to Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. I watched as my Indigenous peers were overcome with grief and mourning when we arrived in the poorest county in the United States. I would later learn this emotional experience is in part due to centuries of historical trauma. Pine Ridge is home to extreme poverty, underfunded government housing with little to no access to heat or running water, and an abundance of trash scattered about the land. This Reservation has the nation's lowest life expectancy, an 89% unemployment rate, and a school drop-out rate over 70% (Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, 2018). It is also home to resilient individuals who exuded joy and an outpouring of love for us. This trip ignited my passion for learning more about Native American culture and education.

Native American students, as well as all students of color, deserve more than what our current education system is providing. Both historically and contemporaneously, Native Americans are frequently overlooked and voiceless on issues in and out of the classroom. As a teacher candidate (TC), it is important to be educated and equipped to support and listen to all students. I felt it important to explore this issue more in depth since it is not highly emphasized or discussed at length in our undergraduate courses. This includes a need for more knowledge on how to implement state mandated Native instruction, such as Act 31.

Act 31 is an educational mandate enacted in 1989 that requires educators to teach students of the history, culture, and tribal sovereignty of the federally recognized American Indian tribes and bands in the state of Wisconsin. (Leary, 2019). An additional requirement is, "teachers must have this instruction in their education training program or they are not eligible for a license to teach in the State of Wisconsin (Hadley & Trechter, 2014, para. 1). The mandate was created in response to a lack of education demonstrated by Wisconsin public school alumni, and shown specifically in the protests against Native people who were exercising their treaty rights to hunt, fish, and gather off the reservation. The federal courts maintained that the Chippewa tribe were in line with their treaty rights. Many protested this due to misinformation and stereotypes. Previous to Act 31, there were no guidelines or requirements for educators to teach American Indian studies (Hadley & Trechter, 2014, para. 1).

LITERATURE REVIEW

President Barack Obama declared that Native American education is in a state of emergency (Morris, 2015, p. 7). Better equipping TCs to successfully teach Native American students is imperative to ensure their positive growth and success. With a 67% high school graduation rate, Native American students are not getting enough support from educators or schools (Morris, 2015, p. 7). Additionally, Native American students are many times grouped as “other” on demographic surveys due to affiliation in more than one racial grouping (Price, Kallum, Love, 2009, p. 37). Ultimately this means students are being stripped of their racial identity due to inadequate demographic accounting systems (Kallum & Kallum, 2013, p. 27).

Recently, Native Americans have been in the media spotlight in regard to: the alarming rate of indigenous women and children going missing; protesting the Dakota Access pipeline; demanding improved access to voting; and increased representation by Native woman in higher government. Peggy Flanagan is Minnesota’s first Native woman elected as lieutenant governor, which is a very positive story. In addition, Sharice Davids and Deb Haaland made history being the first Native American Congresswomen. Jean Schroedel, a researcher in Native American voting rights, states: “Ms. Davids’ campaign offered a blueprint for other candidates seeking to frame issues from a Native American perspective” (Romero, 2018, para.13). For the continued progress of Natives seeking justice and being voices of power, educators need to appropriately teach Native culture, as well as be equipped with best practices when teaching Native youth.

Researchers have found many teaching strategies that benefit Native students, including: weaving storytelling into lessons; an emphasis on positive behavior; and encouraging inclusion rather than assimilation. Stories “define [Native students] identity connecting them to their cultures and families” (Yonnie, 2016, p. 1). The author also explains this method can be used as a learning resource to bridge students’ understanding of their roles, found in Hooghan Nimazi (meaning “home” in Navajo) with the roles in the classroom. With the overall purpose of belonging and creating a strong identity, Yonnie continues to assert storytelling has been proven to enhance the learning of students. Native language has long been neglected in schools; however, language is the guiding force for all students doing well in school. Native voices are missing in the conversation; however, if educators evaluate the cultural context of what and how they are teaching, they can empower and advocate for their students (Yonnie, 2016, p. 2-3).

In the U.S., every state shows a disproportionate representation between students self-identifying as Native, and students from the majority culture who receive services for emotional behavior disorder (Kallum & Kallum, 2013, p. 27-29). The misidentification of Native students as having special needs is also dependent on the school’s response to negative behavior, with an overuse of suspension rather than promoting positive behavior. Utilizing positive behavior reinforcements and techniques, along with finding the function of the behavior, would help to alleviate these issues. Suspending and sending students home ultimately sends a message to students that school is not a priority (Kallum & Kallum, 2013, p. 33).

Finally, teachers need to be more inclusive to students of different backgrounds. There is a “tension between their identification as Native American and the environment of mainstream schools” (Masta, 2018, p. 1). This tension has a negative impact on students social, emotional, and intellectual engagement in school. The blame is put on Native students for not assimilating, versus exploring why educational environments are continuously places of assimilation (Masta, 2018, p. 1).

As stated, research indicates lack of quality education for, and approach to, Native American students by teachers and educators. However, more research is needed to explore how TCs can be better prepared to successfully teach Native Americans and lead them to positive growth and high expectations. This article focuses on the expertise of individuals in the field working with Native youth, Native preservice teachers, as well as those educating preservice teachers to provide insight on how to better serve Native American students.

METHODS

This research began as an assignment for an Introduction to Curriculum and Pedagogy course at a Midwest university. Five interviews were conducted face to face, as well as by email, due to time and schedule constraints. Participants consisted of wide age ranges, from 21- 60 years old, and all participants live in the Midwest. Participants are indigenous people affiliated with various tribes and families. I use the pronouns “they” and “their” when referring to each participant in order to avoid gender specification, and all names are pseudonyms.

Participants

Aspen works at a Midwest University as a Campus Climate program coordinator, as well as with the Native American Student Association Advisor (NASA) on campus. Their tribal affiliation is Cree. The second participant is Riley, their tribal affiliation is Ho-Chunk and they work as a coordinator at an after school Native youth facility. Patisepa, a third-year student at the university, is not affiliated with a tribe in US, but is indigenous to the Wulf family and a descendant of Tuatagaloa of Samoa. Jesse, another third-year student, is a tribal member of the Red Cliff Band of the Chippewa Indians. Finally, the last participant, Gray, is an education lecturer. Their tribal affiliation is Ho-Chunk.

Data Collection

Participants were asked five to ten questions regarding their personal experience in school, observations in their careers, or a combination of both. Data was evaluated through poetic inquiry to highlight the overarching topics discussed and display them in an engaging way. Throughout the interviews, heavily discussed topics included: Act 31 teacher education and implementation, what is detrimental for Native education, and what is necessary for positive growth. These areas are the focus in the poems, to give the audience a vulnerable and up-close look into what five Indigenous peoples – coming from different backgrounds, ages, families, and tribes – have experienced.

Data Analysis

Poetic Inquiry is a rapidly growing area of focus in art-based research. “The potential power of poetic inquiry is to do as poetry does, that is to synthesize experience in a direct and effective way” (Prendergast, 2009, p. xxii). My intention was to listen to what the participants shared and reach the core of what they are feeling using their words, which poetry could capture.

There are three different categories of Poetic Inquiry: Vox Theoria; Vox Autobiographia; and Vox Participare. Data was analyzed using Vox Participare, which is participant-voiced poetry written directly from the participants own words (Prendergast, 2009, p. xxii). I do not have the same experiences as the participants, and I felt speaking for the individuals I interviewed defeated the purpose of them sharing their stories. These are not my experiences to tell and only the people who have lived through the experiences can truly convey authentic emotions. As Prendergast (2009) states: “We must put ourselves in the context: we must feel, taste, hear what someone is saying. Sometimes we must learn to listen under the words, to hear what is not being said. We must be empathetic, aware, non-judgmental, and cautious. We owe our participants and ourselves nothing less” (p. xxvi). As a cisgender, White female, I have not experienced what many Native Americans have gone through in schools. My privilege of white skin has allowed me certain advantages in life that is necessary to acknowledge; thus, poetic inquiry was used to give voice to the participants, separate from my own experiences.

As a form of data, science and poetry could intertwine through re-interpreting and re-visiting that goes beyond a single voice (Downey, 2016, p. 359). Poetic Inquiry is an approach taken to gain a more holistic view of the human heart (McCullis, 2013, p. 83). It cultivates a feeling in the reader while also conveying the information gathered. Poetry “serves to clarify the researcher’s role and understanding of the process in fieldwork that naturally accompanies interpretive approaches” (Downey, 2016, p. 359) Susan Manning (2018) states, “arts-informed methodologies are well suited for social research that aims to work for social change” (p. 743).

Throughout the process, my professor monitored my progress. All data was completed under an IRB attained through my university, and all results are my own. All participants were given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

RESULTS

The following two poems come directly from the narrative of interviews from all participants. No changes were made except line sequences and grammatical changes for poetic effect.

Current State of Education

In regards to Native people,
elementary education is extremely detrimental.
We miss the opportunities
to start teaching our Native students about their people,
while allowing the White students to celebrate
the myth of discovery and helping the “poor Indians”.

The problem with all Native imagery
 is it's from the past,
 it's archaic.
 Our education was biased towards the dominant
 away from the subordinate,
 of which Native America falls into.
 We were shame-based.
 We've been excluded to this point.
 We learned implicitly
 through Columbus, Thanksgiving-
 that we were at best exotic others.
 In the sense of being indigenous,
 I really have never felt included.
 Representation of Native folks is so limited.
 I was the only person of color in my class.
 It's hard to feel included in a place that I'm not even supposed to be a part of.
 Sad to say but it's kind of true.

What is Needed

We have a few great folks
 who give their entire selves to supporting Native students,
 but it is not enough.
 We need to integrate Indigenous thoughts and practices
 into our classrooms and teaching styles.
 We need to build our relationships with the tribes in Wisconsin
 and gain their support.
 We need to bring Elders onto campus
 and integrate them into our education.
 Teachers could explain how systems were built-
 to keep people in their places.
 They could also spend a lot more time
 focusing on people who are "missing"
 from our history books and who are still missing
 in conversations today.
 Some children will have learned at home
 that George Washington was sent to scout out Native villages
 to report back to troops for attacks.
 Or that Abraham Lincoln was no friend
 to Native people and approved the mass hanging
 of 38 Native people in Mankato.
 Being told they were great men,
 does that mean their treatment of these children's ancestors
 was ok?
 It is not just the history of Native students,
 it's the history of all Americans.
 Families may not trust education systems
 because of boarding schools
 and treatment of Native students in the past.
 Meet them where they are comfortable.
 Not allowing minority populations of students
 to see themselves
 included in content and therefore
 not providing positive information
 such as the inventions, ideas, and work

of those populations have contributed to society.
 Never assume
 all your students have an outer appearance matching a culture.
 Don't look in a classroom of light complexion and light hair
 and think it's an all-White classroom.
 Learn about the tribes
 in the geographical area you will be teaching.
 Parents will be more trusting
 and more involved
 if they learn you know the history of their tribe.
 It's okay to not know
 the information from the get-go.
 Many resources are not well known
 because administrators and other leadership
 don't always take Act 31 seriously.
 There are really no consequences for not implementing it.
 The further moved away from a reservation and
 the further you got away from that school district,
 not only was Act 31 not being enacted,
 many districts didn't even know about it.
 Too many people are saying what people want to hear
 and its harmful.
 They need to know what is inappropriate.
 We have to be more iconic in our approach.
 We are on the bottom line,
 teachers.

DISCUSSION

Native Americans have historically been neglected in society, and, as a result, in our school system. Educators have the power and responsibility to teach youth the whole truth about the system of oppression regardless of grade level. Erasing or modifying history is not an option in order to “sugar coat” information for younger students. A common thread throughout the interviews was building strong relationships with students and having an honest conversation with Native students regarding what they are interested in learning about. In many instances, educators could ease a lot of miscommunication, misrepresentation, and misinformation by educating themselves.

TCs will be burdened with the task of covering subjects specific to the curriculum, while being aware of time management. However, teachers need to increase their awareness by examining the broader picture. What do we want our students to take away from this class? In what ways are we helping to make students culturally and globally responsive citizens? Whose voice are we missing?

In order to best inform students, one first needs to come to terms with their own biases, misconceptions, and previous knowledge acquired. Native history is among the most misconstrued topics in education: glorifying Columbus, misinformation about Thanksgiving, and minimizing the thousands of years of oppression, just to name a few. Our students will not change their attitudes or behaviors without the teacher modeling what is appropriate. TCs need to educate themselves and put forth the effort to actively seek information about their students' culture, which will in turn cultivate a positive learning community and help strengthen your relationships with your students.

In many schools, Native Americans are talked about in November for Thanksgiving, and not mentioned again for the rest of the school year. Integrating and intertwining both historical and contemporary information about Native Americans is pivotal for students' understanding of what the modern Native American looks like. Almost all participants in this study mentioned the importance of discussing the “modern Indian” and how that looks different for each person. As TCs, we need to ensure we are not reinforcing the narrative that students celebrate the mystery of manifest destiny and “helping the poor Indians.”

It is important for TCs to remember they do not have to, nor should they, share Native American history from their White perspective. Inviting local tribal members and elders from the community to speak with students is a great way to form a connection from the classroom to real world. Building relationships with tribes in the area is not only beneficial for the education of your students, but also creates a more inclusive environment in which everyone feels valued. TC's need to take a critical look at textbooks and reflect on what implicit messages the text is sending

to students. Whose perspective is it from? In what ways are the colonized portrayed in comparison to colonizers? One resource educators can take advantage of is the Zinn Education Project: Teaching People's History. This website is equipped with thousands of free, downloadable lessons and articles to introduce students to a "more accurate, complex, and engaging understanding of history than is found in traditional textbooks and curricula" (Zinn Education Project, 2019). This project is coordinated by two non-profit organizations: Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change. Both are dedicated to developing and providing social justice resources for educators. Sticking to the mandated curriculum because it is "easy" is not an option when considering the best interests of your students. TCs should make sure all students see themselves included in content, and how their culture has contributed to society. This can be incorporated across multiple subject areas throughout the entire school year. This could potentially increase motivation, learning, and participation in school.

Essential information for TCs when working with Native American students includes not assuming students' culture; considering the background of students; and educating oneself about local tribes. Many Native students are "White passing"—in other words, a person not appearing to be a person of color, but a White individual. Jesse, a white passing participant, shared it is best to refrain from assuming what racial identity one's students identify with and let it happen organically. It can be especially hard for students who are White passing and Native, as certain issues might be difficult to discuss with their peers who perceive them as White.

Being able to effectively teach today's students requires educators to use techniques that are different from those used a generation previous. One crucial technique for all TCs is the use of trauma-informed care. (Oehlberg, 2008, para. 1). One half to two-thirds of children experience trauma, which can "interfere with brain development, learning, and behavior—all of which have a potential impact on a child's academic success as well as the overall school environment" (McInerney & McKlindon, 2015, p. 1). As a result of historically lower SES status and other marginalized identities, Native Americans are more likely to be exposed to trauma. Historical trauma is a specific type first introduced in clinical literature in 1995. The theory states that "some Native Americans are experiencing historical loss symptoms as a result of the cross generational transmission of trauma from historical losses" (Brown-Rice, 2017, p. 117). Examples of this include the systematic and purposeful destruction of Native people by the colonizers, and the repeated oppression and racism by Americans today. Overall, the loss of people, land, family, and culture are major factors that contribute to historical trauma. While further research is needed, there is evidence to support the relationship between historical trauma and risk factors for PTSD, prolonged grief, substance abuse, and depression (Brown-Rice, 2017, p. 117).

Another type of trauma is intergenerational trauma, which "occurs when the trauma of an event is not resolved and is subsequently internalized and passed from one generation to the next through impaired parenting and lack of support or ineffective interventions" (BigFoot, 2007, p. 2). This type of trauma decreases opportunities to use the strengths of culture, family, or community for social and emotional support. As educators, we need to be aware that the "long-term goal of historical trauma intervention practice is to reduce emotional suffering among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas by developing culturally responsive interventions driven by the community to improve behavioral health" (BraveHeart, Chase, Elkins, Altschul, 2011, p. 282). Being aware and proactive about these factors will aid in navigating educating Native and non-Native students.

TCs should familiarize themselves with Native history, specifically the tribes both federally recognized and not federally recognized in their state. In Wisconsin, Act 31 was implemented to bridge the gap between misconceptions and tensions among Native and non-Native students. Gray explained that, "licensure for the state of Wisconsin for a teacher requires that they have on their resume that they did learn about Act 31." Assuring Act 31 is fulfilled in your classroom is a good foundation, but more work needs to be done in teacher and leader preparation programs to facilitate the space of the next generation of teachers to advocate for equity (Sheri, 2018, p. 54). However, further research is needed to examine TC's perception of teaching Act 31, along with their knowledge base and comfort level educating Native youth. Many educators skim over Indian studies due to living in a predominantly White area or one in which students are not open with their identity. This is a common misconception that misses the intent of Act 31. Additional research is needed in order to fully understand TC's mis/perceptions of Native American history, as well as best practices to teach Native students.

Cultivating a more positive and inclusive environment for your students, teaching students the age-appropriate factual history, and developing empathy and perspective in your classroom are all outcomes of teaching Native American history. There is a lack of education regarding how to impart specific strategies to TCs to teach Native Americans throughout the year. Riley shared that administration should provide resources and, in effect, "preservice teachers will not need to search for it and will be better prepared to develop lessons without scrambling to find information." Further research is needed on best strategies to ensure teachers are held accountable for teaching students about Native American history and modern application, without it simply becoming a routine formality.

LIMITATIONS

The research done in this article was completed in a predominantly white institution (PWI) in Wisconsin. Due to this, it was difficult to gain a large pool of Indigenous individuals to interview. In fact, I was only able to interview one Indigenous preservice teacher and one university professor. The experiences and perspectives are from a single Midwestern University and do not necessarily represent all point of views of Indigenous peoples. Further research is needed at additional universities outside of Wisconsin to provide a deeper understanding of Native American perspectives of higher education.

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