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2023 Tribal Leaders Study: An Emergent View on Education, Tribal Sovereignty, Leadership, and Change

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Abstract: *The 2023 Tribal Leaders qualitative study is an emergent perspective from twelve Tribal leaders on education, Tribal sovereignty, leadership, and change presented as a poster session at the 2023 NRMERA conference in Omaha, Nebraska. This conceptual paper presents a review of literature acknowledging a lack of research inclusive of the voice of Tribal leaders as well as research, particularly in the areas of Tribal-specific/Native-centered leadership models and change frameworks. The research findings are presented across the four focus areas and of note:*

- *In education, Tribal leaders indicated the need for Tribal voices to be heard, accurate American History to be taught, adequate funding to be provided, and more culturally relevant instruction provided inclusive of language and cultural teaching were among the more significant findings.*
- *In the area of Tribal sovereignty, Tribal leaders indicated that Tribal sovereignty was something they wanted. They were not convinced that Tribal sovereignty was something in reality that could be achieved and, once achieved, could be held onto.*
- *In terms of leadership, Tribal leaders indicated a preference for Servant Leadership and did not specify any specific Tribal leadership definitions, models, or frameworks.*
- *With regard to change, Tribal leaders discussed change with no specific Tribal leadership models or frameworks.*

The findings are discussed and interpreted through a TribalCrit lens (Brayboy, 2022), with a conclusion and next steps presented.

Keywords: Tribal education, Tribal sovereignty, Tribal leadership, Tribal change, Tribal leaders

The objective of this qualitative IRB-approved study was to ask Tribal leaders their views on four key issues in Native American teaching, research, policy, and advocacy: (a) education, (b) tribal sovereignty, (c) leadership, and (d) change. In reviewing the literature, there is a dearth of information on Native-centered leadership, change, and education, as well as Tribal sovereignty from the voice and perspective of Tribal leaders. Therefore, the goal of this emergent study presented as a poster session at the 2023 Northern Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association (NRMERA) and here in a special edition of Educational Research: Theory and Practice as a conference proceeding was to gain insight into the following research questions:

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- What are Tribal leaders' vision, priorities, concerns, and long-term goals for educating Tribal children?
- In terms of Tribal Sovereignty, this study asked each Tribal leader their vision of Tribal sovereignty, if they could have Tribal sovereignty by 2099, would they want Tribal sovereignty, and what barriers they see to Tribal sovereignty.
- The study asked each Tribal leader for their definition of leadership, if their Tribe had a leadership model, what role oral communications played in their leadership, and what leadership practices they relied upon to lead their Tribal Nations.
- In terms of change, this study asked if each Tribe utilized a change model.

Finally, during the discussion, interpreting the findings through the lens of TribalCRIT (Brayboy, 2022) is an important element in understanding and improving the information analysis.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

TRIBAL EDUCATION

Tribal education is an often misunderstood and uninformed topic of discussion among educational and Native stakeholders alike. Cajete (2015) asserted that the community is the foundational location for Native/Indigenous education, yet many Native communities are under duress and unable to undertake this foundational work successfully. Tippeconnic (2015) echoed this when he observed that Indian people could be their "own worst enemy" and that unity among and across Native nations and tribes is "difficult to achieve" (p. 256). This is compounded by historical trauma and "the fact that Native people do not often speak due to custom, lack of confidence, or lack of opportunity" (Hardison-Stevens, 2022, p. 137), which aligns with the Tippeconnic (2015) assertions that Native education often falls behind other priorities within Native Nations and outside them as well, leaders within Indian education are often overworked and subject to a lack of resources, support, and frequent turnover, and the values of Native leaders are often at odds with state and federal leaders and governments. mohatsi (2022) stated, "(K-12) Curriculum must be culturally responsive and meaningful in the sense that the curricula is representative of any Indigenous student's Tribal affiliation" (p. 43), which runs counter to the Tippeconnic (2015) reality that the need for Native language and culture curriculum and instruction takes a back seat to the rigid mindset of curriculum and instruction found in No Child Left Behind, and there is a push-pull between the Native/Tribal/Indian world and the Western world where Native people are expected to live and work and despite feelings of discomfort and disconnectedness.

TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY

A key component of Tribal sovereignty is Native Nation building, according to Cornell and Kalt (2007). According to Kalt (2007), two keys are vital in Native Nation building: (a) effective Tribal government meeting the needs of the community, and (b) not only securing the right to self-govern but also having and maintaining the ability to self-govern as a Native Nation. Hurtado (2015) asserted that relationship-building and internal and external collaborations were critical steps in the work of Tribal sovereignty. Finally, Greyeyes (2018) noted that Tribal governments and leaders are pressured to effectively strive for a level of independence as a Native

Nation, exercise power and leadership over Tribal affairs/communities/people, work with other governments, and do so within a goal-based and vision-oriented structure of Tribal sovereignty.

LEADERSHIP

Joseph Martin, in sharing his story about being a school leader and preparing school leaders, stated, "The belief is that with an appropriate mindset, when AI/AN educators makes good in a leadership role, they will ferment systemic rethinking about education by relating its purpose to tribal nation building" (2021, p. 250). Minthorn and Chavez (2015), looking at Indigenous leadership in higher education, proposed a synergistic Indigenous Leadership Model comprised of (a) "Who We Are," (b) "What We Strive to Embody," (c) "What is Known," and (d) "What We Do" (p. 9). What is missing from the literature are consistently specific Tribal-based/Tribal-specific leadership models and frameworks. Finally, Martin (2021) stated, "Tribal leaders not only want AI/AN educators to use their 'tribal hearts and mind' to transform AI/AN education, but they also desire for them to be local-tribal community-education leaders who work on many fronts to connect with AI/AN children on levels that surpass both empathy and sympathy" (p. 257).

CHANGE

Native people and nations have been under pressure to Westernize for decades and decades, with recent times, the pendulum swinging back ever so slightly to more and more Indigenous ways of knowing and being despite decreasing resources, elders, and capacity to do so. According to Crazy Bull (2015, p. 45), "Tribal people are turning education into a tool for prosperity and revitalization of identity. In the scholar's world, there is an increased focus on decolonization and what it means to be 'postcolonial' Indigenous people." Pewewardy (2015) asserted, "We may also experience growing pains of evolving decolonization. This perceived loss or intergenerational grieving we may encounter, is worth the price of the benefits we will gain through the inevitability of change" (p. 45). However, what is missing from the literature are specific Native models for change and unique Tribal frameworks for change, as what is often presented as models for change are Western or Traditional models of change such as the Kotter Change Model, the Deming Cycle, the Knostner Model for Managing Complex Change, and the Lewin Change Model to name but a few (Secatero et al., 2022; Yukl & Gardner, 2020)

PROCEDURE/METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a publicly available list of Tribal leaders from the U.S. Department of the Interior Indian Affairs Tribal Leaders Directory at https://www.bia.gov/bia/ois/tribal-leaders-directory/. The list of Tribal Chiefs contained 585 email addresses. One hundred forty-five of the email addresses in the directory failed, and 44 of the email addresses bounced when distributed by the Qualtrics distribution server, leaving 396 viable email addresses. Of the remaining email addresses, after an initial information email and four weekly email reminders, 12 surveys were completed (a 3% return rate). Thus, as this data is qualitative, n=12 can be informative as an early, emergent examination of the issues.

A qualitative methodology (Creswell, 2013) was utilized to guide inquiry, posit the purpose and research questions, consider from whom to collect data, what types of data to collect, how to analyze said data, and write up the findings. The qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to explore an area in-depth and better understand a topic (Creswell, 2013). Inductive coding was applied to the data in the form of open and axial coding (Charmaz, 2014), which generated themes.

Deductive coding was applied using a set of codes developed from TribalCRT (Brayboy, 2022), leading to a set of interpretations. Together, this approach allowed engaging with the data in a deeper, coherent, and more informed way (Charmaz, 2014).

FINDINGS

TRIBAL EDUCATION

In terms of Tribal education, the themes that emerged from Tribal leaders focused on the relationship between Tribes and the Local Education Agency, a Native vision for education, their concerns with education, their ideal for Native education, and barriers to that ideal Native education.

TRIBAL LEADER AND LEA.

Tribal leaders indicated that in working with Local Education Agencies to deliver education to Native children, they wanted to ensure that a Tribal voice was heard, that the "basics" of education were provided, that authentic and accurate American History was taught, that a balance between traditional and cultural teaching was found, and that adequate funding was provided for Native students/education.

TRIBAL LEADER VISION FOR EDUCATION.

In discussing their vision for education, Tribal leaders shared a common desire for Native culture, accurate history, and the value of education as a pathway to a better future for all children to be critical parts of every Native educational vision and program.

TRIBAL LEADER CONCERNS WITH EDUCATION.

In terms of their concerns, Tribal leaders expressed concerns around a consistent lack of Native curriculum, culture, and language within schools, too much exposure to Western education and values, and a lack of cultural competency and inappropriate multicultural education (multicultural light) delivered by teachers working with Native students.

TRIBAL LEADER AND IDEAL EDUCATION.

Ideally, Tribal leaders want their children to be proficient in the basics, be exposed to Native culture and language instruction, be taught by Native teachers and leaders, and in schools with extensive Tribal involvement, community engagement, and the latest technology.

TRIBAL LEADER AND BARRIERS TO IDEAL EDUCATION.

Tribal leaders indicated that barriers to their ideal education came from within their Native nations by elders and those who are consistently resistant to change, from outside Native nation stakeholders who resist Tribal initiatives, a lack of funding and infrastructure, and Native children who are stuck between life on the reservation and life off the reservation who do not know how to succeed in either world.

TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY

The themes that emerged in the area of Tribal sovereignty centered around vision, lack of resources, support, self-sufficiency, and barriers.

Tribal Leader and Vision for Tribal Sovereignty.

Tribal leaders set their vision and goals for full Tribal sovereignty to be independent and self-reliant People and Nations.

Tribal Leader and Tribal Sovereignty by 2099.

When asked if, as Tribal leaders, they could have full Tribal sovereignty by the year 2099, the Tribal leaders indicated: (a) they could not fully function as Native Nations, (b) if they had full Tribal sovereignty, their Native Nations would be consumed in an instant by the Federal government, (c) they could not work with other Tribes so would prefer to remain as is, (d) do not have resources to be sovereign and have no ability to be self-sufficient, and (e) would only want if have funding and Federal government would leave Nation alone.

Tribal Leader and Tribal Sovereignty Barriers.

Tribal leaders indicated that Native people within their nations were significant barriers to Tribal sovereignty as well as funding and revenue sources, interference from state governments, and an overall lack of recognition of sovereignty and Native rights/independence./governance.

LEADERSHIP

Tribal leaders discussed their definitions of leadership and models in the area of leadership.

TRIBAL LEADER AND LEADERSHIP DEFINITION.

The Tribal leaders who responded to the survey did not define leadership in Indigenous or Native terms but discussed leadership from the importance of walk-and-talk alignment and a servant orientation stemming from a connection to Servant Leadership. While Tribal leaders mentioned Servant Leadership and walk-and-talk alignment, which are aligned with Native and Indigenous perspectives, they did not mention specific Tribal-centered leadership definitions such as a Ute or Lakota leadership definition, for instance.

TRIBAL LEADER AND LEADERSHIP MODEL.

Tribal leaders discussed leadership and a leadership model grounded in storytelling, emphasized the Servant Leadership model, and did not identify a specific Tribal leadership model. While Tribal leaders mentioned Servant Leadership and storytelling, which are reflective of Native and Indigenous epistemologies, they did not mention specific Tribal-centered leadership models such as a Zuni leadership model or a Choctaw leadership framework, for example.

CHANGE

Tribal leaders discussed change and noted both the lack of a consistent as well as Native-centric model for change. However, one leader indicated they use Plan, Do, Check, Act, and the Deming Cycle swapping Check with Study and Observe plus the Kotter Change Model.

DISCUSSION

A key to this discussion, as well as a key to the selection of TribalCRIT, is the notion that Native Americans are isolated, excluded, and at the mercy of others' decision-making (Brayboy, 2022). With that understanding, three tenets of TribalCRIT (Brayboy, 2022) help interpret the

findings of this study by the research question:

1. U.S., State, and Local Government and Educational policy and systems continue to engage Native American Tribes, Educators, and Students in ways that are detrimental to Native ways of educating and learning.
2. Due to U.S. and other governmental policies and actions, some Native American leaders are dampened in their desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification (Brayboy, 2022).
3. Tribal internal stakeholders continue to resist change and leaders in the areas of education and Tribal sovereignty, thus bringing forth the need for Native-generated leadership and change models that are unique to individual Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, visions, and stories that are central to the lived realities of Native/Tribal peoples and reinforce not only the need for community but assist in building Native/Tribal communities. (Brayboy, 2022).

Finally, Brayboy (2022, p. 198) noted, "By legitimizing and hearing stories, while connecting power, knowledge, and culture, TribalCrit users take part in the process of self-determination," and it is this process of self-determination that Native people must remember as self-determination is not an event but an outcome.

CONCLUSION/LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS/NEXT STEPS

In conclusion, this study is limited in size and scope, with participants limited and not representative of all Native Nations in America. However, the findings indicate that opportunities for dialogue and policy exist in education, that engagement, policy, and resource work are needed in the area of sovereignty, and that leadership and change are in dire need of Native interpretation and development. Thus, the next steps within each of these areas are ripe for scholars and practitioners to explore and develop further understandings and areas of connections.

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