Ensuring American Indian Students Receive an Equitable, Just, and Appropriate Education

A Matter of Personal and Professional Concern

Alicia Strawn, a first-grade teacher at Heronville Elementary in Oklahoma City, reads *The Legend of the Indian Paintbrush* by Tomie dePaola as part of a lesson to celebrate Native American culture in 2019.

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By Susan C. Faircloth

As an American Indian woman, parent, educator, and scholar, I find myself grappling with the question of how to ensure American Indian children receive an equitable, just, and appropriate education. I know firsthand the detrimental effects of not having American Indian (also referred to as Native) teachers or school leaders, of learning history from a non-Native perspective, and of feeling as if the educational system did not see my talents nor take the time to ask me about my dreams and aspirations. As the parent of an elementary-age Native student, I want a different experience for my child and for others like her—an educational experience that sees and values not only our children, but also our cultures, languages, and stories.

The creation of culturally and academically affirming schools for Native children requires us, as educators, to ask ourselves some difficult questions: Are we confronting the racism that American Indians continue to face and preparing our students to do the same? Are we recognizing the gifts and talents of American Indian students, not simply seeing their struggles? Are we working to recruit Native teachers and ensuring they receive the support and preparation to become leaders within our schools? And are we working to recognize, honor, and incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, learning, valuing, thinking, and being into our teaching?[1]

Honest answers to these questions will provide us a sense of where we are in our readiness and willingness to engage in the education of Native youth. For many of us, this will require us to unlearn or, at a minimum, challenge much of what we learned in our educator preparation and professional development programs.* For others, it will mean opening our hearts and minds to new learnings about this nation's first peoples and the role that the formal education system has played in the tragic taking of Native languages, cultures, and lands. Regardless of where we are in this process, I hope we will all come to recognize and honor the resilient nature of Native peoples; in spite of sustained attempts at assimilation and acculturation, Native peoples are surviving, and in many cases, thriving.

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*For more on the need to build cultural and racial awareness for instructional practice, see "Race to Improve Teacher Education" in the Fall 2019 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/ae/fall2019/milner.

At the core of this survival is Native peoples' recognition of education as a potentially powerful tool for increasing tribal self-determination and for reclaiming and sustaining our Indigenous languages, cultures, traditions, and lifeways. As professor Leilani Sabzalian writes, "Native courage, creativity, intelligence, determination, and artfulness—acts of Native survivance—are our inheritance and our legacy as Indigenous peoples."[2]

Becoming an Educator

As a member of the Coharie Tribe, one of eight American Indian tribes in the state of North Carolina,[†] I was conscious from an early age of the racial and cultural divide that set me, and my community, apart from many of my peers. Much of my understanding of this difference was tied to my parents' telling and retelling of their experiences growing up in the rural South during a period of legalized segregation—a period in which my father was fit enough to serve his country in Vietnam yet unable to dine in a restaurant with my mother.

My parents grew up economically poor but culturally rich. They were among the first in our tribe to graduate from East Carolina Indian School (also known as Eastern Carolina Indian School). Prior to the opening of this elementary and secondary school under the leadership of tribal elders in the 1940s, members of my tribe were forced to make a decision: either conclude their formal education at the eighth grade or leave the community to pursue a high school education in another part of the state. East Carolina Indian School was forced to close in the 1960s due to the integration of the local school system. This loss is still deeply felt and discussed among those who attended and taught at the school.

As a young child, I often returned to this school building, which was converted into our tribal headquarters, with my parents to attend tribal gatherings and cultural events. Each time we entered the school grounds, my parents would recall their childhood memories and reconnect to their past. Although the school lacked a cafeteria and other modern facilities, it was a place in which students, teachers, and community members felt at home. It was their school, and it was evident that they were proud of what they were able to achieve through its creation. The closure of the school marked an end of an era in which the local tribal community was intimately involved in shaping and delivering the formal education of its people.

In contrast to my parents, I attended integrated public schools in which Native students were in the minority. With the exception of a federally funded Indian Education Program,[‡] which provided cultural enrichment and academic support services for American Indian students, my exposure to Native educators was limited. As a result, it was difficult for me to see my culture, traditions, or history reflected in the curriculum. Although I was labeled as academically gifted and excelled on standardized assessments, I never quite fit in, nor did I feel that my teachers, with a few exceptions, saw my true potential. In spite of this, I went on to graduate from high school and college. Returning home from college with no immediate source of employment, my parents encouraged me to pursue a teaching degree. The more they encouraged me, the more I resisted. In the back of my mind, I could not reconcile my own educational experiences with a career as a teacher. Thankfully, I eventually found my calling as an educator and scholar of Indigenous education.

Over the years, I came to realize that what Native students need most is a sense of belonging and care in schools. They need to see people who look and sound like them and who understand where they come from. They need teachers and school leaders who hold high expectations for them and recognize that these expectations can be met without sacrificing their sense of cultural identity. They need a rich curriculum that provides both mirrors and windows—a curriculum that reflects their heritage and honors Native knowledge and ways of knowing; that expands their understanding of other peoples, events, and ideas;[3] and that explores the intersection of other peoples, events, and ideas with their lives as Native peoples. Not only do they need these things, they have a right to them.

What Native students need most is a sense of belonging and care in schools. High expectations can be met without sacrificing cultural identity.

I first learned about the need for more culturally relevant teaching and learning practices through my own lived experience as an American Indian student in a predominantly white school system. Years later, a deeper understanding of this need was developed through my work in K–12 schools where I helped develop culturally relevant programs in an urban Indian Education Program. Subsequently, I pursued graduate-level education in American Indian education through the American Indian Leadership Program at Penn State. Each of these experiences strengthened my commitment to ensuring that future generations of Native children did not feel the sense of exclusion and devaluing that marked much of my schooling. As a scholar of Indigenous education, I have used my work as a means of advocating for Indigenous children and youth and helping to change the ways in which we prepare future generations of teachers and school leaders. To that end, for the past 20 years, I have researched and written about the educational conditions and subsequent outcomes of Native children. (For more on the history of educating Native students, see the sidebar on page 30.) I have also helped to prepare Native and non-Native educators and school leaders to act in more culturally appropriate and responsive ways. Yet, there is still much to be done.

Becoming a Mother

For much of this time, I have approached this work from the perspective of an auntie to my niece, whose name translates

[†]For more information regarding the tribes of North Carolina, see ncadmin.nc.gov/public/american-indians.

[‡]For more information regarding the federal Indian Education Program, see oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-indian-education.

from Hawaiian as "Beautiful Little One." However, 10 years ago, I became a mother to my own beautiful little one by way of adoption. Mothering this child has been one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences in my life and has helped to reinforce my commitment to equitable and just education and care for all.

> We must meld the professional wisdom of teachers and the cultural and traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples.

For the past 10 years, I have worked to balance my professional role as a scholar and educator with my personal role as a mother and caretaker. In many cases, these roles have coincided, yet there are times when they clash quite fiercely. It is in these moments of conflict that I have had to check my own moral and ethical compass to ensure that I am embodying all that I encourage others to do through my teaching, scholarship, and writing—to call out educational and societal injustices and to place children at the center of our work.

The need to engage in this process of introspection and reflection, and to do more than just talk about equity and justice, was crystallized for me as my family moved from Pennsylvania to North Carolina and prepared for our daughter to begin preschool. We informed the school that our daughter and I are Native, so I was not prepared to walk into the preschool and hear the children and teachers singing "One Little, Two Little, Three Little Indians" or to see them making and wearing paper headbands with feathers made of construction paper. Upon discussing these concerns with the preschool administration, we were told that this was part of the curriculum and that curricular decisions were made at the system level (not by the preschool). Unsatisfied with this response, we continued to advocate against such activities while also recognizing the difficulties of changing a system that had limited local control. We did what we could but also weighed the potentially negative impact of our continued advocacy on our daughter.

Two years later, we faced a similar situation when our daughter started kindergarten, and we learned that the first-graders in her school would be making paper feathers and headbands as part of the American Indian unit. Once again we approached school leaders and the teacher. This time school officials said they would "reluctantly acquiesce" to our request not to conduct this activity. The following year, we decided to move our daughter to another school—one that embodied a commitment to justice, equity, and inclusion and that willingly took on the challenge of reviewing and revising its approach to teaching.

Two years later we moved to Colorado. Once again we were disappointed to find that our daughter's school sponsored an

Engaging with Native American Students, Culture, and History

Resources for Culturally Responsive Practices

- In a blog post series published by Education Northwest (bit.ly/33xJGOZ), educator Mandy Smoker Broaddus shares strategies for creating a more welcoming school community for Native* students, being more culturally responsive in engaging Native families, and positively including Native families and caregivers in their children's schooling. Such strategies include educators and schools making connections with Native students' backgrounds and cultures across the curriculum, ensuring that aspects of Native cultures are reflected in classrooms and hallways, and partnering with Native cultural experts to build awareness of cultural norms.
- Native Knowledge 360° is an online resource from the National Museum of the American Indian (s.si.edu/30E7uPA) featuring several classroom and professional development materials grounded in Native American perspectives. A wide array of digital lessons, including "Northern Plains Treaties: Is a Treaty Intended to Be Forever?" and "Pacific Northwest History and Cultures: Why Do the Foods We Eat Matter?," show high school students the cultural and geographic diversity of Native peoples in both historical and modern times. A section devoted to "Essential Understandings" (s.si.edu/3iFLBVT) can help educators and their students broaden their understanding as they supplement lessons on American Indian cultures, Indigenous knowledge, and tribal governance and sovereignty, among other topics.
- *State of the Field: The Role of Native Languages and Cultures in American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Student Achievement* is a policy brief and literature review on promising educational practices to support Native students (bit.ly/3iBBMIT). Written by educational anthropologist and linguist Teresa McCarty, this brief highlights how rigorous programs in Native languages and cultures have positive effects not only on student achievement but also on the maintenance and development of Native languages and cultures. Hallmarks of such rigorous programs include building students' self-esteem and cultural pride, investing in the preparation of Native teachers, and engaging parents and elders in Native students' learning.

Rethinking the Meaning of Thanksgiving

- *A Story of Survival: The Wampanoag and the English* offers elementary school teachers important background information and culturally appropriate activities (bit.ly/30DtppL). Published by the Native American Student Services department of Oklahoma City Public Schools, this booklet includes "quick

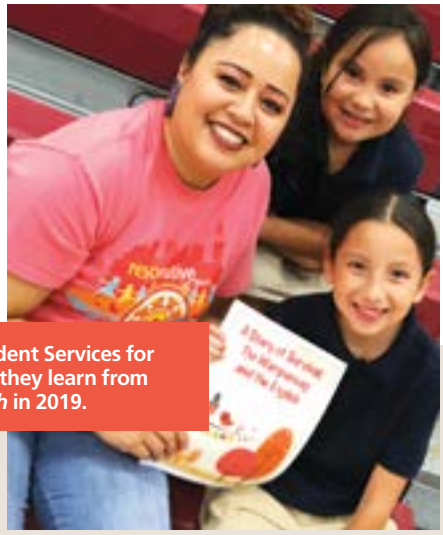
*The terms American Indian, Native American, and Native are used interchangeably in this list of resources.

annual Thanksgiving event in which children dressed up and pretended to be Pilgrims and Indians. Again, we approached the school and explained why this event was culturally inappropriate. Happily, this time we were met with sincere questions *and* an acknowledgement that the school had never recognized the potentially negative impact of this event on Native children and their classmates. Following this discussion, the school agreed to reconsider the event and asked for our assistance in moving forward. Although we offered resources to the school, we also made it clear that the school had an obligation to do its own work, in addition to using the resources we provided.

What each of these experiences taught me is that I am one of the fortunate ones. My years as an educator and scholar who is Native have equipped me with the language and agency to advocate for our daughter and to engage educational systems and structures that are too often unwelcoming to parents and families, particularly those from historically marginalized groups. Although I recognized my own power and privilege, I remained concerned about those who do not have the same privilege and power as my family and me. What happens to these families and their children? Who advocates for them? Who ensures that they are accurately reflected in the teaching of Native histories and culture(s) rather than being presented in stereotypical and inaccurate ways? For me, these children and their families are just as important and deserving as my own.

Having dealt with these situations at my daughter's schools, I became curious about how other schools were presenting Native peoples, cultures, and histories, particularly during the Thanksgiving holiday and the month of November. So I began searching social media (i.e., Twitter and Facebook). To my dismay, I found numerous schools depicting students making and wearing paper feathers and headbands, assigning "Indian" names, and misappropriating Native cultures and traditions, just to name a few activities.* As I found these images and practices, I began to reach out to the teachers and schools, via social media, explaining why such practices are culturally and pedagogically inappropriate and offering up alternate approaches and resources.† In many cases, either I was blocked or there was no response to my posting. However, in a few cases, schools and teachers responded by thanking me for calling out these practices and offering alternatives.

*Sadly, a brief search online confirmed that my experience was not unique; see, for example, "Making Indian Headdresses in School Is a Terrible Way to Teach Kids About Thanksgiving," available at wapo.st/3dyFv8Z.
†See, for example, "Teaching Thanksgiving in a Socially Responsible Way," available at bit.ly/2GXXZEh.



Star Yellowfish, the director of Native American Student Services for Oklahoma City Public Schools, with third-graders as they learn from *A Story of Survival: The Wampanoag and the English* in 2019.

facts" about the 1600s, the Wampanoag (pronounced Wah-pa-noah), and the English, and offers tips such as inviting Native Americans into the classroom to share and discuss their cultures and having schools partner with nearby tribes. This resource also features lesson plans for specific books, such as *The Legend of the Indian Paintbrush* by Tomie dePaola and *How the Stars Fell into the Sky: A Navajo Legend* by Jerrie Oughton. Suggestions for arts and crafts, such as creating reed dream catchers and corn husk dolls, are also included.

- A five-page study guide published by the National Museum of the American Indian, "Harvest Ceremony: Beyond the Thanksgiving Myth," is a helpful primer for teachers on the origins of the Thanksgiving holiday (s.si.edu/3d261HL). This guide explains the Wampanoag's first contact with the English and the harvest celebration in 1621 that came to be associated with Thanksgiving. Classroom discussion topics, such as comparing the actual events of the first harvest festival to the modern-day holiday and researching various ways Native peoples give thanks, are also included.
- With "American Indian Perspectives on Thanksgiving," published by the National Museum of the American Indian, educators can present students with an accurate portrayal of the significant role the Wampanoag played in offering the Pilgrims the knowledge and skills they needed to survive (s.si.edu/2F5DF2C). This study guide, geared toward teachers in grades 4–8, focuses on three themes integral to understanding Native peoples both in the past and in the present: connection to the environment, sense of community, and cultural devastation as a result of first encounters with the Pilgrims.
- In "Thanksgiving Mourning," a lesson from Teaching Tolerance, students in grades 6–12 learn that for some Native peoples, Thanksgiving commemorates a day of lost freedom—not a peaceful exchange between European and Indigenous cultures (bit.ly/3nrrr5Y). After reading two texts, "The Suppressed Speech of Wamsutta James" from the United American Indians of New England and "Thanksgiving: A Native American View" by Jacqueline Keeler (an American Indian author and activist), students can discuss both authors' views of the meaning of Thanksgiving and write journal entries about how these texts have changed their own understanding. (For additional resources, see bit.ly/3nmJfyX.)

–S. C. F.

To me, this exercise demonstrated the need to rethink the ways in which we, as professors—and colleges of education—are preparing future educators as well as the ways in which we are supporting ongoing professional development for practicing teachers. We must ensure teachers and school leaders are equipped to engage in culturally relevant and responsive educational practices, particularly as they relate to teaching with and about Native peoples. This exercise also underscored the importance of supporting the development of parental and familial agency and advocacy as well as the need to welcome parents and families into our schools and classrooms.

Star Yellowfish observes first-graders at Heronville Elementary paint their interpretations of the story told in *The Legend of the Indian Paintbrush* in 2019.

Melding Teachers' Wisdom and Indigenous Peoples' Knowledge

Seeing the ways in which many schools portrayed Native peoples, it was clear to me that neither colleges of education nor local education agencies are doing enough to ensure teachers have at their disposal a set of tools and practices that are culturally relevant and responsive for teaching about and with Native students. (For more on these tools and practices, see the box on page 32.) It was also evident that we need to revisit the notion of what constitutes best practices. Far too often, "best practices" are misunderstood as being readily transportable and implementable wholesale. Fortunately, some scholars have questioned this idea. For example, nearly a decade ago, a literature and program review noted that a great deal of research supports intentional adaptations that "build on the linguistic, cultural, cognitive, and affective strengths individual learners bring to school … [so as to] facilitate learners' self-efficacy, critical capacities, and intrinsic motivation as thinkers, readers, writers, and ethical social agents."[4]

When teachers are educating Native students, the identification and implementation of customized practices should occur in collaboration with Native peoples and communities. We must purposefully and intentionally create space for the coming together and melding of both the professional wisdom of teachers and the cultural and traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples and communities. Our children and our communities deserve nothing less. Unfortunately, such practices stand in stark contrast to what I experienced in school as a student, student-teacher, teacher, and parent.

Each night, I tuck my daughter into bed, kiss her forehead, stroke her hair, and tell her how much I love her. Occasionally, I shed a tear as I watch her drift off to sleep. Each morning I send her off to school with the hope that her teachers and her school will see the same beauty, intellect, and promise that I see in her, and that they will love, educate, and nurture her as if she were their own. At the same time, I fear that they will not see what I see, and that she will not be nurtured, loved, or cared for. Still, I send her to school. Each afternoon I welcome her home and ask about her day. Most days she answers with "meh" or some other nondescript response, before running off to play video games or join her friends. The next day we start the cycle again.

What sets me apart from my parents and elders, and from many of my peers, is that I have the social and economic capital that allow me to engage the school and teachers when I sense that something is not right in my daughter's education. I am able to ask questions and offer up resources. I can volunteer in the classroom and assist with her schoolwork. I can move her to a different school if necessary. But what connects me to my parents, elders, and peers is the knowledge that for generations of Native peoples, the education system has been used as a tool of forced assimilation and acculturation following the mantra first uttered by Colonel Richard Henry Pratt, founder of Carlisle Indian Industrial School.* Under Pratt's leadership, the federal Indian education policy of the late 1800s and early 1900s was "kill the Indian … and save the man."[5] This policy led to the separation of thousands of Indian children from their tribes, their languages, their cultures, and their homes. In many cases, it resulted in their deaths. (For more information, see the brief history on page 30.)†

The legacy of this era is ingrained in our collective histories and memories. It helps explain why many Native peoples remain wary of educational systems and structures. All educators have both an opportunity and a moral and ethical obligation to acknowledge and redress this legacy. To do so requires us to interrogate our own teachings, beliefs, and practices, and to acknowledge the ways in which we intentionally or unintentionally serve to sustain culturally dismissive and historically inaccurate teaching practices. In doing so, it is also critically important that our classrooms and schools become spaces in which parents, families, and community and tribal members are invited and welcomed as partners in our children's education and care. To build such relationships requires the establishment of trust and a commitment to not only listening but hearing and honoring the dreams and aspirations that parents and families have for our children's academic and cultural development and well-being. This work will take time and intentionality, and it will not be easy, but it must be done if Native children and youth are to be educated in ways that are equitable, just, and appropriate. ☐

(Endnotes on page 40)

*To learn more about Carlisle Indian Industrial School, see carlisleindian.dickinson.edu.
†Legislation recently proposed by Representative Deb Haaland of New Mexico and Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts is exciting in that is seeks to redress the harm imposed on Native peoples as a result of the forced removal of Native children from their homes and tribes. For more information, see bit.ly/355vKeD.

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