The Rural Educator

Volume 45
Number 1 *Joint Special Issue Between The Rural Educator and Journal of American Indian Education*

Article 5

Winter 2024

From Theory to Practice: How the Cheyenne and Arapaho Department of Education (Re)Centered Indian Education in Western Rural Oklahoma

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Recommended Citation

Whitlow, C. F. (2024). From Theory to Practice: How the Cheyenne and Arapaho Department of Education (Re)Centered Indian Education in Western Rural Oklahoma. *The Rural Educator, 45*(1), 33-43. https://doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1459

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Cover Page Footnote

TEDs are sometimes referred to as TEAs as per the U.S. Department of Education and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which utilize terms such as local education agency (LEA), state education agency (SEA), and tribal education agency (TEA), a TEA is only relevant to K-12 education, however TEDs tend oversee programs in early childhood, higher education, and other adult learning contexts.

Research Article

From Theory to Practice: How the Cheyenne and Arapaho Department of Education (Re)Centered Indian Education in Western Rural Oklahoma

Carrie F. Whitlow

The Cheyenne and Arapaho Department of Education (CADOE) functions as a tribal education department (TED) in western rural Oklahoma, situated within a tribal government that has a total membership of 13,212, 3,160 of whom are ages 3–18 years. CADOE has supported and advocated for equal opportunity and access for Cheyenne and Arapaho families and students since its inception. The purpose of this article is to utilize the Liberating Sovereign Potential framework to illustrate how CADOE continues to employ tenets from the model to liberate their sovereign potential, often serving students and families in rural contexts. While significant literature addresses Indigenous education, a gap still exists when considering the unique perspectives of TEDs and how they serve their rural tribal communities. Our goal is not only to improve educational outcomes for Cheyenne and Arapaho families and students, but also to assert our sovereign rights in educational systems. Here we outline various programs and efforts we have undertaken as we work to liberate our sovereign potential as Cheyenne and Arapaho people.

Celebrating Our Success in the Present: Head Start Graduations

It's May, and the end of the school year is near. Within two days we attended Head Start graduations in all three of our centers. It is the first time since 2019 we are celebrating in person, so the excitement is palpable.

Every graduation begins with the procession of students. A drum group is present, filled with community members who render a traditional song for the procession. Each ceremony starts with a prayer given by a community member.

In Canton the prayer, Hoowooyeitinoo, is provided by the language teacher, who is also known as "Grandma" to all her students. Guest speakers are community members, all Cheyenne and Arapaho tribal citizens, who speak about the importance of community, family, prayer, language, and culture.

The students in Clinton can greet the audience in Cheyenne: "Pēheveešeeva!" They can also count in Cheyenne, "Na'ēstse, Neše, Na'he, Neve, Noho…"; sing happy birthday in Arapaho; and say, "See you again" in Arapaho, "Heetce'noohobe3en!" They speak with confidence, excitement, and pride—you can see it on their faces as they wave at their families.

Teachers begin awarding diplomas and certificates, and families are rushing to the stage to take pictures. The laughter is contagious. It feels good to see families smiling, laughing, and visiting. Staff members are excited that another school year is ending, but sad to see their students move on.

A significant shift is happening in our early childhood centers, where Cheyenne and Arapaho values, languages, cultures, and worldviews are being asserted. Sitting in the audience and enjoying every moment, I can't help but think about what it took to get here…

The Cheyenne and Arapaho Department of Education and Rurality: A Brief Overview

The Cheyenne and Arapaho (C&A) Tribes (re)committed to education in 1962, when they began awarding $100 grants to all students who graduated from high school, college, nursing, or art schools (Mann, 1997). The purpose of the education program was to provide a direct service to encourage students to pursue a higher education. The C&A Tribes were placing value and, as McCoy (1994) states, "developing infrastructure and capabilities of tribes who wish to control and take responsibility for the formal education of tribal members" (p. 1). As our programming evolved and grew, on August 22, 1977, the Cheyenne and Arapaho Department of Education (CADOE) was created by the tribal council (Mann, 1997). The purpose of the department was to provide a variety of educational programs and services to C&A tribal members and to grow into a more comprehensive department (Mann, 1997).

Most tribal education departments (TEDs) oversee educational programs and services for their tribal citizens from birth to grave. By 1979 CADOE operated these programs: Adult Education, Head Start, Higher Education Assistance, Incentive Action, Johnson O'Malley, and Vocational Education

Training and Program Improvement (Mann, 1997). In 2023 CADOE programs included: Child Care Development Center, Head Start, Johnson O'Malley, School Clothing Voucher, Academic Excellence and Enrichment, Native Youth Community Project, Accessing Choices in Education, State Tribal Education Partnership, Higher Education, Cheyenne and Arapaho Productions, and Administration. Prior to January 2023, the Tribal Historic Preservation Office, Master Apprentice, and Language and Culture programs were also in the department. Although we have built capacity as a department, capacity building—as defined by RedCorn (2020), "the ability of a Native nation to administer and/or influence the education of their citizens" (p. 4)—has yet to be fully achieved.

Overall, the C&A Tribes' total membership is 13,000+, and the tribes employ 500+ in the tribal government and own five tribal casinos, which create significant revenue to fund tribal programs. As with many Native Nations operating in and across rural contexts, the C&A Tribes are an economic leader and job creator in our communities. In our education department, CADOE consists of 130 employees; administers 14 tribal programs; and has a budget of $8 million that includes state, federal, and tribally generated gaming revenue money. The C&A Tribes prioritize direct services and how we get those services into the hands of our tribal citizens.

As described by RedCorn et al. (2021), 71.9% schools with *high density* Indian enrollment (over 25% American Indian/Alaska Native students) are designated as rural, and more scholarship is needed regarding rural education and Native populations. The C&A Tribes' headquarters are in Concho in western rural Oklahoma (Whitlow, 2022), with a service area that includes nine counties and over 125 square miles that are either held in trust or under tribal ownership (CEDS Review Committee, 2023). The service area also includes 13 public school districts that serve C&A students and families, most of which identify as rural. As described by Biddle and Azano (2016), rural education and "the rural school experience should reflect the aims of the community," yet TEDs must operate in a context in which their students are attending state-run public schools, meaning we often do not have any direct influence over the education of our citizens. The 13 public school districts in the CADOE local service area are also referred to as tribal communities due to their demographic makeup, which should be reflective of the C&A values, languages, cultures, and worldviews. However, our abilities to embed those qualities into our students' daily experiences often depends on the quality of our partnerships with those 13 districts. Considering how Crumb et al. (2023) define rural as a "set of cultures and diverse experiences ranging from Indigenous and migrant farming communities to intergenerationally shared land in established communities" (p. 126), by asserting our sovereignty, we hope to make C&A perspectives a more visible part of that professional system branching over to our public schools.

In and across these rural contexts CADOE has been able to build capacity through gaming revenue, discretionary grants from the Office of Indian Education (OIE), and through collaborative partnerships. As an administrator, educator, and leader for CADOE, part of the responsibility is to develop systems thinking. As RedCorn (2020) states:

> This means leaders must be able to visualize all systems of learning in the community all at once, which includes local cultural systems, tribal education departments/agencies (TEDs/TEAs), local education agencies (LEAs), state education agencies (SEAs), Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) programs and institutions, federal programs in the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and more. (p. 3)

Since the inception of CADOE and through the work of many tribal educators, administrators, and advocates, we are now in the position to answer the question, what do we want education to look like for C&A students, families, and communities?

Tribal Education Departments: Asserting Sovereignty in Education

The first step to answering the question of what we want education to look like for C&A tribal citizens is to understand the importance of TEDs and how we assert sovereignty in education. TEDs, also referred to as tribal education agencies (TEAs), education departments, higher education offices, or education committees, are organizations found within tribal government systems. They are created by sovereign governments of Native Nations (Beesley et al., 2012), and their primary role is to support the education of their tribal citizens. According to the *Tribal Education Departments Report* (Bowers, 2010) out of 565 Tribal Nations in the United States, 200+ tribes have an identified TED. TEDs vary widely in size and capacity. CADOE is considered a TED, and in comparison to other TEDs, CADOE would be considered large, with more programming

and a larger budget than most, but as mentioned previously, the C&A Tribes started building these capacities in the 1960s and 1970s, so we have had more time to grow than many other Native Nations. Overall, TEDs are responsible for supporting the education of tribal members in other educational institutions, but TEDS are also at times directly responsible for education of their tribal members (Mackety et al., 2009), including in early childhood education, K–12 education, higher education, and adult education.

Bowers (2010) shares, "over the last few decades tribes have begun to develop modern governments and assert themselves on education issues to change how and where Native American students are educated" (p. 2). Furthermore, sovereign nations have an inherent right to regulate the education of their tribal members at public, private, and BIE schools, on and off the reservation (Mackety et al., 2009). Tribal Nations, TEDs, and TEAs are prioritizing not only education of their tribal citizens, but governance as well. TEDs are in a unique position as they begin to assert their sovereignty. They continue to build capacity and take control by prioritizing the education of their tribal citizens.

Building capacity includes learning how to write curriculum and standards, creating teachers, and creating our own systems of education. As Brayboy (2006) shares, "we need teachers who look like us, talk like us, and think like us" (p. 426). When creating systems of education with a Tribal Nation, it is important to assert our own tribal values, languages, cultures, and worldviews with educators, leaders, and elders within our tribal communities, with some emphasis on development of their own educators and education systems. TEDs and Tribal Nations' desire to build their own educator pathways is a shared goal with rural education. Pursuing these pathways typically means that we must leave home (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020) and use our strengths and assets to navigate our varied sociocultural and geographic contexts (Crumb et al., 2023).

Most are aware that the history of schooling was meant to colonize and assimilate (Castagno et al., 2022), and one way to assert sovereignty in education is to create our own educators and systems in education. As Castagno (2021) shares, "centering and building of teachers as leaders is not simply a move to improve schools or see gains in student achievement, it is a disruption of generations of colonizing ideologies and systems" (p. 327). If our TED's goal is to improve educational outcomes and experiences in western rural Oklahoma, we must learn how to grow our own teachers. Furthermore, "rural schools and districts are not waiting on state or federal policymakers to solve persistent staffing challenges" (Carl & Seelig, 2023, p. 3), so if our priority is language teachers who are equipped with specific C&A cultural skills, we must take the lead to attract, recruit, and hire them. The research tells us that we know how we can help students' success by offering a curriculum that integrates tribal histories, cultures, and languages; seeing an increased number of Native professional educators and staff in schools; and the use of teaching methods that integrate Native cultures and languages (Reinhardt et al., 2020). While TEDs vary widely in size and capacity, they represent a key stakeholder in this work, but we are not always a visible or known part of the landscape.

Organizations like the Tribal Education Departments National Assembly (TEDNA) are critical to the development of a department of education. TEDNA is a nonprofit organization that provides technical assistance and includes a vast network of TED leaders across the United States. Through TEDNA, TED leaders can connect, build partnerships, and most importantly learn from one another regarding our own departments of education.

RedCorn (2019) states, "there is a lack of literature in the field that specifically focuses on practitioner perspectives for leaders who work in TEA environments experiencing transition and change" (p. 3). TEDNA also provides annual reports that include background on tribal sovereignty and Indian education and highlight departments and the work they are doing. Under the umbrella of Indian education, research, literature, and perspectives that include the impact of TEDs in rural tribal communities are lacking.

Because of TEDNA's network I have witnessed not only the progress but struggles of numerous TEDs throughout the United States. The monthly and annual meetings provide perspectives from the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, Hoopa Valley, Pueblo of Jemez, Cherokee Nation, Muscogee Creek Nation, the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, Chickasaw Nation, Wichita Affiliated Tribes, and Citizen Potawatomi Nation, among others. Each TED is as unique as their nation, and it is an honor and privilege to learn from their leaders. As a new TED leader, it is imperative to see what other departments are building, creating, and accomplishing.

In November 2018, TEDNA hosted a regional conference, Education Sovereignty Leadership, in Suquamish, Washington. The purpose of the regional

conferences was to highlight SEAs, LEAs, and TEAs that are making progress with the education of their tribal citizens. I attended a workshop about TED leadership, presented by Dr. Mario Molina of Indigenous Solutions. He presented the work his department of education had achieved under his leadership, and I wanted to ask, how did you do that? In speaking with Dr. Molina, I learned he was a consultant who worked directly with other TEDs not only to create goals, but to accomplish them. Faircloth and Minthorn (2018) stress "the importance of working intentionally and proactively to recruit, train, and hire leaders who know, value, and enact Indigenous culture, practices, and beliefs" (p. 125). To (re)center our department we needed the expertise of Indigenous Solutions, who valued and asserted Indigenous worldviews. Dr. Molina began working with us in late 2019 and continues that work today.

TEDNA also provides opportunities for partnership. As an example, when applying for discretionary grants from the OIE, in the past we have collaborated on Native Youth Community Project, Extended Data Collection, and Accessing Choices in Education grants for tribal students and families. Furthermore, we are provided with technical assistance from organizations that have an Indigenous focus, such as the Academic Development Institute (ADI). ADI helps with writing curriculum, writing grants, providing evaluation on grants, and streamlining governance systems. After working with ADI on several grants, our department hired them as consultants to assist with the reorganization of our department.

Conceptual Framework

Liberating Sovereign Potential is a conceptual framework critical for Indigenous education research, specifically TEDs. To begin, education departments need purpose. RedCorn (2020) shares:

> Over time leaders in Native nations can increase their ability to liberate educational sovereignty by creating an army of change agents working to (re)center systems of learning around Native nation's cultural and governance systems, and pull learning systems away from the assimilationist trajectory found in the status quo of settler-colonial education. (p. 1)

Indigenous frameworks are vital for practitioners who need assistance with rethinking, relearning, and (re)centering a department's purpose. Tribal communities and tribal citizens are doing important work with their Tribal Nations, but it is hard to see progress when results are not produced overnight.

The Liberating Sovereign Potential framework has grown out of scholarship on culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP), with an emphasis on making sovereignty and self-determination part of that work (McCarty & Lee, 2014; RedCorn, 2020). Tribal sovereignty can be defined as the right of a people to self-determination, self-government, and self-education (McCarty & Lee, 2014). As Indigenous scholars we have been taught about our political identities and the importance of sovereignty, but typically we have had less exposure specific topics and skills related to educational sovereignty. Not only are we defining educational sovereignty as we learn to lead in and across systems, but we also are asserting educational sovereignty through the work of TEDs/TEAs. McCarty and Lee (2014) cite Moll and Ruiz's (2005) assertion that "a core element of educational sovereignty is 'the extent to which communities feel themselves to be in control of their language'" (p. 103). RedCorn (2020) describes how the Liberating Sovereign Potential model includes the important work of Lee and McCarty (2017) who assert that CSP must also consider culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy, which includes "the goal of transforming legacies of colonization" (p. 103). Furthermore, the framework is aligned with Pewewardy and associates' (2018, 2021) Transformational Indigenous Praxis Model and calls for leaders to deepen their critical consciousness and self-reflexivity, as they move toward changing and building new and improved educational systems through social justice action.

As stated previously, Tribal Nations have TEDs in their governmental structures, but they have yet to reach their full potential because of a disconnect between wanting to make progress and not knowing how to do it. The remainder of this article focuses on these three tenets outlined by RedCorn (2020):

1. Assessing the educational landscape and identifying community assets,
2. Fostering professional growth across systems, and
3. Engaging in ongoing systems development and alignment advocacy.

RedCorn provides a step-by-step process on how a Native Nation can understand educational sovereignty, why it is important, and how to assert educational sovereignty through its TED/TEA. Literature regarding Indigenous education exists, but gaps remain regarding the definition, functions, and responsibilities of a TED.

As we work to learn more about and execute our capacities as a TED, as a leader it is important not only to have a vision but also to engage critical thinking and reflective leadership when it comes to actual execution. For example, we want language and culture taught in early childhood (Child Care and Head Start) centers every day, but how do we accomplish this goal? Additionally, how do we center "curriculum, pedagogy, teaching styles, leadership styles, and more" (RedCorn, 2020, p. 7) on a C&A worldview?

Assessing the Educational Landscape and Identify Community Assets

First and foremost, we must acknowledge the impact of settler-colonial education in rural public-school systems and acknowledge how we have endured assimilationist schooling for generations (RedCorn, 2020). For example, as Pewewardy et al. (2018) share, "while the dominant white-stream society may wish to believe that racism is a historical construct, subtle forms of racism [continue to] manifest" (p. 43), especially in education. Not only does settler-colonial education impact our experiences, but also how we feel about ourselves as Indigenous people and sometimes subconsciously reject our own heritages (Littlebear, 2003). Indigenous people had their own educational systems and practices in place prior to European contact, and we need to keep those traditions in the forefront of our consciousness.

Mann (1997) shares, "each was educated to be a good Arapaho or a good Cheyenne—and they stood in stark contrast to the white American schooled in the formal education system" (pp. 15–16). Education can be as simple as stating, "Be a good Arapaho or be a good Cheyenne." The word "good" carries a standard of how to treat people, how do to things, or how to be. People from a rural tribal community in Oklahoma hear phrases like, "Be good to people" or "Do things in a good way." Sometimes it really is that simple—the standard of "good" is known and understood, and it carries more cultural context than its interpretation in public schools.

Reflecting on our community assets, we realized that we were not asserting a C&A worldview within our department and were not necessarily prioritizing those "good ways" within our institutional culture. It was important not only to decolonize and Indigenize our practices, strategies, and systems (Pewewardy et al., 2018); we needed to explore how to (re)center specifically on a C&A worldview as we looked to identify our community assets. That process included asking ourselves critical questions, including: What is important to our families, communities, and people?

Part of the answer includes placed-based education, which is a symbiotic relationship between the tribes, school, and community that focuses on local needs, cultures, and economies. As Adams and Farnsworth (2020) explain, placed-based education "highlights the intentional choice of staying in one's home community with the goal of improving educational outcomes for children and youth" (p. 87). RedCorn et al. (2021) suggest, however, that place-based education and relationships with land can bring a deeper meaning to these notions (e.g., Cajete, 1994; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). Learning your family, community, and people's values is equally as important as learning Western education.

For our C&A-specific context, as one of our early childhood educators proposed in 2020, "We would like language and culture to be taught in our centers every day." This goal aligns with Littlebear's (2003) assertion that "our Native languages can help and should help us to preserve our spiritual identities in addition to our own individual and cultural identities" (p. 75). In other words, our languages are essential assets in our communities. Yet how do we ensure our identities are preserved in systems that are dictated by federal and state funding?

CADOE operates five early childhood centers within our service area: the Child Care Development Program (Clinton, Concho) and the Head Start Program (Canton, Clinton, and Concho). In total, they serve 203 children, ages birth to 12 years. More importantly, they provide a direct service every day. CADOE operates these systems of learning, but the curriculum, teaching, and grants are often dictated by federal and state guidelines. Since we have some administrative control over these programs, however, they can be seen as one of our key community assets. We need to be mindful of our sovereign priorities as they intersect with state and federal policies.

As for our languages, CADOE also operated the Language Program. In 2019 the program was combined with the Cultural and Heritage Program and renamed to the Language and Culture Program. The Language Program has been funded largely by Administration for Native Americans (ANA) grants from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. The first grant was received in 2013 and was a living language project that focused on teacher preparation and building language curriculum. This project also forced our TED to assert our sovereignty in new ways, as we now can certify our language

teachers alongside the SEA. These existing assets are relevant to liberating our sovereign potential.

The second grant, *Communicating Together Speaking Bravely*, was awarded in 2016, focused on a master apprentice project, and worked to bring together our linguistic assets across C&A communities. The goal of the project was to produce fluent speakers on a conversational level. In addition to producing fluent speakers, a system was created to include learning from elder fluent speakers from Oklahoma, and it also connected us to our Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho relatives in Wyoming and Montana. No fluent Arapaho speakers and 20+ fluent Cheyenne speakers remain in Oklahoma, so collaborating with our relative Nations was essential in assessing the landscape beyond our local geographies and identifying our linguistic assets. Apprentices in the program were in daily sessions either in person or via Zoom with the elder fluent speakers. From 2016–2019, the grant strengthened partnerships and collaborations with both the Northern Arapaho and Northern Cheyenne; the Northern Cheyenne had received a similar grant from ANA in 2003 that produced fluent speakers as well as a certification process. As Littlebear (2003) asserts, "virtually every Native community in the United States and Canada, including Hawaii and American Samoa, are fighting to stave off the potential loss of their language" (p. 83), and the C&A Tribes of Oklahoma are not alone in this fight.

The Language Program at the time focused on language acquisition and community classes. In March 2020 most of the tribal government was shut down and everyone was sent home, including the language apprentices. Once everyone returned to work in late 2020, our operating system shifted largely to online platforms. During that time our tribes suffered significant loss of tribal elders due to COVID-19. Again, the Language Program relied heavily on federal grants to sustain language revitalization efforts, with supplemental tribal revenue funding. In January 2020, the Eighth Legislature of the C&A voted to allocate $2 million to fund a Master Apprentice Program, which allowed recruitment of more apprentices and more fluent speakers, as well as a focus solely on second language acquisition.

The $2 million allocation was more than enough to sustain a Master Apprentice Program. A stipulation to receive the funding was to create a strategic plan, which allowed CADOE leaders to discuss priorities and how to build language learning within the department of education. The strategic plan included apprentice training, virtual language classes, afterschool language classes, language support, language standards/strands, a teacher preparation program, and K–12 teacher placement. Although we were already working on early childhood curriculum, this program allowed a focus on K–12 education as well.

According to RedCorn (2020), the first step in assessment of the educational landscape is to identify educational systems that influence our tribal citizens. Within our reach were five early childhood centers, 13 LEAs, 13 tribal programs, and 130 CADOE employees. To meet the goal of teaching language and culture in our early childhood centers we had to align programs within our department. Language, Head Start, and Child Care created a system that identified teachers within their centers, offered weekly training sessions with language staff, and aligned the language and culture curriculum with Head Start. Our early childhood centers in Canton, Clinton, and Concho each has a language teacher.

While it was important to write and produce a curriculum, it was equally important to identify tribal teachers. RedCorn (2020) observes, "across the nation most Native students have limited, if any, interaction with Native teachers and the majority of their instruction comes from non-Native teachers" (p. 11). Our teachers teach the language and provide cultural context alongside the curriculum. Since our early childhood programs work closely together, they combine costs and share teachers.

Since instruction began in fall 2021, Head Start has created a full-time language teacher position that is funded by gaming revenue and filled by a tribal elder, who oversees the teaching at all centers. Since we looked from within our department and communities, we were able to "identify individuals connected to the community who already possess a certain degree of efficacy and comfort with critical Indigenous paradigms" (RedCorn, 2020, p. 12). We are identifying teachers who look like us, think like us, and reflect our communities (Brayboy, 2016).

Returning to the present day and our Head Start graduation ceremonies, every graduation was centered on C&A values, languages, cultures, and worldviews. Our students walked in with shawls across their backs and bandoliers draped across their bodies, and, most importantly, our languages were spoken throughout the ceremony—an example of balancing short-term needs with long-term impact (RedCorn, 2020).

Fostering Professional Growth Across Systems

One of my assumptions in leading this work was that we only needed to (re)center systems, not people. RedCorn (2020) states, "many leaders in Native communities have inherited the habits of Westernized systems and/or their employees' work experience within them" (p. 6). The same settler-colonial educational system of which we are critical is the same system in which we were educated. Ninety-three percent of Native students attend public school systems (National Indian Education Association, n.d.), which means that only 7% of Native students are educated in tribal, BIE, private, or charter schools. There is a need to recognize that most former students who are employed by TEDs and tribal governments are products of Westernized systems of education, and sometimes their worldview is not as inclusive of the C&A Tribes as some might assume.

The Transformational Indigenous Praxis Model tell us it is necessary to promote critical awareness and consciousness among educators (Pewewardy et al., 2018, 2021). To (re)center systems, we must be able to (re)center ourselves. Critical self-reflection is necessary and sometimes includes reflecting on one's own experience in public school education. For example, it took me years to understand that public school education taught me to be ashamed of who I was as a C&A woman. Once I came to this realization, I cried. I cried because I was fortunate to be raised by grandparents who always taught me the importance of knowing who I was and where I came from—where I learned those "good ways." Teachings from home taught me to be a confident Native person, while teachings from the classroom taught me to be ashamed.

Change is always described as a good thing, but once it is underway, the response may not be positive. Pewewardy et al. (2018) provide ways to manage this process: "one strategy to decolonizing teaching and learning is to create a transformative structural process by reframing Indigenous worldviews and methods" (p. 47). For example, one day we brought together staff and said we are going to start writing our own curriculum. Instantly, we encountered resistance. Reactions included, "Why would we do that? We don't know how to do that. We're not teachers." Unfortunately, these comments reflected a Westernized educational system. Our work included a need to "evolve the skill sets of already practicing teachers and leaders through in-service professional development" (RedCorn, 2020, p. 14). The challenge was intersecting C&A worldviews and fighting through the dissonance of what we are taught in public school education. There was value, but how would we make it valuable to us? (Re)centering our way of thinking about education after generations of settler-colonial influence was easier said than done.

A priority in the master apprentice strategic plan was to create a teacher preparation program. This program would produce C&A language teachers for early childhood, PK–12, and higher education. The most important steps when creating this program were to identify content areas for future teachers, develop a framework for new teacher training, identify a local college partner for coursework, and develop all required school documents. We understood that these steps were just the beginning of a very long and tedious process. Also, because we lacked the capacity and technical leadership skill sets to know how to achieve this goal, we consulted with Dr. Molina at Indigenous Solutions. We learned that while we had C&A-specific place-based cultural knowledges, we needed a technical and professional leadership skill set. We acknowledged that it was important to ask people who had done this work to show us how to do it. It was important to have money in our budget to hire a consultant, which not all TEDs have.

The partnership between the Master Apprentice Program and the Northern Cheyenne Language Program created a pathway to work with Chief Dull Knife College, which is several states away in Montana. The apprentices were given the option to take college courses that would prepare them to teach language in our educational systems. In summer 2022, they began taking courses online on topics such as methods of teaching language, American Indian education, school society, and teachers.

It was also important for them to take courses at a tribal college or university (TCU) because they would be required to study Indigenous pedagogy and literature, which are perspectives often not found at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI). They completed coursework in fall 2023 and can now be certified to teach by CADOE and the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

It is also necessary to discuss academic achievement and school success based on C&A standards. As Schafft (2016) asserts, "rethinking the relationship between rural education and development means moving beyond a discussion of education that focuses on test scores as standard indices of academic achievement and school success"

(p. 145). An example of successful implementation of what Schafft suggests is the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative (AKRSI), which has done significant work in creating culturally responsive standards and schools. Through AKRSI, Alaska Native people have been able to develop pedagogical practices and school curricula that appropriately incorporate Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing into the formal education system (Hill et al., 2006). At CADOE, we are inspired by other communities that have done this kind of (re)centering.

Our teacher preparation program does not require anyone to leave their home community to complete a degree and allows tribal members to remain in their homes (Faircloth & Minthorn, 2018). We have begun to create cohorts of teachers, as well as pathways to a profession that are beneficial to our students and families. As recommended by RedCorn (2020), "the most ideal candidates are not necessarily students out of high school" (p. 18). We are creating opportunities for hybrid grow-your-own and/or career change pathways to expand our workforce, as tribal citizens from birth to adult learners are enrolled in these programs. C&A people are reluctant to leave their rural communities because they "live in villages or communities far from large cities and towns and are often deeply rooted in their extended family systems, cultural practices, values, and lifestyles" (Rao et al., 2011, as cited in Adams and Farnsworth, 2020, p.87). We no longer have to send our people away for education and/or opportunity, and we believe this approach has helped us succeed in making progress toward building up our professional skill sets needed to reach our goals.

Systems Development and Alignment

To achieve systems development and alignment RedCorn (2020) recommends, "if leaders actively work to align internal and external systems toward their center, then there is hope in moving away from the assimilationist status quo" (p. 21). As RedCorn describes, all three core components are happening in interconnected and complex ways. In the previous sections, I have described interconnected examples of systems development and alignment working in conjunction with our efforts to identify of community assets and foster professional growth (creating the Master Apprentice Program, co-certifying teachers, developing standards and curricula, aligning funding to meet C&A goals, etc.). However, strategic planning is also an essential component of systems development and alignment.

At the beginning of my tenure as the leader of CADOE, several programs operated from an individualistic perspective due to their leadership. To shift to a collective perspective as a department, we created a new strategic plan for 2020. Prior to the strategic plan, 13 tribal programs operated with their own goals and objectives. With the assistance of ADI, we created five department goals:

1. To protect and preserve our C&A language and culture by continuing meaningful implementation for tribal citizens.
2. To increase student engagement in school by providing support and direct assistance.
3. To offer C&A families access to affordable, high quality, holistic early childhood education services.
4. To promote interest and awareness surrounding college and career readiness among C&A tribal citizens.
5. To continue to build the capacity of CADOE to better serve students and family's educational needs.

This process allowed us to serve our families and students as a collective, rather than individually. It was imperative first to build capacity from within.

All our programs serve the same students and families, just at separate times on their educational journeys. It was important to assert collective work because we would achieve our department goals together, not separately. We also needed to "focus on leadership that fits the particular situation or context and how our leadership can best serve community members" (Faircloth & Minthorn, 2018, p. 124). C&A people believe in helping as much as we can, which is why we prioritize direct services (i.e., support).

CADOE will continue to support the education of its tribal citizens, but we want to take responsibility for the education of our tribal citizens. Concepts such as systems development and alignment empower TEDs to assert their sovereignty, as "local control and self-determination are founded on the belief that local tribes and communities have the right to determine and shape the future and direction of our children's education" (Faircloth, 2009, p. 3). At CADOE, we are working to liberate our sovereign potential by creating sustainable systems that will impact our communities, families, and students' education, as well as their success.

Looking to the Future

In October 2022, CADOE was awarded a State Tribal Education Partnership discretionary grant from OIE. The grant, *Enhancing Educational Choice for Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma*, will allow us to create a model for a charter school. It is a three-year comprehensive planning process, and the model will aim to meet the unique cultural and educational needs of our communities' children. It will also be an opportunity to continue to assert our educational sovereignty by prioritizing our language and culture through development of curriculum, language and culture teachers, and standards of education centered on C&A values and worldviews. The Liberating Sovereign Potential framework has allowed us as a TED to:

- Assess the educational landscape and identify community assets, where we learned to understand our role as a TED; identify a need within our educational systems; and create a system that centered C&A language and culture.
- Foster professional growth across systems, beginning with understanding settler-colonial education, how it impacts how we understand education and learning, and how to create our own systems of professional development for education.
- Think critically about how our TED was operating; create various new systems of education and a new strategic plan, including five goals that we could achieve as a department collectively rather than individually; and create sustainable systems that impact our tribal citizens into the future.

The hope is that in 5 to 10 years we will be able to operate our own schools, where our worldview is truly at the center of education. As RedCorn (2020) shares, "it would be ideal to imagine a school run by a Native nation with 100% of the staff being professional trained educators who are citizens of that same Native nation" (p. 12). At CADOE, it would not only be ideal, but a dream. CADOE is well on our way to making that dream a reality for our students, families, and communities.

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Suggested Citation:

Whitlow, C. F. (2024). From theory to practice: How the Cheyenne and Arapaho Department of Education (re)centered Indian education in western rural Oklahoma. *The Rural Educator*, *45*(1), 33–43.