

## AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS SPEAK OUT: WHAT'S GOOD CITIZENSHIP?

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### Abstract

For much of our country's history, citizenship has eluded American Indian people. With this in mind, the authors conducted a study to determine the perceptions of eighth and eleventh grade American Indian students regarding citizenship. We wanted to find out what American Indian students believe are the attributes of a good citizen; what activities they are currently participating in that are related to good citizenship; and what citizenship activities they see themselves performing ten years later in life. The results of the research study indicated that American Indian students' views of citizenship were grounded in community service rather than in political engagement. For these students, volunteering in community and tribal activities seemed to be an alternative to political activity. Voting and running for political office and engaging in political activities were many times equated to participating in their local tribal organization. However, the fact that these students do not focus to a great extent on political engagement may not be cause for alarm. Their involvement in civic activities in the community and the tribal organization is providing a strong foundation for future civic and political engagement.

For much of our country's history, citizenship has eluded American Indian people. Even when slaves were gaining their freedom, native peoples were not legal citizens of the United States. The legal basis of limiting Indian citizenship was rooted in the United States Supreme Court's interpretation of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the United States Constitution. The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment states that "all persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and the State wherein they reside" and "representatives shall be apportioned among the several States according to their respective numbers, counting the whole number of persons in each state, excluding Indians not taxed."<sup>1</sup> The 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment (section one) states that "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude."<sup>2</sup>

In 1884, when John Elk (American Indian) attempted to vote, his registration application was turned down. The Supreme Court rejected Elk's constitutional claims, holding that Indians belonged to "alien nations."<sup>3</sup> The court maintained that even if individual Indians met basic citizenship requirements, they still could not be enfranchised unless Congress passed a law authorizing such a change in their legal standing.

Change was slow, but the Dawes Act of 1887 (also known as the General Allotment Act) was designed to assimilate American Indians by assigning each male head of household 160 acres of land, and American Indians who accepted the allotments became citizens of the United States.<sup>4</sup> During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the United States participating in World War I, citizenship was granted to American Indian war veterans. The Indian Veterans of World War I Act and the Snyder Act of 1924 granted citizenship to all American Indians. While these acts granted American Indians U.S. citizenship, the United States Constitution permitted franchisement on the state level to be determined at the discretion of the states; consequently, it was possible for American Indians to be citizens on the national level but not at the state level.<sup>5</sup> Enfranchisement of American Indians varied widely from state to state, and it was not until 1962 that all states recognized American Indians as citizens.

Because of this history of repression of citizenship of American Indian people, we decided to conduct a study to find out how current American Indian students (8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades) viewed good citizenship. These young adults will help shape our country's future, and it is important as educators to understand their thoughts on this subject. As part of the No Child Left Behind Act, schools are required "to foster civic competence and responsibility."<sup>6</sup> If we are to respond to the national agenda put forth by the federal

government regarding citizenship education in the schools, we need to find out how our students view the concept of good citizenship.

We, therefore, wanted to find out what American Indian students believe are the attributes of a good citizen; what activities they currently participate in that are related to good citizenship; and what citizenship activities they see themselves performing ten years later in life. Such information is important to us if we are to fulfill our responsibilities as teachers in educating knowledgeable, thoughtful, committed, and participatory citizens. We need to know how these students view good citizenship if we are to improve the civic education curriculum and the teaching strategies that go along with it in our schools.

It should be noted here that we are approaching this research study from a perspective of citizenship that has been developed out of Western European culture. This concept may be different from the concept of citizenship that historically developed among the American Indian tribes within North America. It is also evident that some American Indian people see themselves as having a dual citizenship, tribal as well as U.S. citizenship. We have found limited research related to this topic and realize the limitations of our research.<sup>7</sup> However, we feel that this research is at least a step towards trying to untangle a difficult concept that needs to be researched.

### **Concept of Citizenship**

For the purposes of this study, we have defined citizenship as the social and legal link between individuals and their democratic political community. MacIntyre and Turner concluded that good citizenship involves the self-conscious performance of a collection of behaviors in an attempt to meet society's standard of the "good citizen."<sup>9</sup> This "self-conscious performance" is what Conover and Searing label as "practice."<sup>10</sup>

“The practice of citizenship involves the knowledge, thoughts, and commitment of citizens, which is translated into actions essential to sustain our representative government.”<sup>11</sup> Finally, Westheimer and Kahne reviewed the work of practitioners and scholars related to the concept of a good citizen and grouped the information under three headings. They were: (1) the personally responsible citizen – one who acts responsibly in his or her community; (2) the participatory citizen – one who actively participates in civic affairs; and (3) the justice-oriented citizen – one who critically assesses social, political, and economic structures and considers collective strategies for change that challenges injustice.<sup>12</sup>

To further our understanding of the concept of citizenship, it is also important to realize the dual nature of citizenship, civic and political engagement. The civic aspect of citizenship deals with how citizens interact with each other (i.e., civic engagement), while the political aspect involves how citizens interact with the state (i.e., political engagement). Both of these elements are essential for a citizen to participate in a democratic society. It is this dual nature of the concept of citizenship that this study will focus on in the interpretation of what students believe constitutes the practice of good citizenship. The civic and political perspectives incorporate the ideas of knowledge, thought, commitment, and participation into these two roles of citizenship.

### **Method**

Studying citizenship as practice enabled us to focus more on explanations rather than causal relationships. It involved an account of students’ knowledge, beliefs, and actions that they were expressing. With this in mind, we designed a case study to interpret the data regarding American Indian students’ views of good citizenship. This

case study was “bounded by time and place ... through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context.”<sup>13</sup> A case study is well suited for locating the meanings people place on events, processes, and structures of their lives. These perceptions, assumptions, and presuppositions are useful for people to connect these meanings to the social world around them.<sup>14</sup> Yin argues that a case study strategy is preferred when the inquirer seeks answers to how or why questions, when the inquirer has little control over events being studied, when the object of study is a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context, when boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clear, and when it is desirable to use multiple sources of evidence.<sup>15</sup> Stake emphasizes that the foremost concern of a case study is to generate knowledge of the particular.<sup>16</sup> Both Stake and Yin argue that case studies can be used for theoretical elaboration or analytic generalization.

Within our case of a rural school district, we have multiple cases of 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade students that provide us with our level of analysis. Miles and Huberman assert that multiple cases offer the researcher an even deeper understanding of processes and outcomes of cases, the chance to test hypotheses, and a good picture of locally grounded causality.<sup>17</sup> Our prime interest in the study was conceptual. We had some notion of the community in which the students live and the schools they attend, and we want to find out how they express their concept of good citizenship within this environment.

Data collection (interviews and surveys) took place over a one month period of time in a rural school district that was located in a southwestern state with a large number of American Indian students. The methods employed and the analysis of the data were

similar to a study conducted by Chiodo and Martin.<sup>18</sup> In this study, data from urban, suburban, and rural students were assessed regarding the concept of citizenship.

### *Selection Of The Sample*

The school district was chosen because of the large number of American Indian students in attendance. It should be noted that the school was not part of a reservation school system, and Native American families were scattered throughout the rural community occupying individually owned homes. The teachers whose classes we surveyed also volunteered to assist the researchers. A total of sixty-nine students took part in the study, all of whom attended the two schools in the rural school district being studied. Thirty-eight 8<sup>th</sup> grade students were surveyed, along with thirty-one 11<sup>th</sup> grade students. The difficulty of securing permission to conduct the research and the small student populations led to the variations in the sample sizes. In addition, some of the student surveys had to be discarded due to incomplete information.

Student anonymity was maintained in the research process. Demographic data included only grade level, gender, age, and tribal affiliation. In addition, all students in the classes (American Indian and non Indian) who submitted a permission slip completed the survey. Only those who indicated a tribal affiliation were included in this study.

We chose students in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades for this research project because American history and civics are taught at these two grade levels in the school district. In addition, as part of the state testing program, students complete standardized exams in history and civics at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades. It was our assumption that because the students were learning about American history and civics, they would be willing to share their thoughts regarding citizenship.

As part of the research study, a sample of convenience was used to choose the students based on gender. The samples from both schools were generally evenly divided between males and females; however, there was no attempt to equalize the students based on the two dominant tribes, Choctaw and Chickasaw. Tribal affiliation was noted on the survey form for the purposes of analysis of the data.

### *Data Collection*

Prior to completing the survey, the students were unaware that they were going to be asked questions about their concept of citizenship. The researchers administered the surveys in the students' social studies classrooms, and it took about twenty minutes for the students to complete them. The survey was designed as a series of three open-ended questions. Unlike leading questions, they establish the territory to be explored while allowing the students to make in-depth comments about their experiences. Merriam encourages open-ended questions to be used as part of qualitative studies.<sup>19</sup> They provide opportunities for yet more information, opinions, and feelings to be revealed. As researchers, we considered a more structured approach to the survey but decided giving the students the freedom to openly respond to the three questions seemed to be a better fit for our research methodology. However, we are also aware that the way we phrased the questions and our use of the words "good citizenship" might have influenced the students' responses. Since the questions were phrased in a positive direction, they may have influenced the students to reply in a positive manner.

We also conducted interviews with a limited number of students from each school in an attempt to gain a richer understanding of the students' written comments. Five students were randomly selected from each pool of students for a total of ten participants.

This selected sample was small enough for the purpose of interviews, yet representative of the total population of students.<sup>20</sup> Interviews lasting approximately twenty minutes were conducted in the classroom during the students' lunch period. During the interviews, the researchers asked a series of prompting questions to clarify student-written comments on the survey. Typically, the researcher would read a question that was on the survey and then read the student's answer back to him or her. The student would be asked to explain or expand upon what he or she had written. Typical questions by the interviewer were as follows. "Can you tell me more about this?" "Can you explain this to me?" "Do you do anything else related to citizenship?" "Why do you do these activities?" The students' oral comments provided us with a greater depth of understanding compared to the responses on the survey forms. These comments were audio taped, transcribed, and used in the analysis of the data.

A third group of participants who took part in the study were the two teachers of the student participants. One teacher had been teaching in the district for six years, while the second teacher had taught in the district for nine years and two additional years in another school system. Neither teacher was of American Indian ancestry. The teachers were asked to comment on how they thought their students would answer the questions on the citizenship survey as well as respond to a summary of some of the students' answers. The use of the teachers' comments as part of the study was included to help validate the students' comments on the survey and the information obtained in the student interviews. For example, a student might indicate on the survey or in the interview that they worked on a tribal project, and their teacher would also mention some of his students worked on a particular tribal project.



## *Data Analysis*

The goal of case study data analysis is to find and analyze the data for “themes within larger social and psychological theories.”<sup>21</sup> In this study we were exploring the theory of political efficacy as expressed by Patrick and Conover and Searing.<sup>22</sup> First, a case study database was created to organize data for the analysis. Then, a narrative analysis was conducted on the students’ written comments where the researchers sorted the responses by key words or phrases to potentially reveal patterns in the students’ responses. The patterns were analyzed collectively as one group (American Indian students) and as subgroups (8<sup>th</sup> grade and 11<sup>th</sup> grade students).

The constant comparative method was used to develop codes and categories whereby coding gradually evolved into emerging themes for each grade level.<sup>23</sup> In this method of analyzing qualitative data, data in the form of observations, interviews, and the like are coded inductively. Then, each segment of the data is taken in turn and compared to one or more categories to determine its relevance and compared with other segments of data similarly categorized. In the case of our research, data from the surveys, the student interviews, and the teacher interviews were used for comparison and the development of the categories of meaning.

Student answers on the surveys were reviewed, and key words and phrases were noted. Both student and teacher interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for key words and phrases. Through a process of coding and recoding until analysis appeared to run its course, and when we felt all incidents could readily be classified, we were able to see selective categories emerge. For example, student comments referring to “obeying school rules” or “don’t do drugs” were grouped under a general category of

rules and laws while comments such as “join the army and fight in Iran” fell under the category of patriotism. Four categories provided us with our final analysis. They were obeying rules and laws, helping others in the community, acts of patriotism and loyalty, and respecting others personally as well as their property. The two researchers were involved in the coding process and throughout the analysis of the data. Although no inter-rater reliability took place, both individuals were able to agree on the placement of data at all times.

Initially, within-case analysis was used to develop a comprehensive understanding of the contextual variables bearing on each case independently. Thereafter, cross-case analysis was used to build a general explanation of the relationship between the two groups.

To encourage internal validity, the researchers triangulated the data and included an external audit. Triangulation allowed the researchers to explore the data from different perspectives and included survey data from students, student interviews, and teacher interviews. An external audit was conducted by an individual who taught qualitative research design with no connection with the research study and “examine[d] both the process and the product of the account, assessing the accuracy.”<sup>24</sup> Finally, the process of coding and recoding until analysis appeared to run its course and the process of peer checking and debriefing established the data and interpretations of the inquiry. These procedures along with the external audit helped develop the trustworthiness of the study.<sup>25</sup>

### **Description of the School District**

Because our research study involved American Indian students in rural schools, we had to develop a clear definition of what constitutes a rural school. We soon realized the problem of defining rural and rural schools is not a new one. There is, however, some agreement as to the criteria for determining the characteristics of a rural school district. Recent studies by Stern (1994); Colangelo, Assouline, and New (1999); and Harde and Reeve (2003) describe rural schools as having the following characteristics: the community's population is less than 5,000 people; schools in the district draw students from neighboring communities of fewer than 1,500 residents; the school district's population is less than 2,500 students; and the high school population is less than 800 students.<sup>26</sup>

For this study, we chose a rural school district that was located in a southwestern state that had a large number of American Indian students enrolled in the middle school and high school. Although the district has some unique features regarding its rural character, it still meets our definition of what constitutes a rural school district.

This particular school district has been experiencing a small but constant growth in the past ten years. Although no town center is present within the district, there are two buildings that house public offices. The proximity to the urban area gives the residents a place to obtain a variety of goods and services, but they are still able to maintain a rural lifestyle. A large state recreational area separates the district from the urban area. This facility helps ensure an economic base for the residents. There is also an Indian gaming casino within the boundaries of the district. In recent years the casino has been expanding and providing additional jobs for the residents. Because of the recreational area and the casino, there has been a small but constant increase in the district's

population during the past ten years. Both the middle school and high school are located on the same parcel of land, but they maintain separate administrative staffs. No facilities are shared other than the athletic fields. The history and language of each tribe has a significant presence within the entire school district and it is also reflected in the district curriculum. Students are provided with the opportunity to study American Indian languages in both the junior and senior high school. In addition, the two Indian tribal organizations have a strong influence within the geographic area.

### **Findings**

In the process of analyzing the data, several patterns became evident in the student responses that were somewhat similar to previous studies of middle and high school students related to civic education.<sup>27</sup> The students' responses on the survey and their comments in the follow-up interviews revealed four general categories. These categories were: helping others; obeying rules and laws; patriotism/loyalty; and respect for others. They appeared in relationship to all three questions that the students were asked.

#### *What It Means To Be A Good Citizen*

Our first question included in the survey asked students to explain what it meant to be a good citizen. The data revealed that the students viewed helping others as being the most important aspect of good citizenship. Approximately 80 percent of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students and 74 percent of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade students responded that helping others was an important aspect of being a good citizen (see table #1). This theme was frequently linked to helping others in their community and tribal organizations. For example, students mentioned that a good citizen was someone who helped out in the community and helped

their neighbors. Church projects and tribal projects were a part of this category of community activities. A good citizen is a person who, “helps their friends,” “helps the elderly,” “picks up trash,” and “recycles.” A good citizen “helps organize tribal projects.” A good citizen “helps some of the younger children in the tribe.” Finally, students noted, someone who is a good citizen, “coaches sports for the kids in the community.”

**Table 1**

**Question #1: In your own words, can you tell me what it means to be a good citizen?**

**Response category: Helping others**

8 <sup>th</sup> grade			11 <sup>th</sup> grade		
n	r	%	n	r	%
(38)	30	80%	(31)	23	74%

**Response category: Follow /obey the rules/laws**

8 <sup>th</sup> grade			11 <sup>th</sup> grade		
n	r	%	n	r	%
(38)	24	63%	(31)	19	61%

**Question #2: In your own words, can you tell me if you do anything that demonstrates good citizenship?**

**Response categories: Helping others**

8 <sup>th</sup> grade			11 <sup>th</sup> grade		
n	r	%	n	r	%
(38)	25	66%	(31)	22	71%

**Response categories: Follow / obey rules / laws**

8 <sup>th</sup> grade			11 <sup>th</sup> grade		
n	r	%	n	r	%
(38)	21	55%	(31)	19	61%

**Question #3: In your own words, can you tell me what you will be doing ten years from now that demonstrates good citizenship?**

**Response category = civic activity - voting**

8 <sup>th</sup> grade			11 <sup>th</sup> grade		
n	r	%	n	r	%
(38)	18	47%	(31)	21	68%

**Response category = community service**

8 <sup>th</sup> grade			11 <sup>th</sup> grade		
n	r	%	n	r	%
(38)	16	42%	(31)	22	71%

n = total number of students in the group  
r = total number of responses by students in the group  
% = percent of responses to the group total

Obeying rules and laws was the category with the next largest number of responses. Although the responses were not as high as helping others, still almost two thirds of the students in each grade level mentioned obeying rules/laws. The highest number of responses to this category was made by 8<sup>th</sup> graders (63 percent) while the total for the 11<sup>th</sup> grade students was 61 percent (see table#1). Many of the student responses related to school rules and traffic laws. Statements characteristic of student responses as to what it meant to be a good citizen were, “drive safe, don’t drink and drive, and obey laws,” “don’t break the laws,” “don’t do drugs,” “follow the school rules in school,” and “obey all the rules and try to be involved.” An interesting comment somewhat related to this area was a comment made by one student that said, “Good citizens work to change laws that are bad.” For this student, taking an active part in the political process is an important aspect of being a good citizen.

Beyond the first two categories, the students' answers varied a great deal. Generally speaking, they fell into two categories, patriotism/loyalty and respect for others. When asked about the qualities of a good citizen, many students responded with virtuous characteristics like: "honesty," "good-hearted," "loyal," "courteous," "being polite," "being nice to others," "don't do bad things to other people," "be patriotic," "work hard," "be kind," "help other members of the tribe," "help your family," "be responsible," "mind your own business," "stay out of fights," "join the Army," "fight for your country," and "fight in Iraq." Statements related to patriotism were generally evident in the student answers; however, these kinds of comments were not as prevalent as the comments in the categories of helping others and obeying rules and laws.

#### *Demonstrating Good Citizenship*

The second question on the survey asked students, "In your own words, can you tell me if you do anything that demonstrates good citizenship?" Here again, the students overwhelmingly mentioned helping others as the main way that they could exhibit good citizenship. The responses ranged from 66 percent for 8<sup>th</sup> graders to 71 percent for 11<sup>th</sup> graders (see table #1). A large number of responses mentioned helping out with tribal, church, and school activities. Once again, tribal projects or tribal programs were activities they generally mentioned as a form of community service. Finally, a large number of students said they did chores around the house or took care of their siblings. The latter was a common response for female students.

In analyzing the responses, it was evident that many students were involved in more than just participating in a service activity. Students mentioned that they helped plan and organize the activities along with participating in them. We read and listened to

such comments as, “my friends and I worked on organizing this project where we cleaned up this area down at the lake. There was a lot of trash there, beer cans, soda cans, a lot of paper, stuff like that. We worked with the park ranger and he helped us haul the stuff away.”

Similar to the first question, obeying rules/laws was the second most stated response. An interesting series of responses were made that we categorized under obeying rules and laws. These comments were: “I don’t drink,” “I don’t do drugs,” “I don’t steal,” and “I don’t do drugs and beer.” From the students’ perspective, if you are not doing these things, you are obeying the rules and laws.

### *Future Citizenship*

The third question asked students what they anticipated doing in ten years that would demonstrate good citizenship. This seemed to be the most difficult question on the survey for students to answer. This was also true for the follow-up interviews where students’ comments were very brief. With regards to this question, 8<sup>th</sup> graders were more uncertain as to what they would be doing in ten years than 11<sup>th</sup> grade students. Many students believed that being employed was a form of citizenship and they responded to question three by discussing their intended careers. Some of the comments the students made were: “Following my job’s rules;” “Work hard and support my family;” “Take care of my grandma;” “I want to be a policeman;” “I will work at the lake;” “I’m going to college and want to be a doctor and help people;” “I will be a teacher;” “I am going to be an electrician;” and “I will be in the army and work on computers.” In addition to the specific examples, some students indicated general leadership roles in the community.



Comments such as “I will help organize tribal projects” and “get my friends to work on the football field” expressed a commitment to leadership and community service.

Of the four categories developed out of the student responses (helping others, obeying rules, and laws; patriotism/loyalty; and respect for others), the most commonly mentioned activity that the students would be doing in the future was community service. An important element of citizenship, voting, was mentioned by both groups of students (see table #1). Typical students responses were, “I will probably be voting” as a citizenship activity. Still others made statements such as: “I will obey the laws and vote;” “I will run for a political office and vote;” and “I will vote as a tribal member;” and “I will run for a tribal leadership position.” During the follow-up interviews, students were asked questions that probed the political side of citizenship. Other than voting for the president, governor, and state officials and tribal officials, there was not much depth to their comments. Students seemed to have a hard time relating to political engagement as an element of citizenship.

The last component of the research study involved interviewing the two teachers whose students we surveyed and interviewed as part of this study. Informal interviews with the teachers lasted between 20 and 30 minutes where they responded first to how they thought the students would answer the questions and then commented on the actual student responses. Generally, the teachers thought their students would comment more about voting and other forms of political engagement that represent good citizenship. However, the fact that their students focused on helping others did not surprise them. “My students do a lot of work in helping their families. It’s part of who they are” (teacher #1). “These kids come from Indian families who are real close. They live right

next door to their grandparents, and brothers and sisters, they're all close" (teacher #1). "These kids have grown up together; they all know one another's families" (teacher #2). They were pleased that their students cared about one another and the people in the community. Both teachers emphasized that they taught about government in their classrooms, and the students had to know about it for the state exams. As one teacher put it, "I know they know about it; they just don't see it affecting them, but it really does" (teacher #1). Or as the other teacher said, "When they start paying taxes, they'll get involved" (teacher #2).

The teachers also discussed how they involved their students in understanding government and citizenship. They both mentioned that they lectured, had class discussions, and class activities. During election years, they spent a significant amount of time discussing the candidates and political campaigns. The 11<sup>th</sup> grade teacher invited local politicians to speak to his students. He also had tribal leaders come and speak about tribal government. Both teachers talked about encouraging divergent opinions and having students develop strong arguments based on research. However, they were also aware of the school and community attitudes toward controversial issues. This echoes what Gundra said about schools discouraging non-conformity.<sup>28</sup>

### **Discussion**

The survey, student interviews, and teacher interviews revealed some interesting information regarding the American Indian students' concept of what constitutes good citizenship. Rather than focusing on political engagement, these students saw good citizenship as directly related to community and tribal service. This finding supports previous research related to students' views of community service versus political

participation. Research by Flanagan and Faison explored the problem of getting high school students to link community service to political participation.<sup>29</sup> Students believed that they could make a difference by volunteering but did not feel they could have an impact politically. Galston's study of rural, urban and suburban students concluded that, "most young people characterized their volunteering as an alternative to official politics, which they see as corrupt, ineffective, and unrelated to their deeper ideals. They have confidence in personalized acts with consequences they see for themselves; they have no confidence in collective acts....."<sup>30</sup> We have also concluded that the American Indian students in our study have not made the connection between the civic and political engagement.

This focus on community and service by American Indian Students relates to MacIntyre's, Turner's, and Conover and Searing's views of good citizenship. It also incorporates two types of Westheimer and Kahne's portrayals of good citizens: that of the personally responsible citizen and the participatory citizen.<sup>31</sup>

We also realized that the nature of rural schools and the communities they are a part of may have an influence on the American Indian students' attitudes towards citizenship. The community-school tie is strong in many ways. Rural schools are never just a place to receive instruction. School facilities are often the only public building in the area and serve in many capacities. A school can serve as a polling place, a community event center, a meeting place for a 4-H clubs, a shelter during a storm, and a location for a variety of other community activities. Close cooperation between the community and school district was typical in districts surveyed by Roan Herzog and Pittman. There is also the sense of belonging that is evident in small schools. Cotton

reports, "... in small schools, everyone is needed to populate teams, offices and clubs; thus, even shy and less able students are encouraged to participate and made to feel they belong".<sup>32</sup> Thus, we recognize the possible influence this had on how our students' developed their attitudes and values related to civic engagement.

The political aspects of citizenship were not as evident in the American Indian students' comments as were comments regarding community or tribal activities. Very few times did the terms "nation" or "country" (in reference to the United States) appear on their surveys or during the interviews. 11<sup>th</sup> grade students were more apt to focus on political engagement (voting and running for political office) than 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. 68 percent of the 11<sup>th</sup> graders mentioned voting and politics while only 47 percent of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students mentioned that good citizenship related to voting or politics. Previous research regarding rural students by Martin and Chiodo revealed lower levels of political engagement, while research by Conover and Searing and Torney-Purta who surveyed urban, suburban, and rural high school students obtained results similar to this study.<sup>33</sup> This type of engagement is usually associated with taking an interest in politics and working on political campaigns or actively supporting political issues. What is interesting in our study is that many of the comments related to political engagement were related to tribal government.

The American Indian students in this study related many aspects of good citizenship to tribal activities. These were usually civic activities such as helping other Indian families and community functions that benefited members of their tribe. Voting and running for political office and engaging in political activities were many times equated to the local tribal organization. For many students this was related to the local

tribal organization. Some students related this to more of a national tribal participation (Chickasaw or Choctaw Nation legislative body). However, we were unable to clearly differentiate student comments related to civic engagement.

The role of the tribal organizations in this community is strong, and it is not uncommon for these students and their families to participate in local civic and political activities related to their tribe. The tribal organizations also have a large economic presence in the community. The Chickasaw Nation gaming casino is one of the largest in the state and provides jobs for many family members of these students. Thus, the impact of tribal civic and political action is a major factor in this community's existence, and it is evident in both the students' ideas of community and political service.

In viewing the data, there were no major differences in the responses between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade students. Generally speaking, the written responses and oral interviews provided responses that seemed to be fairly consistent. 11<sup>th</sup> grade students tended to respond in more detail in writing their answers on the questionnaire as well as when responding in the interviews than the eighth grade students. In many cases, 8<sup>th</sup> grade students defined citizenship as just "being good." They also used these same terms in answering the second and third questions related to how they correctly demonstrate citizenship and what they will do ten years from now that demonstrates good citizenship. However, the absence of more written detail and oral responses by the 8<sup>th</sup> graders may be simply attributed to a lack of maturity.

The comments by American Indian students' in this study also suggested that they had some difficulty in visualizing how they would demonstrate citizenship as future citizens. The nebulous answers received on the third question of this survey supports

Conover and Searing's idea that high school students do not have a clear picture of themselves as active citizens in the future. Conover and Searing concluded that students would not be civic-minded in the future unless they can foresee themselves doing specific activities. Likewise, several previous research studies regarding citizenship have revealed that in the minds of high school students, the social responsibilities supersede political responsibilities.<sup>34</sup>

However, the fact that these students did not embrace the political engagement to the extent they participated in the civic engagement may not be cause for alarm. Both the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade students stated a variety of ways in which they were involved in civic engagement. On the questionnaires and during the interviews, students explained how they took an active part in their school, community, and tribal functions. Previous studies by Kirlin; Beck and Jennings; Verba, Schlozman and Brady; Stolle and Hooghe; and Kirlin all suggest a strong relationship between adolescent extra curricular activities and adult political and civic behaviors. Flanagan also argues that everyday activities of adolescents are important to the formation of civic values and political views. She considers civic and political socialization as "... integrally related to other aspects of human development (such as the formation of identity, values, and social ties to others)."<sup>35</sup> However, we were unable to discern the depth of these types of participation. We could not conclude if these students were functioning at a level to which Westheimer and Kahne would label as the "justice oriented citizen."<sup>36</sup>

In this study we have categorized and labeled the students' responses into separate groups. However, we realize that there is a relationship between them. The political and civic engagement work together. Thus, civic engagement may provide the foundation for

the political engagement that may occur as these students grow older. Youniss, McLellan, and Yates also support this viewpoint. They argue that the organizations that middle and high school students participate in create a “civic identity” and that these organizations “introduce youth to the basic roles and processes required for adult political engagement.”<sup>37</sup> In a multi-generational study by Jennings and Stoker, it was reported that the roots of adult political participation are planted in pre-adult experiences but, more importantly, the impact of the participation may not be felt until the individuals are in their 30s and 40s.<sup>38</sup>

As educators, we must also keep in mind that junior and senior high school students are limited when it comes to political engagement. There are few political opportunities in which students can participate. The reality is that they can’t vote in a political election, and they can’t run for a political office. Voting and politics are activities that may occur in the future, and students are really not focusing on them at the present time. The teachers we interviewed reinforced this conclusion. They all reported teaching about the American governmental system and the role of the citizen within the system. They actively involved these students in political debates and had politicians and tribal leaders participate in their classrooms. Yet, they all agreed their students don’t make a strong connection with their future regarding what they have learned.

As we have asserted in previous studies on citizenship, the behaviors of these American Indian students and others whose perspectives we have researched, may be age appropriate.<sup>39</sup> At ages 13 to 16, citizenship translates into activities that focus on the civic aspects of the concept. Later in life when one buys a house, raises a family, and pays taxes to local, state, and national government, the political side of citizenship becomes

more meaningful. Our assertion is based on our findings compared to a variety of somewhat similar studies regarding adolescences that have reported related conclusions.<sup>40</sup>

It should also be noted that we are not advocating that schools discontinue student activities related to political engagement. The knowledge and skills related to the political engagement are important to our students' future. What we are saying is that American Indian students may be developing a solid foundation regarding good citizenship through the development of civic engagement activities. As teachers, we must continue to stress both aspects of citizenship. We must find ways to make political engagement more meaningful to our students. Because civic engagement requires active participation by students, it may be useful to also apply this teaching method to the political side of citizenship. Research presented by Hahn has shown that active discussion and debate along with making connections to the students' lives has been an effective strategy in civic education.<sup>41</sup> The Center for Information and Research and Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) advocates six approaches for civic education which include simulations and student participation in school governance.<sup>42</sup> These strategies have the potential to actively engage students in civic and political understandings. New curriculum materials that engage students in active learning also need to be incorporated into civics classrooms. Studying the role of the citizen in the governmental system needs to be taught along with the structure of government.

### **Implications for Future Research**

In trying to understand American Indian students' concept of good citizenship, we realized the complexity of the situation. The relationship of the school, community, and tribal governments creates many nuances that we were unable to study in this research



project. For the students in this study, political socialization takes place within these three entities and we have wrestled with what effect they have had on our students.

A previous study by Conover and Searing asked students in urban, suburban, and rural communities, “When they hear the word ‘citizen’, what do they think of first?” The majority of students in the rural community said a citizen is “a member of the community”, while urban and suburban students said a citizen is “a person who has legal rights.”<sup>43</sup> What is revealed here is the importance of the local culture in influencing the understanding of the practice of citizenship. We hope that researchers will continue to explore the relationship between communities and civic development.

School culture is also important in how students develop their concept of good citizenship. What is the role of the high school in contributing to students’ sense of citizenship and nurturing their practice of it? Schools provide students with an opportunity to experience community. R. Freeman Butts argues that schools are the “training grounds for acquiring the sense of community that will hold the political system together.”<sup>44</sup> We need to find out to what extent schools are developing the practice of citizenship.

Finally, one of the most interesting aspects of this research study was the influence of the tribal organizations on the students’ concept of good citizenship. Historically, tribal organizations have inculcated their young people into the culture and organization of the tribe. The results of this process can be seen in the many comments made by the American Indian students regarding community and political activities associated with tribal affairs. We realize that the historical aspects of limiting franchise to American Indians may still have some effect on these students’ lack of interest in state

and national politics while reinforcing their interest in tribal affairs. Another explanation for low interest in politics is that “self-interested, competitive politics are not consistent with American Indian traditions of cooperation and seeking the benefit of the whole community.”<sup>45</sup> We think that this is an important area of research that needs to be explored.

### **Conclusion**

Our study revealed a positive picture of a group of American Indian students regarding the concept of good citizenship. These students seemed to be altruistic and believed that good citizenship is best defined as service to others in their community and tribe. Their responses did not reveal a sense of greed, selfishness, or apathy which previous studies by Damon indicated regarding high school students.<sup>46</sup> Rather they had a strong sense of civic engagement that was at the basis of their concept of good citizenship. It is our belief that this strong element of civic engagement bodes well for the American Indian students in our study. Their efforts have been valuable in improving life in the tribe and in the local community.

For these students, the political side of citizenship was not as strong as the civic side. However, they did express some desire to become politically active in the future, especially in relationship to tribal activities. As they grow older, we believe that political participation will become a more important part of their life. A recent study by Chapin seems to support this contention. Analyzing 8<sup>th</sup> grade students voting and community participation 12 years later, Chapin found that comparing data from 1994 to 2000 voter registration, voting in a presidential election, and voting in any election increased.<sup>47</sup> This

pattern was consistent with the established patterns of adult voting as individuals get older.

Our Founding Fathers' perception of citizenship was moral. They believed that the success of the nation depended on the character, self-reliance, and responsibility of the citizens.<sup>48</sup> We have witnessed this sense of "civic virtue" in the written statements and oral comments of the American Indian students we surveyed and interviewed in this study. However, we should not become complacent and think our job is done. As educators we must continue to work with all our students to ensure that their civic and political activity continues to grow and flourishes in our democratic society.

Finally, we also wish to encourage our fellow researchers to continue to try and unravel American Indian students' concept of citizenship. We have tried to present one side of the equation. More research needs to take place to explain how both tribal and U.S. citizenship manifests in American Indian youth.

## NOTES

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