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Creating an Education Pipeline: Training American Indian Teachers

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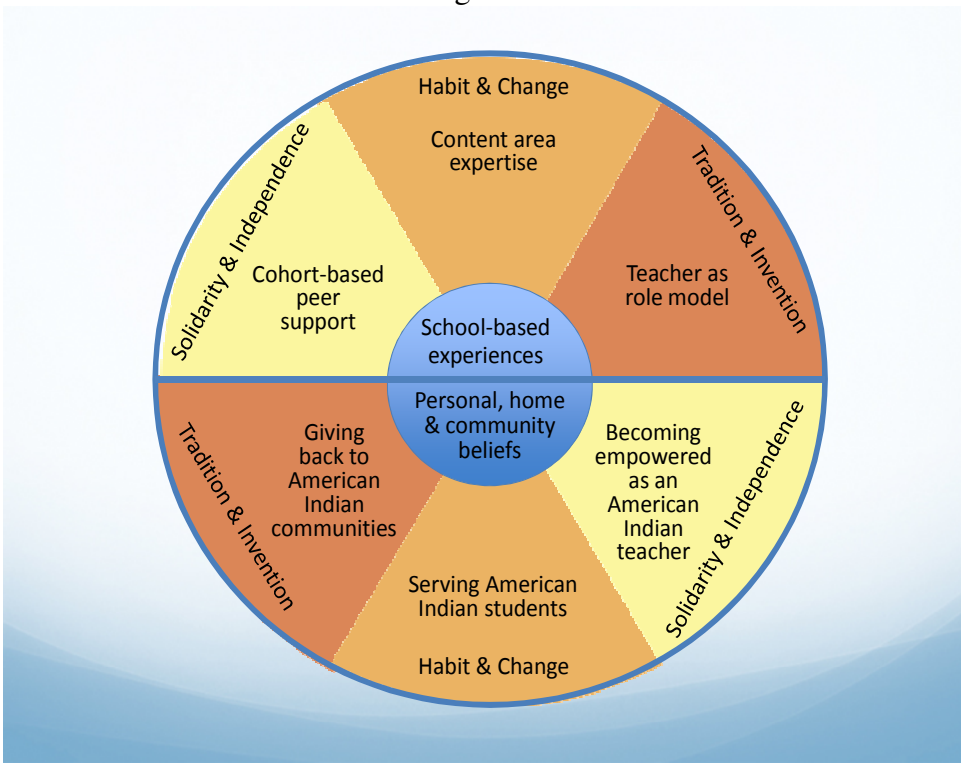
How can we design effective American Indian teacher education programs? As Beaulieu and colleagues (2005) observed, "Indigenous control of education has become policy over the past forty years. What that education looks like is still an issue" (p. 38). A recent case study (Exton, 2008) took a unique route to program analysis which focused on how the participants in an American Indian teacher training program (secondary education, grades 7-12) developed a sense of teacher identity. Participants included Ute and Navajo teachers.

Developing an identity as a teacher is more than a natural process of professional maturation; it is "an important part of securing teachers' commitment to their work and adherence to professional norms of practice" (Hammerness et al., 2005, p. 383). In other words, pre-service teachers who develop a core sense of professional purpose are more likely to become effective and reliable teachers. The findings and recommendations drawn from this study can provide suggestions for the design and implementation of future American Indian teacher education programs.

Figure 1



The Exton study found six factors which contributed to developing teacher identity during and after the Ute Teacher Training Program (UTTP). The first three factors (**personal, home, and community beliefs**) are 1) giving back to American Indian communities, 2) serving American Indian students, and 3) becoming empowered as American Indian teachers. The next three factors (**school-based experiences**) are 4) cohort-based peer support, 5) preparation for content area expertise, and 6) teachers as role models. The wheel of emergent patterns (Figure 1) shows that personal, home and community beliefs formed the foundation of teacher identity for the American Indian participants of this study.

Personal, home, and community beliefs

Case study participants noted the importance of giving back to their reservation communities through teaching and mentoring. They often asked themselves if they were living

up to community expectations: "Did you fulfill what you were supposed to fulfill? Are you teaching our Native American students? Are you giving back to our Tribe?" (Exton, 2008, p. 56). They noted the importance of serving specific student populations by using culturally-appropriate teaching strategies and creating the necessary materials to engage their students. Finally, participants reported the significance of personal empowerment outside their own classrooms through attendance at national and regional education conferences.

A negative finding about personal, home, and community beliefs was that participants in the case study faced similar challenges to those experienced by American Indian teachers in federal boarding schools during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Gere, 2005): 1) initially feeling isolated in reservation schools after graduating from predominantly white colleges, or as Gere noted, existing outside both White & Indian worlds, 2) initially teaching with minimal culturally-appropriate curriculum materials, 2) finding themselves in the minority as Indian teachers in schools serving American Indian students.

School-based experiences

Three additional factors emerged as factors in developing a sense of teacher identity: the courses (content area expertise) and the cohort (peer support), combined with an underlying emphasis on being an educated role model within reservation communities. Becoming a role model was both an honor and a challenge. As one participant explained, "Being part of that teacher training program, the eye is always on you. No matter what I do, that is always there in my head: I need to be this role model; I need to be an example."

The school-based factors correspond to what Gilbert (2008) named as the three cornerstones of Indian education: rigor, relationships, and relevance. University courses provided academic challenge, the cohort provided much-needed social and emotional support, and the opportunity to become role models for young people provided relevance. Relationships within the cohort were strengthened outside of university courses by attendance at NIEA conferences and grant-funded summer programs designed for immersion in culturally relevant pedagogy and practice. These opportunities helped participants develop networks of support which lasted into the first year of their professional careers, a time when many beginning teachers across the curriculum lack formal support systems (Kardos & Johnson, 2007).

A negative finding about school-based experiences was that the "one size fits all" teacher education program, such as the one which housed this program, was not an ideal context. The curriculum was a regular secondary teacher education program run by the partnering university. Exposure to issues of cultural relevance at school was largely incidental, outside of a required Multicultural Foundations course. Opportunities to observe and discuss culturally relevant practices were primarily introduced by the program administrator through extra-curricular conference participation and summer enrichment programs.

Conclusion

One of the most significant lessons from Exton's research is about program continuity: there will be gaps in the pipeline of American Indian teachers as long as tribes are dependent on competitive government grants to support teacher education programs. The program studied by Exton from 2002 to 2005 was funded for a renewable 3-year program. It ended after three years, leaving participants in their first year of teaching without the structured mentoring that helped sustain them during the program. The closure of the teacher education program occurred despite overwhelming support within the reservation community for increasing the number of American

Indian teachers.

Community partnerships for specific American Indian teacher education grant cycles have been developed many times across the country since the landmark *Indian Education: A National Tragedy—A National Challenge* advocated recruiting and training American Indian teachers as a priority strategy for improving Indian education (Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, 1969). In the last forty years, however, few post-secondary programs outside of Tribal Colleges have produced consistent numbers of American Indian teachers. Many reservation schools continue to hire temporary and sometimes poorly-prepared teachers to fill in the gaps. In order to build a pipeline of effective American Indian teachers and to encourage longer professional commitments in reservation schools, American Indian teacher education and para-professional-to-teacher programs have to become an ongoing priority.

The take-away message is that community partnerships between tribes, school districts, colleges and universities, and business leaders need to be maintained for long-term educational goals. Training American Indian teachers is an investment in the diversity of all communities.

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