

“And We Were a Unit”: Urban American Indian Youth Perspectives on Act 31

by

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Abstract

Wisconsin mandates that public schools teach about the history, culture, and sovereignty of the American Indian tribes and bands in the state. To gain insight into the experiences of American Indian youth in Wisconsin schools, in this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 urban American Indian youth who ranged from eighth grade to two years post-graduation. This dissertation is divided into three papers. The introductory paper provides historical background on Indian Education, particularly challenges faced by urban American Indian youth and my concerns with the implementation of Act 31. In paper two, focusing on the context in which “Native peoples” (in Wisconsin or elsewhere) are presented in the classroom, I draw from my interviews with students to document what they recollect about being taught about Native peoples. My goal is to understand the efficacy of Act 31 from the point of view of Native students’ experiences in the schools. The majority of students reported that Native peoples are presented stereotypically and/or as people from the past and that typically, the information that is shared, is inaccurate. In paper three, I focus primarily on students’ reflections on the text and video resources that were used in their classes to teach about Native peoples. Using narrative analysis, I explore the consequences for Native students of “relative invisibility” and “points of validation.” Results from students’ stories (“I felt attacked,” “I felt isolated”) indicate that they are harmed by the negative or inaccurate portrayals of *themselves* in the schools. While students reported few stories of feeling validated at school, their insights provide guidance for educators on how to create spaces and places for positive learning experiences.

Acknowledgements

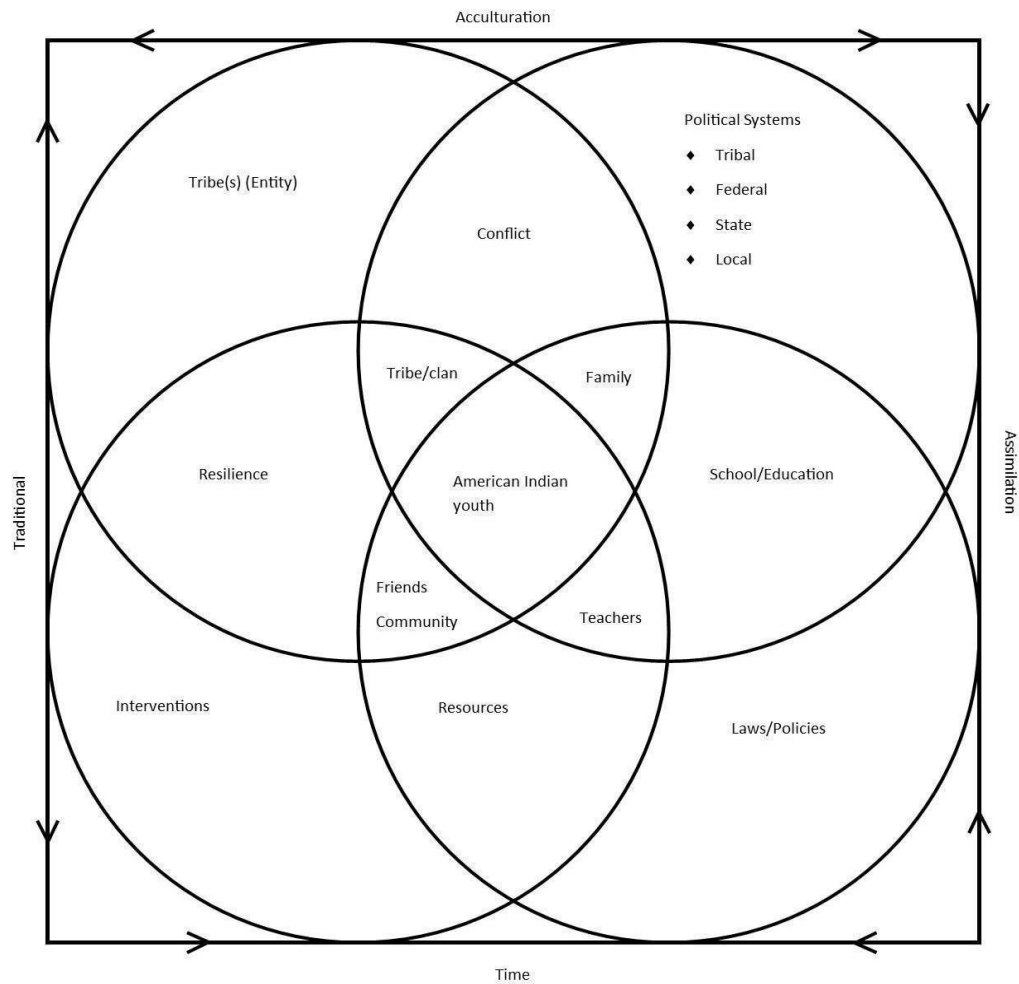
I would like to acknowledge the traditional and ancestral homelands of the Ho-Chunk Nation on which I live, work and go to school. I would like to thank my family and friends for always being there for me, your support means everything to me. I am grateful to my husband who stood by my side and held me together when I thought I would fall apart. Thank you for giving me space, time, and support to take on this endeavor. I would like to thank all of the teachers and professors who have helped me along the way. I would not be at this point without your help. I will continue to reflect on the ways that each of you have encouraged me and provided me with guidance. I want to thank my dissertation committee who believed in me when I did not believe in myself. Each and every one of you helped me along in my journey. It was a long road but we did it together. And I would like to thank all of the students and parents who took part in the interviews. We need change and you shared your words to help make that happen. Yakoke.

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My Mind Map



This mind map grounds me in the work that I do which is primarily focused on urban Native youth. My work is largely focused on the influences connected to them through school/education, teachers, resources, and interventions. The image is added here as a visual reminder of the work that I do.

Introduction

As parents, we all want the best for our children and we do all we can to ensure that they grow up healthy, happy, and whole. As American Indian¹ parents, we want to ensure that they know who they are and where they come from. And we know that there is a chance—because it happens often with our children—that they will come home from school and tell us that they do not want to go to school anymore or that they do not want to be “Indian” anymore. Indeed, American Indian young people have among the worse educational outcomes including dropout rates²—and even worse with respect to mental health, the highest suicide rates³—of any young people in this country.

¹ Although I will use “Native,” “Native American,” “American Indian,” and “Indian” in this paper as collective terms to refer to the Indigenous peoples of this continent, it should be noted that, as of November 2020, there are 574 federally recognized Native nations, 66 state-recognized Native nations and countless hundreds of Indigenous nations fighting for federal and state recognition. Each nation has its own culture, traditions, languages, norms and practices. While there may be many similarities across tribal nations there is also much diversity based on their historical and cultural ties, linguistic histories, and geographic regions.

² According to The National Center for Educational Statistics (2017), we learn that Native youth are absent more, suspended more, drop out more and graduate less than their white counterparts. For example: In 2015, 68% of Native youth had 1-10+ absences, whereas 56% of white youth had 1-10+ absences (For more information see page 54). In 2011-2012, 7.8% of Native youth (girls and boys combined) were suspended, whereas 6.4% of white youth were suspended. When divided by gender both Native girls and Native boys have higher suspensions than white boys and white girls. (For more information see page 70). In 2014, 12% of Native youth (girls and boys combined) dropped out, whereas 6% of white youth dropped out. When divided by gender both Native girls and Native boys have higher dropout rates than white girls and white boys. (For more information, see page 79). In 2015, 82% of Native youth completed high school, whereas 95% of white youth completed high school. (For more information, see page 84). In Wisconsin, we can look to the Wisconsin Information System for Education Data Dashboard. Here we see similar trends in attendance, suspensions, dropout and completion rates as the national level. For the Madison Metropolitan School District, and specifically for Title VII students (2014-2015 school year), while we see the same trends in attendance and suspension rates, we see a slightly higher graduation rate. (Information on dropouts was not included.) (McCready, 2015).

³ The Centers for Disease Control, for years 2003-2014, reports suicide among 10-24 year olds was 35.7% (same aged white youth was 11.1%). <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/wr/pdfs/mm6708a1-H.pdf>

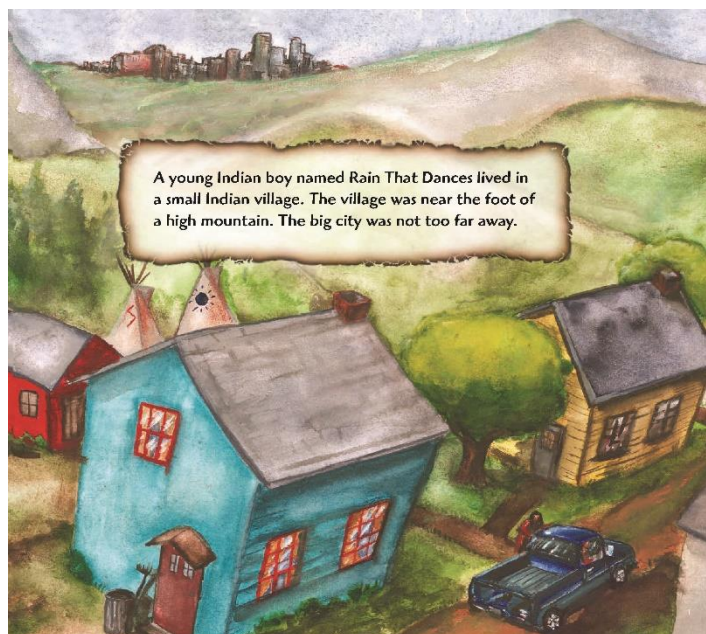
Once, at my youngest child's daycare, I found a book that was primarily about dinosaurs. But on one page, there was an image of an "Indian," looking like a caveman, wielding a club. After I brought it to her attention, the director agreed that this book was inappropriate and removed it. On another occasion, I asked that she request of parents that their children not come to school wearing race-based Halloween costumes. I was practicing being more proactive. I was trying to be better at protecting my kids from stereotypical images. I was on top of things, or so I thought.

And then this happened. My youngest child had not even started kindergarten. One evening, just before bedtime, I was reading a book to him entitled, "Through the Eyes of the Eagle" by Georgia Perez (2010). I began reading the story, "A young Indian boy named Rain That Dances lived in a small Indian village. The village was near the foot of a high mountain. The big city was not too far away" (p. 7).

And my son said to me, something I will always remember: "The Indians will probably kill everyone."

I am Indian. My children are Indian. My family is Indian. Our community is Indian. Yet somehow, my Indian child

thought that "Indians" went around "killing everyone." He has been surrounded by his culture since birth, has been dancing at powwows since the time he could walk, and his large extended family is made up mostly of Indian people. Where did he get this image of



Through the Eyes of the Eagle by Georgia Perez (2010)

Indians? What could have caused him at such a young age to think that a picture book portraying an Indian child in a small village would somehow attack and “kill everyone”?

Statement of the Problem

One must remember that Indian people survived on this continent thousands of years before the arrival of the Europeans. Like all people in the world, to survive as a group there has to be an existing educational system to pass down the knowledge of the group from one generation to the next, and traditional systems can pass on knowledge preserved for decades, and even centuries (Juneau, 2001, p. 5).

It was not always this way. For American Indian peoples, since time immemorial, storytelling has been, and continues to be, central to our existence. Prior to colonization, American Indian young people were educated by their elders and through observing the world around them. All aspects of necessary information were passed down orally, while practical applications were learned through imitation and practiced using hands-on training. Both elements would help ensure that all children possessed the knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills needed for their people to survive and thrive.

However, this traditional form of education drastically changed upon contact and its ensuing colonization “the process by which a people exploit and/or annex the lands and resources of another without their consent and unilaterally expand political power over them” (Porter, 2005, p. 108). In Brayboy’s Tribal Critical Race Theory (2013), he refers to colonization as “the idea that European American thought, knowledge, economic structures, and power structures dominate and frame present-day society in the United States” (p. 92).

For the last 500 years, the dominant culture has imposed its education system onto Native peoples in attempts to force them to assimilate (Juneau, 2001). Lomawaima (1999) contends, “Historically, the goals of the colonial education of American Indians have been to transform Indian people and societies and to eradicate Indian self-government, self-determination, and self-education” (p. 4).

As the Europeans spread across the continent, the process of “intrusion” (Bill, as cited in Juneau, 2001, p. 7) by missionaries began to chip away at traditional education. “Tribal education systems were being broken from the time of contact (early 1500s) to at least 1871, which marked the end of the treaty-making process between the United States government and Indian Tribes” (Bill, as cited in Juneau, 2001, p. 7). The new form of “Indian education” was problematic all around. In the colonizing process the goal is to subjugate and subordinate its people. “As colonization was inflicted upon Native Peoples, the assertion of cultural imperialism in conjunction with colonization laid the foundation for assimilation and cultural genocide” (Haynes, 2008, p. 6). The traditional and practical education discussed above—and its practical application was based on the ecology of humans living interdependently with the natural environment where their tribal group lived. The settler imposed form of education—formal education and classical ideas alienated from the local place with no connection to or respect for humans living interdependently with other forms of life in their local habitat and schooled in learning that was devoid of practice.

As Chief Canassatego of the Onondaga Nation, speaking on behalf of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, addressed William and Mary College in 1774:

We know that you highly esteem the kind of learning taught in those colleges, and that the maintenance of our young men while with you would be very expensive

to you. We are convinced that you mean to do to us good by your proposal, and we thank you heartily. But you who are wise must know that different nations have different conceptions of things, and you will, therefore, not take it amiss if our ideas of this kind of education happen not to be the same with yours.

We have had experience of it. Several of our young people were formerly brought up at the College of the Northern provinces. They were instructed in all your sciences. But when they came back to us, they were bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the Woods... Neither fit for Hunters, Warriors, nor Counsellors, they were totally good for nothing.

We are however not the less obliged for your kind offer, tho' we decline accepting it; and to show our grateful Sense of it, if the Gentlemen of Virginia shall send us a Dozen of their Sons, we will take great care of their Education, instruct them in all we know, and make Men of them. (as cited in Juneau, 2001, pp. 18-19)

Brief Overview of Indian Education

Federal Indian Education policy began during United States President George Washington's first term in office. In 1792, the United States established a treaty with the Seneca Nation and, two years later, with the Oneida, Tuscarora, and Stockbridge Indians (Juneau, 2001). Provisions for formal education were part of the treaty-making negotiations, which were part of the United States government's policies to "civilize the Indians." The tool of "education" was used for colonization, religious indoctrination, assimilation, and land acquisition. In addition to educational provisions, treaties often included land cessions, annuity payments, hunting and

fishing rights, a guarantee of peace as well as a statement of allegiance from the tribes and protection for them (Juneau, 2001).

Some two hundred years after Canassatego's trenchant words, people are still talking and writing about the many flaws in what is known as "Indian education." For instance, in 1978, Indian Educator of the Year, Tom Thompson, noted:

From the arrival of the white man up until the last two decades, Indian education has rested in the hands of church and state. Through their combined influence, the Native American has been systematically denied his Native identity. Two eras emerge: the period of missionary domination from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, and the period of federal government domination from the late nineteenth until the mid-twentieth century. (as cited in Juneau, 2001, p. 18)

Although there was a mismatch in educational practices, white governmental policies such as the Indian Civilization Fund Act of 1819 pushed for western modes of education "to instruct them (Indian children) in the mode of agriculture suited to their situation; and for teaching their children in reading, writing, and arithmetic" (as cited in Juneau, 2001, p. 11). This policy encouraged "benevolent societies" (p. 11) to take on this educational charge that would be formalized through Indian Boarding Schools. These modes of agriculture also ultimately destroyed the natural ecology—so the policy was to destroy the Indian and their relationship to the land.

One of the most notorious ways of destroying Native ways and taking the land was the establishment of the Indian boarding schools. In 1879, Brigadier General of the United States Army, Richard Henry Pratt, established the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Pratt summarized its purpose in remarks to the World Baptist Convention in 1883: "In Indian civilization I am a

Baptist, because I believe in immersing the Indians in our civilization, and when we get them under holding them there until they are thoroughly soaked” (Upstander Project, para. 3).

At another convention, in 1892, Pratt said that he agreed with the sentiment that “the only good Indian is a dead one,” (Upstander Project, para 4) by which he meant the death of their culture: “that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man” (Upstander Project, para. 4). To do so, Pratt’s design and process was total annihilation of language and culture and assimilation of Indian children into settler culture. In boarding schools this goal was achieved through the most brutal conditions. The reality of the conditions in the Indian boarding schools ranged from mere neglect and abuse to absolute brutality: murders, tortures, and sexual assaults were common (The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, n.d.).

To assimilate the children, to “kill the Indian...,” all parts of their identities were stripped away from them: their languages, their spiritual beliefs and practices, everything that made them who they were: their hair, their clothes, their languages (The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, n.d.). It was not an easy task to strip them of everything. Children would not easily surrender. Everything that shaped them into who they were had to be taken away. They were regularly beaten into submission for speaking their languages. They had lye soap pressed into their mouths. They were denied food. They were separated from their siblings. “Some schools had cells or dungeons where students were confined for days and given only bread and water” (Lajimodiere, 2017, p. 8). Carlisle Indian Industrial School was one example but there were hundreds of Indian boarding schools⁴. In addition to destroying their culture,

⁴ According to National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition in the United States, there were 357 Indian boarding schools in 30 states by 1926 in the United States (National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition).

boarding schools trained the children for the lowest rungs in the economic ladder: The boys were trained in low-wage industrial work and the girls in low-wage domestic work.

Indian boarding schools in the United States began closing after the 1928 Meriam Report, which documented the horrible health and working conditions that would not have met—even minimally—the child labor laws of the time. The revelations of the horrid conditions led to public outcry which forced boarding schools to close. In their place, government controlled day schools were established locally (Lajimodiere, 2016). While there was some hopes for “progressive education” from 1929-1950’s to help American Indian students regain or hold onto traditional ways (see Watras, 2004), the next decade refocused on other assimilation policies aimed which continued to impact education for American Indians. The Termination and Indian Relocation policies in the 1950s (see Walters, n.d., for more detail) created a mass exodus of American Indians from their home communities to large cities. Whereas in the 1930s, barely 10% percent of American Indians lived in urban areas, it is estimated that 100,000 American Indians (Snipp, 1996) were “encouraged, enticed and coerced to relocate from their home reservations to urban areas that promised to have greater job opportunities and economic sustenance” (NCUIH History Revised, 2012) for selected major urban cities under the Urban Indian Relocation Program. However, with no social services or training programs, transition was difficult including for school aged youth. In addition to people moving to the cities, the Termination policies forced many of the government controlled day schools to close and students began attending the local public schools (Hornback, 2019).

White America—with decades of propaganda including that which was taught formally in classrooms—continued to hold onto racist beliefs about American Indians. For many states, textbooks provide students with “misconceptions, myths, inaccuracies and stereotypes about

Indians are common to the curriculum of most schools” (Kennedy Report, 1969, p. 23). Leary (2018) made it clear that curricular policies set by national, state and local levels “served to constrain opportunities to learn even the most basic information about American Indian history, culture, and tribal sovereignty” (p. 103) resulting in representations that “are characterized by absences and problematic presences such that American Indians are largely invisible and stereotypically portrayed when they are included” (p. 103).

While the Stockbridge Indians were one of the first tribes for whom education was included in their treaty, in 1961, a Stockbridge-Munsee tribal citizen criticized this system of education. At the American Indian Chicago Conference, Elmer L. Davids addressed the ‘white public’s lack of understanding of American Indian issues by posing a question to the audience: “Is it fair to the Indian to use the textbooks in our public schools that tend to justify the acts of early settlers and make the poor Indian, resisting in proud self-defense, a culprit and a savage?” (Leary, 2018, p. ix). The United States Department of Education (1991) acknowledged the many problems that American Indian students face, “Our schools have failed to nurture the intellectual development and academic performance” (p. 1) including “overt and subtle racism” (p. 8), “an unfriendly school climate that fails to promote academic, social, cultural, and spiritual development (p. 7), and “curriculum presented from a purely Western (European) perspective, ignoring all that the historical perspectives on American Indians and Alaska Natives” (p. 8).

Modern Challenges for Urban Native Youth

All tribal nations face the sheer necessity of holding on to what they have and revitalizing their traditional practices. That challenge is especially difficult in light of the fact that many members of tribes are dispersed and have few opportunities to connect with their homelands, traditions, or elders. Generally, about a third of American Indian people live on reservations or

tribal lands, another third live in the towns bordering reservations or tribal lands, and the final third live in urban areas typically far from their tribal homelands. Even in places in which American Indian people have large concentrations, such as in Los Angeles and Phoenix, they still make up less than two percent of the population. With no critical mass, American Indians are often an “invisible minority” (Carr, 1996).

And young Native people of school age, who are, in effect, “invisible micro-minorities,” face multiple additional challenges in developing their Native identities. Separation from their tribal communities and decreased access to tribal resources make the opportunities for Native youth living in urban areas even more difficult:

There is now a whole generation of Indians who have been born, raised and socialized in the city.... A great many city raised Indians are not distinctively Indian in the way that they behave or the way that they think about things.... I'm not sure in my mind if Indians can exist as city people. The city really cuts one off from the natural world. Can the Indian's sacred world continue in a world of concrete and automobiles? (Thomas, as cited in Straus and Valentine, 1998)

As already noted, Native people represent a very small demographic in most urban areas. Native youth in urban settings are exposed to many different cultures, including the dominant culture. As a micro-minority in an urban area, they need proactive means to learn about and feel a sense of pride in their own Native ways of being in the world (Churchill, 2014; Stumblingbear-Riddle, & Romans, 2012). Learning traditional ways through cultural activities is a source of cultural strength for American Indian communities (House, Stiffman, & Brown, 2006). While some Native youth may have access to traditional knowledge through family, many Native youth in urban settings may have limited options for traditional knowledge acquisition available to

them. However, Byington's (2015) study found that participation in cultural programs designed specifically for American Indian youth can be a viable way for urban Native youth to gain access to cultural knowledge. For example, one middle school youth shared how participation made him feel:

It kind of makes me feel more, like, self-aware like when you are learning about [Native culture] and you know that was your ancestors, your people that did that, it kind of makes you feel more like you are part of some continuity as an Indigenous person in this city. In this [city] environment, you kind of feel like there is no continuity, like, I have no part in making this but if you go to what your ancestors were doing and what people before you were doing that were just, that were just like you in a physical way, you can kind of sense, like, I had some impact—my people had some impact at one point. (Byington, 2015, p. 41)

In addition to the challenge of finding opportunities to connect with their culture, urban American Indian teens struggle with their ethnic identities because, more often than not, mainstream society does not present them in positive ways. In her in-depth study of seven Native youth, Lucero (2010) concluded that there were four stages urban American Indians go through in understanding what it means to be who they are as American Indians: the struggle, the catalyst, going back, and integrating Native identity. In her study, Lucero reported that, as teens, personal struggles include rejecting and rebelling against their Native identities. Lucero describes participants' reporting feeling "lost, detached, or as if they didn't fit in *anywhere* (emphasis mine)" during their adolescence (p. 331).

Fryberg & Eason (2017) point out the harm caused by the prevalent representations of American Indians, which are laden with historical, romanticized, and stereotypical depictions to

“represent what most Americans believe is an accurate depiction of America’s history” (p. 555). But getting it wrong is not the only problem—acts of “omission” (Fryberg & Eason, 2017, p. 555) can also cause American Indian students to not feel a sense of belonging in their schools and communities (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015).

Schools can be a setting where telling the truth about Native peoples and U.S. history could be a means whereby American Indian students could reclaim some sense of belonging. Indeed, that could be an outcome in the implementation of Act 31 (outlined below) in Wisconsin. In the next chapters I will explore the extent to which that promise has been realized through the experiences of Native youth in the state. To do so, I will draw from two tenets in Brayboy’s (2005, 2013), which supports Lucero’s research and offers further insight into her findings. Building on Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998) and aligning it with Native issues, Brayboy outlines nine tenets. Two tenets provide an overarching framework for the following two papers. (See Appendix B for complete list of tenets.)

- Colonization is endemic to [U.S.] society.
- Governmental and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation.

A Wisconsin Requirement

For almost three decades, Wisconsin public schools have been mandated by a set of statutes that define the responsibilities for the state superintendent, school boards and pre-service education programs so that schools and teachers have the tools they need to teach adequately and appropriately about the tribes in Wisconsin. Together these statutes are commonly referred to as Act 31 (See Appendix A for complete statutes). This means that students attending Wisconsin’s public schools should, as part of their instruction, receive:

- An appreciation and understanding of different value systems and cultures [see §118.01(2)(c)(7)]
- At all grade levels, an understanding of human relations, particularly with regard to American Indians, Black Americans and Hispanics [see §118.01(2)(c)(8)]
- Adequate instructional materials, texts and library services which reflect the cultural diversity and pluralistic nature of American society [see §121.02)(1)(h)]
- Instruction on the history, culture and tribal sovereignty of the federally recognized tribes and bands in Wisconsin at least twice in elementary (kindergarten-eighth grade) and at least once in high school [see §121.02)(1)(L)]

However, from my practice as an educator, when teachers and schools refer to Act 31, they are making reference to this last point—the instruction on the history, culture, and sovereignty of the tribes in Wisconsin.

The Act 31 Report (Hadley & Trechter, 2014) offers insight into the implementation of Act 31 from the point of view of administrators and teachers, in other words, what they perceive to be the implementation of Act 31. The Report is an analysis of the responses to a survey distributed to school administrators and educators. At first glance, the executive summary indicates that, as a state, we are meeting the requirements of Act 31, “A large majority of administrators said that their school or district includes instruction in the history and culture of Wisconsin American Indian tribes and bands” (p. 3).

However, although teachers and administrators indicate that they are meeting the requirements of Act 31, when one delves into the open-ended responses, it becomes apparent that not only is the actual *practice* a problem, but there is a lack of *understanding* of the Act 31 requirement. For example, teachers often present their “Indian” units around Thanksgiving (with

the Wampanoag people), and stereotype and misrepresent the historical and tribal perspectives (Moody, 2013). As one respondent wrote, “I teach about the differences in people and about the Wampanoag Indians as part of Thanksgiving instructions [sic]. I haven’t received any information about or that I need to teach WI tribes from my district” (Hadley & Trechter, 2014, p. 35). While there is nothing in the statutes that says that you cannot teach about other tribes, teaching solely about the Wampanoag, does not meet the Act 31 requirement as they are not a tribe in Wisconsin. As this teacher notes, teachers may not be aware of the requirements of Act 31 and districts may not be explaining the law to their teachers. But the problems with implementation are many. The Act 31 Report, in fact, presents multiple layers of the problem.

Not only is the lack of appropriate resources an issue, but educators are also required to teach a topic about which they have had little or no coursework and they are not getting ongoing professional development or support. As one teacher who seemed motivated to find resources, noted, “I did not have adequate resources—the only resources were from online. But they seemed misrepresentative of the tribes we studied...very outdated and seemed to reinforce stereotypes that are frequently passed on” (p. 52). There is no doubt that teachers are frustrated. One teacher sums up her experience by writing, “I currently have NOTHING (emphasis hers) regarding the instruction of American Indian tribes/bands in Wisconsin and have had no training what so ever [sic]” (p. 83).

These comments from the Act 31 Report support Brayboy’s tenet that governmental and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation. When teachers lack accurate and authentic resources and the skills they need to appropriately teach about American Indians, this is the basis for assimilation. As Wilson and Yellow Bird (2005) write, “The current institutions and systems are designed to maintain the

privilege of the colonizer and the subjugation of the colonized, and to produce generations of people who will never question their position within this relationship” (p. 1). An education void of appropriate teachings about American Indians is designed to “erase the tribal memories, to cloud vision, to impair hearing, and to impede the operation of the critical capacity of Indigenous Peoples...Indigenous Peoples became programmed to follow a pattern of historical lies” (Pewewardy, 2005, p. 148). Pewewardy (2005) contends that the educational system perpetuates oppression and upholds the dominate educational power structure by “graduating students with a value system that is basically Eurocentric, individualistic, competitive, and materialistic” (p. 140); in other words, assimilated.

I predict that, if implemented properly, Act 31 would assist our Native young people in gaining positive self-, tribal and community identity. On the other hand, if it is not implemented properly, it contributes to what Lucero calls “rejection and rebellion,” and, in fact, the schools remain, as Brayboy theorizes, “tools of assimilation.”

This introductory paper provides background for the following two papers in which I share insights from interviews with young Native people. The study included interviews with 19 Native students in grades eight through two years post-graduation, their parents, and parents of other Native youth. Parents were interviewed using questions that would provide insight about their child’s experiences in school while learning about American Indians. Because the students’ interviews were both painful and incisive, I have chosen to focus the two papers only on the students’ interviews and have framed each of the two papers around a particular theme that emerged. I plan to analyze and present results gathered from the parent interviews in a future paper. I chose to focus on the interviews with the youth because I found that their words were so

emotional and so powerful that I wanted to honor their bravery. Our young people have been invisibilized for so long, and I will continue to share their stories until their voices are heard.

The papers in this dissertation focus on the interviews with the youth because their stories have not been told. I chose not to interview teachers or administrators as we can draw insights into their experiences by reviewing the Act 31 Report (Hadley & Trechter, 2014); neither did I choose to analyze curricular materials because my study was designed to understand students' perceptions of the materials their teachers used in teaching about American Indians.

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Paper 2

Understanding Act 31 through the Voices of American Indian Youth

Abstract

Wisconsin public schools are required by law to teach about the history, culture, and sovereignty of the federally recognized American Indian tribes and bands in Wisconsin. For this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 urban American Indian youth ranging from eighth grade to two years post-graduation to gain insight into their experiences in schools with particular attention to teaching about the tribes of Wisconsin. Focusing on the context in which “Native peoples” (in Wisconsin or elsewhere) are presented in the classroom—good, bad or mediocre—or left out completely, I document what students recollect about being taught about them. My goal is to understand the efficacy of Act 31 in correlation to student experiences in the schools. Data suggest that Native peoples are presented stereotypically and/or historically and generally containing inaccurate information. I utilize a thematic analysis to generate patterns of shared meanings among participants. To determine the story of each, I then cross-examine detailed interpretive analysis of emerging narrative themes in relation to existing data. In conclusion, my findings suggest that Act 31 is not being implemented, and when Native peoples are included in lesson plans they are presented stereotypically and/or historically and generally containing inaccurate information.

Introduction

“We live in a world with shared dominant myths that we encounter every day, and we need to make these visible in order to address them” (Potts and Brown, 2015, p. 37).

Native⁵ students, both nationally and in Wisconsin, are facing a crisis in our school system with some of the worst achievement gaps and disparities in education nationally (Musu-Gillete, de Brey, McFarland, Hussar, & Sonnenberg, 2017) and in Wisconsin (O'Connor, Kubinski, Koelln, Nayar, Bowman, & Reinhardt, 2015). This problem is due, in part, to the fact that schools are dominated by settler/colonial traditions, beliefs, and practices that maintain stereotypical images of Native Americans, both contemporary and historical, as well as stereotypical images of the relationships between American Indians and settlers.

Schools themselves are embedded in a larger culture where stereotypes of American Indian peoples—from negative representations based on generations of Wild West shows, mass media, and Indian mascots and logos freely used in sports promotion⁶—are well entrenched. For contemporary and future generations, educators have the potential to challenge stereotypes and to teach the truths about American Indians.

In the state of Wisconsin, Act 31 mandates, in part, that Wisconsin public schools teach about the history, culture and sovereignty of federally recognized tribes and bands within the state. For almost three decades, Wisconsin public schools have been mandated by a set of statutes that define the responsibilities for the state superintendent, school boards and pre-service education programs so that schools and teachers have the tools they need to teach adequately and appropriately about the federally recognized tribes and bands in Wisconsin. Together these

⁵ Although I will use “Native,” “Native American,” “American Indian,” and “Indian” in this paper as collective terms to refer to the Indigenous peoples of this continent, it should be noted that, as of December 2020, there are 574 federally recognized Native nations, 66 state-recognized Native nations and countless hundreds of Indigenous nations fighting for federal and state recognition. Each nation has its own culture, traditions, languages, norms and practices. While there may be many similarities across tribal nations there is also much diversity based on their historical and cultural ties, linguistic histories, and geographic regions.

⁶ The harmful effects of Indian mascots and logos is well documented in decades of research. See Dolley, 2003; Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman & Stone 2008; Chaney, Burke, & Burkley, 2011; and Kim-Prieto, Goldstein, Okazaki & Kirschner, 2010.

statutes are commonly referred to as Act 31 (See Appendix A for complete statutes). This means that all students attending Wisconsin's public schools should, as part of their instruction, receive:

- An appreciation and understanding of different value systems and cultures [see §118.01(2)(c)(7)]
- At all grade levels, an understanding of human relations, particularly with regard to American Indians, Black Americans and Hispanics [see §118.01(2)(c)(8)]
- Adequate instructional materials, texts and library services which reflect the cultural diversity and pluralistic nature of American society [see §121.02(1)(h)]
- Instruction on the history, culture and tribal sovereignty of the federally recognized tribes in Wisconsin at least twice in elementary (kindergarten-eighth grade) and at least once in high school [see §121.02(1)(L)]

Statement of the Problem

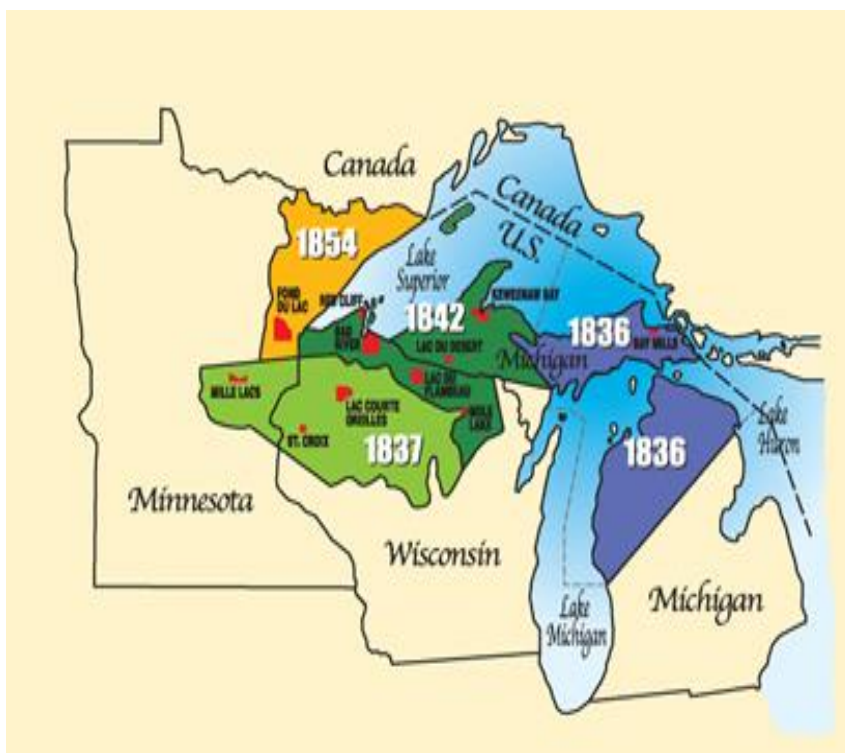
When teachers and schools refer to Act 31, they are referring to instruction on the history, culture and sovereignty of the tribes in Wisconsin—the focus of this study. However, from my practice as an educator, I have observed that Wisconsin public schools a) may or may not teach anything about Indigenous peoples, b) what they teach may or may not be about the federally recognized tribes and bands in Wisconsin, c) what they teach may or may not be accurate and/or authentic.

Events Leading Up to the Creation of Act 31 in Wisconsin

A treaty is a legally binding agreement between two or more sovereign nations. From 1778 to 1871, Native nations signed approximately 375 treaties with the United States. These

treaties documented peace accords, military alliances, trade compacts and land sessions (Case, 2018).

In a series of treaties in the 1800s, the Ojibwe bands ceded large tracts of land to the United States. In the Treaty between the Chippewa (1837 and 1842) and the United States, the Ojibwe bands ceded some 12 million acres of land and water (Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission, 2018). In addition to outlined payments and goods, both



Ojibwe Land Cessions, Great Lakes Fish & Wildlife Commission

treaties included usufructuary rights for the Ojibwe to continue to hunt, fish, and gather on ceded lands.

It has been said that nothing positive happens without struggle. The Ojibwe peoples' rights to hunt, fish, and gather have had a century long legal battle. In Wisconsin, the struggle over treaty rights came to a head in the 1980s, during turbulent times referred to as the "Walleye War" (Nesper, 2002).

As the Upper Midwest's population grew, the territories became states: Michigan in 1837, Wisconsin in 1848, and Minnesota in 1858. And these states passed laws governing hunting, fishing and gathering activities, which they enforced against the Ojibwe peoples. The

regulation of what was now assumed to be the states' natural resources—regardless of reserved rights—set up a situation in which tribal citizens exercising their own historical rights to hunt, fish and gather were often cited, taken to court, fined, and had their equipment confiscated if found harvesting fish or game without a state license (GLIFWC, 2018).

In exchange for ceding more land, permanent reservations were established for the Ojibwe bands in the Treaty of 1854. Although their rights to hunt, fish, and gather on ceded territories were still in place from the previous treaties, state and local law enforcement agencies used these various levels of oppressive tactics against the Ojibwe people off reservation to limit their usufructuary rights to hunt, fish and gather (Nesper, 2002; Letellier, 2014).

This racist battle by white people in power—including sports fishermen, police, jailers, judges, business owners and the courts—attempted to roll back Ojibwe fishing rights. In 1908, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that Ojibwe rights to hunt, fish, and gather on ceded territories had ended when Wisconsin became a state in 1848 (Nesper, 2002).

The Ojibwe understood their treaty rights to hunt, fish and gather on ceded territories: “However unbroken were the memories of off-reservation rights to the Indians, those rights were forcefully denied by the expanding state of Wisconsin” (Nesper, 2002, p. 49). Other cases were fought in the legal sphere (see Nesper, 2002, for more detail), but real change happened in 1974 with the arrest of brothers, Fred and Mike Tribble, tribal members from the Lac Courte Oreilles (LCO) Band of Lake Superior Chippewa.

In 1978, in the Western District Federal Court, the judge ruled that the LCO, with the establishment of permanent reservations (Treaty of 1854) and the 1850 Presidential Removal Order, had relinquished their off-reservation treaty rights (Nesper, 2002; GLIFWC, 2018). However, in 1983, the U.S. Court of Appeals affirmed their rights to hunt,

fish, and gather for themselves as well as other Ojibwe bands who joined the lawsuit (GLIFWC, 2018). “The usufructuary rights reserved by the Lake Superior Band of Chippewa in the treaties of 1837 and 1842 had become a matter of settled law” (Leary, 2018, p. 42). As the United States Constitution declared treaties as “the supreme law of the land”, the courts confirmed the inherent rights documented in their treaties. The Ojibwe who refused to back down were met with “numerous acts of overt hostility and violence” (p. 4).

Anti-Indian protesters believed this ruling that the Ojibwe were getting special privileges rather than exercising their treaty rights. Anti-Indian groups such as Protect America’s Rights and Resources and Stop Treaty Abuse were formed as they felt that treaty rights were a violation of equal justice. These groups flocked to the boat landings to harass and bully the Ojibwe practicing or taking part in spearfishing. “In Wisconsin, as elsewhere, ignorance-fueled racism, exacerbated by economic anxieties, sometimes erupted into violence” (Leary, 2018, p. 47).

Loew (DeGrace, O’Kane, Stranz, & Loew, 2009) points out that the media, with headlines such as “Court Gives Unlimited Fishing Rights to Indians” were at least partly to blame. As she explains, “there is a huge difference between *giving* rights and *affirming* rights.” Common citizens, not having an understanding of American Indian peoples, were left to sort out information on their own. As one witness testified, “the lack of educational systems to teach anything about Indians, about treaties...when the population really doesn’t know what the rights are and what the laws say, they have to make judgment decision based on what the media puts out to them and what a politician [says]” (as cited in Leary, 2018 p. 47).

Citing concerns that the “Ojibwe spearfishing would deplete the fish population and leave little for tourists” (Nesper, 2002, p. 3), their true agenda included lobbying the government

to restore the Indian relocation and termination policies of the 50s, abrogate the treaties and to terminate the government -to-government relationship between the tribes and federal government.

In 1985, northern Wisconsin held its first legal spearfishing season. From the start, white “protesters” (with media filming) attacked Ojibwe traditional fishers, tried to destroy their boats, hurled racist epithets, and created social unrest. During this time, racist placards and bumper stickers proclaimed: “Spear an Indian, save a walleye” and “Spear a pregnant squaw, save two walleyes.” “Timber n*gger” was a common name of choice.

However, it was in the spring of 1989 when Wisconsin’s Walleye War made national headlines and became an impetus for Act 31. In response to the Walleye War, the Ad Hoc Commission on Racism in Northern Wisconsin⁷ made several recommendations to help combat the racism against Native peoples. After gathering information from a public hearing, the Commission found “that there was a significant level of anti-Indian racism in Northern Wisconsin and that these sentiments were pervasive in many social institutions, including schools, churches, and the media” (Leary, 2018, p. 90). The Commission found that “the lack of learning opportunities as both a cause and effect of racism” (Leary, 2018, p. 91). The Commission recommended that both Native and non-Native organizations to become active partners in taking positive steps to address the root causes of racism—misinformation, fear, and hatred. Specifically, they urged both K-12 schools and university teacher education programs to teach about the tribes including tribal sovereignty, treaties, culture and history (Leary, 2018).

⁷ Made up with volunteers from churches, educational institutions, and civil rights organization with administrative support from the Office of the Governor, the Wisconsin Indian Resource Council and the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community College, the Ad Hoc Commission on Racism in Northern Wisconsin was formed in 1984.

These recommendations laid the foundation for what would become a set of statutes, commonly referred to as Act 31. These unprecedented statutes mandated the creation of specific curriculum content, described the responsibilities for the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, described the roles for local school boards and districts to provide adequate instructional materials, and required teacher-licensing educational programs to equip pre-service and out-of-state teachers seeking Wisconsin licensure with the appropriate knowledge to teach about the federally recognized American Indian tribes in Wisconsin.

J. P. Leary, former American Indian Studies Consultant for the Department of Public Instruction, wrote extensively about the Act 31 policy. Leary explained that “Act 31 wasn’t created for Native kids, it was created for the rock throwers” (personal communication, May 15, 2016). Act 31, he told me, was created to prevent another generation of white people acting out their racist beliefs. In addition, Leary told me something he had read and remembered: “We can evaluate our educational programs, not based on short-term measures like test scores, but on the activity of our alumni” (Leary, personal communication, May 15, 2016).

Current State of Act 31: A Cause for Concern

In 2014, an electronic survey was sent out statewide to Wisconsin teachers and administrators to help state and tribal agencies determine ways to provide information, training, and technical assistance to school districts to support their work in teaching about the tribes in Wisconsin. The responses gathered from these surveys were presented in the “Wisconsin Education Act 31: Administrator and Teacher Survey Report” (Hadley & Trechter, 2014). At first glance, the executive summary indicates that the state meets the requirements of Act 31: “A large majority of administrators said that their school or district includes instruction in the history and culture of Wisconsin American Indian tribes and bands” (p. 3).

The Report demonstrates that the implementation of Act 31 has been problematic, to say the least. The Report shows that ~63% of teachers (n=1,250) who had received a Wisconsin teaching license after 1991 responded that they *did not receive* or *could not recall* receiving proper training in their teacher preparation program. However, of those who responded that they had received training (n=466), 52% said they had received training in *one class only*. This suggests that the majority of teachers are ill-prepared to teach about the tribes in Wisconsin.

Although the Report says that educators are indeed teaching about the tribes in Wisconsin, and teachers and administrators indicate that they are meeting the requirements of Act 31, it becomes apparent that not only is the actual *practice* a problem, but there is a lack of *understanding* of the Act 31 requirement. We know that schools have many educational priorities placed on them. However, although teachers and administrators are concerned with having “so little time and so much to cover,” when asked, “Which other non-Wisconsin American Indian nation(s) do you teach?,” teachers listed dozens of other tribal nations and vast tribal areas such as “Eastern Woodland, Great Plains, Southwest Desert, Northwest Coast” (Hadley & Trechter, 2014, p. 34)—*and even from vast time periods*: “Paleo, Archaic, Old Copper Culture, Hopewell, Mound Builders? These are WI tribes but not mentioned above” (Hadley & Trechter, 2014, p. 33). Does this mean that they are teaching about tribes in Wisconsin *and* tribes and other tribal societies elsewhere? Or does it mean that they are teaching about these other tribes and tribal societies *rather than* the tribes in Wisconsin? My guess is the latter.

In addition to the survey items in this study, teachers were also asked open-ended items. Their responses to these items reveal gaps in their preparation and resources as well as in their understanding of Act 31. For example, teachers often present their “Indian” units around

Thanksgiving (with the Wampanoag people), and stereotype and misrepresent the historical and tribal perspectives (Moody, 2013). As one respondent wrote, “I teach about the differences in people and about the Wampanoag Indians as part of Thanksgiving instructions [sic]. I haven’t received any information about or that I need to teach WI tribes from my district” (Hadley & Trechter, 2014, p. 35).

Not only are educators required to teach a topic about which they have had little or no coursework, they also lack professional development and resources for teaching what the law mandates. One teacher noted, “I did not have adequate resources—the only resources were from online. But they seemed very misrepresentative of the tribes we studied...very outdated and seemed to reinforce stereotypes that are frequently passed on” (Hadley & Trechter, 2014, p. 52).

There is no doubt that teachers are frustrated. Most of the teachers wrote that they wanted and needed instructional materials and professional development. One teacher sums up her experience: “I currently have NOTHING (emphasis hers) regarding the instruction of American Indian tribes/bands in Wisconsin and have had no training what so ever [sic]” (p. 83). Her reflection could be interpreted as indication that at least some teachers are motivated to do a better job but are not getting adequate training or resources.

The Report (2014), in fact, shows multiple layers of the problem. Not only is there a lack of appropriate resources, but there are many questionable materials including textbooks, videos and Internet searches. Some of the materials listed have been determined to be inappropriate, such as *The Sign of the Beaver*, which contains 36 pages of anti-Indian references (Students and Teachers Against Racism, 2007). Another teacher listed a Scholastic series, *If You Lived with the___* (Sioux, Iroquois, Cherokee, Hopi, etc.) This whole series is problematic, to say the least.

Additionally, administrators and teachers find “reasons” for not teaching about the tribes in Wisconsin. Some of the reasons are based on proximity: “We don’t live extremely close to any tribes to make a big deal about their culture. Exposure is important, but I don’t feel it necessary to dwell on the topic in the class I teach” (Hadley & Trechter, 2014, p. 104). Other times Act 31 is treated as a unit to be squeezed in—if time allows. As one administrator noted, “With all the other requirements placed upon school districts and the assessment of each district it is difficult to cover all historic topics. We do the best we can and cover the Indians, the treatment and plight they have suffered throughout history” (p. 30). And sometimes there are multiple reasons for an excuse:

I think it’s a part of what we do, but it is a small part. I am not sure if that’s good or bad. American Indians make up less than 5% of our population. So how much time should be spent on talking about those kinds of issues? Nothing is really ever said about that. The truth is we have lots and lots of content to cover over the course of our classes. I know there are portions of it included in the State Standards and we do our best to cover, evaluate and assess those standards. I think our schools did a pretty good job years ago of teaching WISCONSIN HISTORY (emphasis hers).... (Hadley & Trechter, 2014, p. 99)

Additionally, of the teachers who responded regarding teaching about the tribes in Wisconsin (n=829), 84% responded that they teach about history, 77% about culture; 20% about tribal sovereignty, and 20% about contemporary issues. From their responses, it is unclear exactly what teachers mean by “history” or “culture.” However, based on the open-ended survey responses, when teachers selected that they taught the history of tribes in Wisconsin, do they

mean, “we teach historical Indians”? (p. 39). When they selected that they taught about the culture, does it mean “just drumming and nature together”? (p. 49).

To reiterate, the Ad Hoc Commission on Racism in Northern Wisconsin *began* making recommendations to combat the pervasive racism in social institutions in 1984. This led to the passage of Act 31 in 1989. And, some thirty years later, *in 2014*, from the Act 31 Report (Hadley & Trechter), we see that there are problems with the implementation: 63% of the teachers reporting have not been properly prepared to teach about the American Indian tribes and bands located in Wisconsin, and most said that they need professional development and instructional materials. When teachers have not been properly prepared, do not understand the law or its necessity, do not have appropriate resources, the educational system is likely to continue to have a general population without understanding about the history, culture and sovereignty of the tribes in Wisconsin.

Focusing on the context in which “Native peoples” (in Wisconsin or elsewhere) are presented in the classroom—good, bad or mediocre—or left out completely, in this paper, I document what Indian students recollect about being taught about Native peoples. My goal was to understand the efficacy of Act 31 as reflected in Native students’ experiences in the schools. In the next pages I draw from the students’ words to document what they recalled.

My decision to focus on the experiences of Native students was based on a major gap and limitation in the literature, i.e., the actual voices and experiences of Native students. The perspectives of American Indian young people and their learning about the tribes in Wisconsin, or Indigenous peoples in general, is missing. Ultimately, the voices of young Native people are missing. To gain insight, I conducted interviews with 19 American Indian students from several school districts, both urban and suburban, in the southern portion of Wisconsin.

Methods

My Role as a Researcher

I am a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and grew up in an urban setting. I have always been active in my community which has provided me with the opportunity to build relationships with Native peoples over many years. When I graduated from college, I obtained a position serving American Indian students and families in my local public-school system. I provided direct services to students as well as served as a resource and provided professional development to teachers and staff.

As a Native person growing up, I attended urban public schools where I had limited exposure to how American Indians were represented in the curricula. My education occurred at a time before the enactment of Act 31. In my ninth-grade history textbook there was one paragraph I remember that mentioned Indians; however, that paragraph was not discussed or referenced in the class.

In this paper my goal is to contribute scholarship that could make Act 31 more effective for practitioners, appropriate for students, and reflective of all Native peoples, particularly in Wisconsin. Since my time as a student in the K-12 educational system, I have seen some positive changes. Yet, there is much more work that needs to be done. I have been through the processes of developing, negotiating, and maintaining my identity as an urban Indian—and hope that my work will transform my grandchildren's and their grandchildren's experiences in school.

Participants

When I was in the initial stages of developing my research project, I proposed my idea to two groups of parents who served American Indian students. I had been involved with both

groups for many years. Parents and students readily approved my proposal and several volunteered to be part of the study. I received approval from the University of Wisconsin-Madison of Educational and Social/Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board to conduct this study.

To recruit parents and students, I attended American Indian community events where I sought out parents of students in the age range from seventh grade through high school, including students who had recently graduated within two years. If prospective participants were interested in learning more, I provided an overall research description and provided them with an introductory letter (see appendix C), invitation, and consent form. Participating families reflected a wide range of backgrounds based on their educational attainment, community and tribal involvement, socio-economic status, and educational attainment ranging from high school graduates to several with advanced higher education degrees. The students represented 12 tribal nations with some visiting their tribal homelands frequently and some not having that opportunity.

This paper draws from interviews conducted with 19 American Indian young people from public schools, from the end of their eighth-grade year to two years post-graduation from high school. Five students were either at the end of their eighth-grade year or had completed it. Eight students were in high school (grades nine through twelve). Six students had completed high school. Approximately half were female. In total, they attended 16 elementary schools, 11 middle schools and eight high schools. For confidentiality, I used pseudonyms for all participants.

Data Collection

I conducted semi-structured interviews individually with each student (see Appendix D for youth protocol), which I recorded and then transcribed. Although I am not reporting on the parents here, I gave students and parents⁸ the option to complete their interviews together or separately. Not all students had a parent who provided an interview and not all parents had a student who provided an interview. I began the interviews in mid-May and completed them in late August of 2019. The student interviews ranged from 13-65 minutes.

Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis Approach

To analyze the interview data, I used a qualitative thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within data. This method calls for becoming familiar with the data and then generating initial codes. These codes, identified by the researcher, are gathered into clearly defined and named themes using an interpretive analysis where meanings are generated into initial codes regarding the phenomena. Initial coding can highlight similarities and differences across the data set and can generate unanticipated insights. This last aspect (unanticipated insights) is particularly useful in under-researched areas or when views on a topic are unknown or when generating newly found knowledge.

A key aspect in identifying a theme is that it captures something important to the research topic and it represents a patterned response within the data set. Reviewing and refining are part of the process. While researcher judgment is necessary to identify themes, using this approach where the data is collected specifically for the research means that the identified themes are

⁸ While parents were interviewed, the data is not shared in this paper.

linked to the data themselves. Thematic coding was performed by using NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis software program.

Results

As part of the social studies curriculum, Statute 121.02 (L) of Wisconsin Act 31 requires public schools to teach students about the history, culture, and sovereignty of the American Indian tribes in Wisconsin, at least twice in elementary grades (K-8), typically recommended for fourth and eighth grades; and at least once in the secondary grades (9-12). Based on their grade at the time of the interview and depending on the number of years they attended school in the same school district, two of the 19 students should have received instruction about the tribes in Wisconsin at least three times, and each of the remaining 17 students should have had instruction about the tribes in Wisconsin at least twice. *None* of the 19 students shared having received instruction about the tribes in Wisconsin at least twice. Three students specifically mentioned learning about the Ho-Chunk which was the only tribe in Wisconsin discussed. All of the students said they had learned about Native Americans, at least minimally, during the schooling even if what they had described was problematic. Below I capture the most common themes in which students described lessons in which they said they learned about Native peoples.

Christopher Columbus

When I asked students if and what they had learned about American Indian people, groups and/or tribes in school, approximately 63% of students mentioned something having to do with Columbus. This was true, regardless of grade levels with five elementary students, six middle school students and one high school student making reference to Columbus. When students spoke about their elementary school teachings, most felt that Columbus was portrayed

in a positive or mostly positive light. However, not all students were happy about this presentation.

Fabi's shared insights from her fourth-grade experience. She said that the Native perspective was not taught: "The teachers taught about what he did, how he messed up, thought he was in India, that's why he called us Indians. They just talked about how he found it and then was funded to go back, find things and that's it. That's it!" While Fabi said her teacher mentioned that Columbus "enslaved us, made us mind," Fabi seemed upset with the lack of detailed information: "They didn't really go into depth, 'I actually had to be like, you know, they used to hurt us, then send us back in and hurt us more if we didn't come back with enough [gold].'" Fabi was, invited by her teacher to share her knowledge with the class: "I was asked to speak in front of the class, but I really don't think I had an impact on anybody." I asked Fabi if her perspectives were used in the following years. Fabi said she hoped so but did not keep track.

In contrast to the generally positive presentation of Columbus in the elementary grades, students felt that their teachers in middle school grades seemed to teach a more truthful portrayal. Leia described how her teachers "put it into detail that [Columbus] wasn't all good." And the teachers "explained that [Columbus] actually killed a lot of the Native people." Leia rationalized this shift (from teaching in elementary vs. middle-school) in the following reflection: "You don't get taught about this, because people don't want you to know, until you're older." Interestingly, Leia commented that after the teachers taught some of the truths about Columbus, the teachers seemed to return to honoring him, "And then after that was over, it went to back to like...back to *that* side of him." I asked Leia what she had thought about learning about Columbus. Leia did not like that there was a day set aside to honor Columbus. She questioned her teacher about it; his response was "*tradition that we celebrated it for so long.*" That explanation did not sit well

her. She shared with me, “And a lot of people know that it’s a bad thing, but they choose to ignore that side of Columbus and just believe what they were told when they were young.”

Justice, a recently graduated high school student suggested why he thought elementary school teachers might protect their students from the truth about Columbus. The teachers “didn’t really talk about it too much. Because I don’t know, it’s kind of heavy to tell a five-year-old about, you know, Columbus cutting peoples’ hands off and stuff.”

Louise reported that her class in middle school learned some of the truths about Columbus by comparing an older textbook version with a new one. The older one portrayed Columbus as a “pioneer” and a “hero” while portraying the Native people as “bad.” She added that she thought this version “was really racist.” However, the newer textbook portrayed them as “more realistic.” Louise added, “We *usually* use the *old ones* [textbooks] just reading some passages to get background knowledge.”

Kiffa described how she learned that Columbus went from being a “good guy” in elementary school to learning that he was “seriously bad” in middle school. She learned more of the truths about Columbus when her class did research to create a comic book featuring him. Kiffa described how earlier in middle school, teachers had alluded to a more truthful representation of Columbus, but it was with this project and her Internet searching that she learned the full truth: “He killed a lot of them.”

Of all the participants who spoke about Columbus, there was no discussion about the Indigenous peoples that he initially encountered. Whether Columbus was presented as a good guy or bad guy, the only roles ascribed to the Indigenous peoples were either being enslaved or killed. As Solo and Tanner surmised, respectively, “he [Columbus] came and killed off most of the guys” and “they were pretty much decimated when Christopher Columbus came over.”

Raelynn summed up her frustrations including Columbus by saying:

They really should start teaching these kids the real stuff, not the fake. Columbus did not find America; that was a complete lie, they are lying to these kids. Just stop lying, start teaching. Do what you're supposed to do, you are a teacher right? Start teaching kids the truth. Don't lie to them. Because then all their life they're gonna think Columbus found this land. Columbus Day, that's not Columbus' Day, that's *our* day. That's Indigenous Peoples' Day. That's us. That's our people, we the People.

The students' stories suggested that they were typically introduced to "Columbus" in fourth grade, in which he was taught as a "good person." Any horrors about Columbus that may have been taught at the elementary level had been glossed over. However, at the middle school level, there had been a total switch in presentation. Then, teachers provided a more accurate portrayal. Yet, although students said that they had learned about American Indians, it seems that the focus had only minimal mention of the Indigenous peoples Columbus "encountered"—that is, being enslaved or murdered. Columbus discovered. Columbus enslaved. Columbus killed.

Some of the students had been visibly upset, others had been upset in general, and still others hadn't seemed to have been bothered. However, only two challenged their teachers. One teacher invited her student to share her knowledge with the class. Another teacher, after having been questioned about celebrating "Columbus Day," informed his student that it was "tradition." Our Native students know that Columbus didn't "discover America," and believe it is time for teachers to begin teaching the truths.

Thanksgiving

Approximately 44% of students spoke about lessons related to teachings about American Indians during Thanksgiving. Unlike Columbus teachings, which occurred in elementary and middle school, these lessons were taught only in the elementary grades. Most students described Thanksgiving lessons as including hands-on activities such as coloring sheets, making turkeys from tracing their hands, or doing plays. The Thanksgiving lesson was always presented as a story of friendship between the Pilgrims and Indians.

Louise described her elementary school experiences as not “really learning much about Native Americans, like only on Thanksgiving” by coloring sheets of the Mayflower and when the Natives and settlers “sat together and ate dinner.” Louise said that the class was not “told who they were or what was happening.” The Natives were presented as “very stereotypical, not how they actually looked.”

Renee described her Thanksgiving lesson in which the students made turkeys shaped like their hands. She added that Native people were not included in the lesson as it was “mostly based on the pilgrims.”

Andre was much more critical, calling the lessons about Thanksgiving (and Columbus Day) “complete fallacies.” He described the impact:

I realize that in the course of my educational experiences, I have, like, in a way blocked off memories from resurfacing as a form of coping, because it was, you know, like, knowing what Thanksgiving is and actually represents is like, it's messed up....I'm taught at home like a completely different story about Thanksgiving....I had access to the Internet. I looked up what happened to New England and the East Coast. At that point in time there was bloody wars. Entire

tribes were, like, exterminated but you go into the classroom, and you're, like, okay, I guess they just like ate together and everything.

And we would watch little documentaries where everyone's doing all good. So It's just like, very sanitized, pre-packaged, almost propaganda thing that you're being exposed to. And when you challenge it, you know, you're not getting support by teachers or the students because they don't understand. Teachers, either because they don't understand or that they are threatened by like, this outdated view of American history that they're not necessarily trying to teach you.

And that is traumatic: traumatic, because you're a child, and you're trying to decipher what's right or wrong. And also [to know] it's okay to think what you think. And in a lot of ways, it's being pushed against you. And when that's pushed against you, and you're so small, It's scary, you know, and so like, I just kind of blocked it off...And then I would get so anxious and worried and upset about what would happen when I pushed back on it as a little kid [that it] kind of contributed to developing a little bit of an anxiety disorder.

Andre went on to describe how his family taught him that Thanksgiving represented “violence, conquest and disease”—but the school taught it as “sanitized, pre-packaged, almost propaganda that you’re being exposed to.” Although the Native students were able to reflect back on the information taught about “Thanksgiving” as having been problematic—“I didn’t like what they were doing”—it is clear that, from what Andre reported, the material and the teaching were actually traumatizing. Our Native students learn these truths at home and then have to endure the lies at school.

Manifest Destiny and Indian Removals

Approximately 26% of interviewees shared that they learned about American Indians during lessons on Manifest Destiny and/or Indian Removals. Remy said that he learned about Manifest Destiny in elementary school and described how the settlers thought that they had a divine right and killed American Indians for their land.

Justice described his eighth-grade lessons about Manifest Destiny as settlers “moving out and conquering the rest of the country we now live in.” He shared that this lesson was followed with learning about the Cherokee Trail of Tears. Even though Justice understood that the treatment of American Indians was “horrible,” he seemed pleased by the lesson saying that his teacher went more in depth on the topics and that the lesson lasted about a month or two and that it was integrated rather than being its own entity: “They didn’t skim over it...it was more like this is part of *our* history.” He seemed to attribute this positive learning experience to the teacher: “Some teachers really go out of their way to be good historians and other teachers, not so much.”

Sam said he learned about Manifest Destiny during his freshman year as this:

The only time we learned about any of the tribes of Wisconsin...*We were a unit.* Or should I say, I don’t even know what the unit was? It was Manifest Destiny but they threw American Indians into it...because they were obviously the ones getting pushed off their land and getting relocated...And when they talked about the tribes in that class, it was like basically the same for all of them so you couldn’t distinguish what was going on.

He further criticized the lesson: “I didn’t care for it. I didn’t know what they were teaching...and the emphasis was *not* on American Indians.” Although the lesson lasted for three weeks, he added that the lesson was “super broad” and “basic stuff.” As part of this unit, Sam

had to pick a tribe to “write a paper on one of the tribes and how *they were impacted by Manifest Destiny*.”

Emile spoke of her frustration with learning about the Trail of Tears: “It was only for that day in [sophomore history] class, which is really like 30 minutes and we never talked about it again. We moved on and I haven’t really seen anything in high school.”

While no students mentioned any Wisconsin tribes in their discussion of Manifest Destiny or the Trail of Tears—it is clear that, when teachers provide brief, broad-stroke (and incorrect) overviews of these complex issues, it frustrates and confuses American Indian students. The students don’t know what’s going on. However, when teachers spend a significant amount of time and development of these subjects, it helps students to understand the contexts and situate them within a larger time frame. In addition, learning historical and cultural contexts builds relationships between American Indian students and their teachers and provides the students with an opportunity to shine.

“Pick- a-Tribe” to Research

Picking a tribe to research was another theme that four interviewees (21%) discussed. Besides Sam’s experiences (above), I will share the experiences of two of the other young people. Devin described an elementary lesson in which the class picked a tribe to research and created a diorama. It was to design the landscape of their “chosen” tribe and the type of lodging. Devin could not remember what tribe she selected for her diorama or the tribes her classmates selected: “I can’t even remember what tribes he let us choose from. I just remember it being just like any other research project: you get a prompt, you do the research, and you just present it, so more like you are doing it for a grade. That’s what it felt like.”

Devin provided further criticism of the lesson: “I wish the teacher would have helped more instead of just relying on students to find information just because I know that students cannot be into it and people just rushing it just to get it done. Not really doing the research and reading the history of [the tribe] and everything.” She was also concerned that classmates relied on Wikipedia and similar websites. Devin said that she could only remember a few classes where American Indians were discussed “just a little bit”:

It’s not enough to know a lot about Native people. They don’t really talk about it at all...It made me feel kind of like, okay, they’re talking about it. They’re trying to make it something known but not enough to the point of where students can actually understand it.

Fabi described how, in eighth grade, she had to select a tribe to write about. Although Fabi was critical, she also found this approach positive:

I actually really liked that the teacher suggested that we [research] tribes. They put a big list [of tribes] on the TV and we picked a tribe and *then we talked about how the tribe was impacted by colonization*. I thought it was a good lesson, but I know that the kids didn’t take it very seriously. I wish the teacher would have made sure that students knew you should get credible sources and everything like that. *But I mean, I thought that I could finally tell the truth and that made me feel better.*

While it is unclear which tribes were on any list for students to choose from, from the students’ interviews, the “Pick-a-tribe” approach has some promise for affirming some American Indian students in developing their own identities. One student, for instance, used this opportunity to learn and share about her own tribe, and that helped her “feel better.” However,

both of these students worried that their peers would gather their information from Wikipedia and materials—written by people from outside the culture—that may or may not have contained appropriate information. The students criticized their teachers for not helping their peers learn where or how to identify accurate and authentic resources: “I wish the teacher would have, like, made sure that students knew you should get credible sources.”

Ho-Chunk

For all 19 interviews, the Ho-Chunk was the only tribe specifically mentioned and discussed by three students (16%). Leia described her sixth-grade lesson as spending a week on learning about casinos. When asked to explain more about what was covered, she said that some tribes like the Ho-Chunk “have more money than other tribes because of [their casinos].”

Later in the interview Leia said that other tribes in Wisconsin were discussed and they learned comparative information about the tribes such as “how many [Native] people live there, how much money they made...[but] they didn’t say where they were [originally] from or how they practice their traditions. Like which other tribes [have] more money or which of the tribes has more people.”

Louise described a three-day unit in eighth grade on “American Indians” but again, only specifically mentioned the Ho-Chunk. She described the lesson as “we didn’t really go too in depth,” instead getting “kind of some of the basics with the Ho-Chunks.” She was dissatisfied with the lesson: “I thought it was rushed. We could have [gone] more in depth with the tribes...like the class wasn’t as educated as it could have been.”

Fabi said she had a lesson on the Ho-Chunk but did not go into detail; however, she described the lesson as “boring.” She understood that schools were not supposed to show all the

violence but she wished “they would show kids more of the truth.” Fabi shared her frustration about the lesson as coming “from the perspective of the colonizers” —from a white perspective:

There was [sic] no sources actually [used]. Just our teachers who would give a presentation about it...They were really boring. They were trying to, you know, put the effort [in, but it] was not really there. The schools give teachers these things that they’re supposed to teach, but my teachers are always white. I mean, they just have to do what they have to do and then they get on with the next thing, so I mean, it was pretty boring.

The Ho-Chunk Nation was the only Wisconsin tribe that my interviewees discussed. However, the students’ experiences were very different from each other. Leia said that her teacher taught about casinos for a week, while Louise reported that her teacher’s lesson was basic, rushed, and lacked depth. However, Fabi goes into detail about why she found the lesson about the Ho-Chunk problematic.

Boarding Schools

Three students (16%) spoke about Indian boarding schools. Emile was quite upset. She said that the high school lesson did not even cover one day and hit on “really just the big pivotal things” which included “early on Native Americans, how they lived, how Western expansion is affecting them, going to boarding schools. And it kind of just stops right there. Nothing modern, and I feel like *that representation is harmful to Indigenous peoples.*”

While Emile felt that not learning about Native peoples in a modern sense was harmful, Alexander initially seemed to have been guarded about sharing frustrations. Alexander mentioned that his teacher knew he was Native so was not sure if this had anything to do with the teacher’s including boarding schools or trying to be sensitive: “I can’t really remember it too

well but it was a lot about boarding schools we learned about and she definitely really tried to teach it to the best of her ability.” Alexander said his class watched a video in which:

They had the side-by-side comparison of what happens when people went to boarding school, how they had their hair cut, stuff like that...how they didn't let them practice their religion, that was pointed out. And there was nothing at the time where I was like I am not being represented.

As with other students, Alexander pointed out the short length of time spent on this topic:

I just feel like, I don't know how to explain it. It's just something that people really want to go by it quick. To me, I feel like there should be a little more information on it. I feel like we just try to get through this unit as fast as possible.

And it's a unit. I feel there's so much more things to say like maybe go more in depth on tribes. I think they should learn our religion and looking into Native people overall. And that's just something that's not in our high school system. We have *one unit* in our freshman year and that's about it.

Harley did not discuss the length of the lesson but did say his class watched a video as well:

How they assimilate them and all that...They want them to get used to it [white culture] because now since white people took over the land, they want them to learn, to go through the same stuff, like those white people go through and learn.

Although it is unclear where this idea originated from, Harley thought that it was “pretty crazy how they subsided [sic] to white culture and how they had to have white names, white hairstyles and all that.”

Indian Mascots

Kiffa reported that her seventh-grade teacher gave the class a packet about the R*dskin mascot. They were to read the packet and answer the questions at the back of it. This lesson lasted one day and according to Kiffa, “I feel like they didn’t care so they just gave us a little packet and said do your stuff. [The teachers] were just on their computer—they didn’t really teach us.”

In ninth grade, Alex also learned about Indian mascots in Language Arts. Alex reported that:

[T]he article was actually against Indian mascots. The teacher asked us to write about our stance on the issue and we had to have evidence. We never talked about it in class though, but it was cool because that teacher loves the rights of everyone, so she always has that kind of stuff. And it is cool because no other teacher said their point of view on that kind of stuff.

Discussion

Although the reality is that most teachers *understand* that they are supposed to teach about the history, culture and sovereignty of the tribes in Wisconsin, it appears that they still have little or no understanding of what those requirements are or what they mean.

Since 1989, when Act 31 was implemented, based on my interviews with students and parents, it appears that not much—if anything—has changed. For example, several parents mentioned that their children learn similar Thanksgiving lessons to them when they were in school.

This study suggests that Act 31 is not being implemented. The two most common times when the topic of “American Indians” appear in the instruction are Columbus Day and Thanksgiving—neither has anything to do with the tribes in Wisconsin. Teaching about Columbus in a positive sense (hero and explorer) for younger grades and then beginning to share the truths (enslavement and genocide) in middle school is confusing, not to mention bad teaching practices. Michael (2019) wrote that “teaching untruths about the racial history of the U.S. alienates people of color from school, especially history/social studies. *It widens the performance gap* (emphasis mine)” (p. 4).

Additionally, it is concerning when students describe genocide as if it is a common occurrence as did a high school student: “He came and killed off most of the guys...” I wonder if this is the same reverence that students would describe the Holocaust committed by the Nazi regime?

Further, neither “Columbus Day” nor “Thanksgiving” (the holidays and/or the teaching units) focuses on the Indigenous peoples—the Taino in the Columbus Day unit or the Wampanoag in the Thanksgiving Day unit. And even if these units were relatively well taught—which they are not—the only roles the Native peoples appear to play is “getting killed off.” Columbus—the man who inflicted genocide on the Taino peoples—is presented as a hero. We have a national holiday named for him. But times are changing, and with them, their demands. Native communities and supporters have organized states, cities, and counties to change the official name, “Columbus Day,” to “Indigenous Peoples’ Day.” This is a time for educators to become allies—and show their students whose side they are on. König (1993) points out that this country’s teaching of the myth and lore of Columbus as hero is interwoven with “its basic

goodness and the superiority of its white civilization” (p. 5) adding that teaching the truth would give children “a new sense of integrity and self-knowledge” (p. 5).

The same thing is true of “Thanksgiving.” The focus is on the Pilgrims, with “Indians” playing a supportive role—sitting down together with the Pilgrims who are giving thanks for a bountiful harvest. In reality, Native peoples everywhere gave—and give—thanks for “bountiful harvests” and good hunting. In truth, Columbus Day and Thanksgiving are all about greed, land theft, and murder. Emile, a post high school graduation student described her experience, “Making turkeys and then making pilgrim hats and sitting down and doing plays and everything...I don’t remember it very well, but I didn’t like it.” Now, as a young adult, this same student was able to reflect on the problematic nature of teaching Thanksgiving saying it “reinforc[es] the idea that we just invited the pilgrims over and gave them our land and our food and our crops. And here, we’ll take this small plot of land.”

If one is committed to teaching about Columbus Day and/or Thanksgiving, teachers should be prepared to unlearn what they have been taught—and teach the realities instead: “If you can’t, don’t teach the truth. Let it sit silently on the bookshelves in other safe places. Don’t talk about it...And if we’re going to insist that our history be taught to children as if no wrongs were ever done, no mistake ever made, couldn’t we just stop pretending that truth matters?” (Starnes, 2009, p. 449).

If educators decide to teach about these truths, they need to be careful about how they present the information to students, especially to young children. Teaching about genocide can certainly be done but the emotional repercussions may be great. As Sam said, “It’s kind of heavy to tell a five-year-old about, you know, Columbus cutting people’s hands off and stuff.” Michaels (2019) recommends teaching the truth but:

If students are too young to learn about genocide, don't teach them about genocide. But don't teach them falsehoods that they will later have to unlearn. Falsehoods that go in early form the template of our assumptions and common knowledge, and are very hard to unlearn (p. 4).

Another concern the Native students in these interviews brought up was that their fellow students were using Wikipedia to research their chosen tribe in the "pick-a-tribe" approach. As with all the other topics, the main goal seemed to be learning how colonization impacted the specific tribe. Again, Native peoples were the backdrops to the story of colonization. Where is the resistance? Why not have students go to the tribal websites to research the information from a tribal perspective or provide accurate and authentic resources approved by the tribe? If teachers are not aware of what makes teaching and learning sources accurate and authentic, how are they contributing to or breaking cycles that either dispel racial stereotyping or working to reinforce these practices?

Although the Ho-Chunk Nation was the only tribal nation anyone mentioned, I am particularly concerned about Leia's description of the week-long casino lesson. From her explanation, it would seem that this lesson does nothing but perpetuate stereotypes (i.e., "which other tribes [have] more money.") Reclaiming Native Truth (2018) points out that "the most *persistent and toxic* (emphasis mine) negative narrative is the myth that many Native Americans receive government benefits and are getting rich off casinos" (p. 9). It would be appropriate to teach the economic and social impacts on tribes related to gaming. For example, tribes with gaming facilities are often the largest employers for their region and gaming generates needed revenue. Those funds support their people's needs, including health, housing, education, and other vital programs. From the Act 31 Report, we know that teachers have the least

understanding about tribal sovereignty. In order to teach about casinos, this subject matter would need to be well-researched and -developed.

Teaching about the Indian boarding schools does not appear to have been situated within its larger historical, political and cultural contexts. When the students were taught about the boarding schools using “before-and-after” photos, did they understand the realities and horrors: the deaths, the emotional and physical abuse: tortures, beatings, rapes, starvation, lye soap forced into their mouths? If a student’s takeaway is “how they had their hair cut, stuff like that...how they didn’t let them practice their religion”— this “surface transformation” (Lomawaima, 2018, p. 13) creates more victims of the public relations campaign of,

hav[ing] been persuaded that they tell some truth about the transformative magic that boarding schools claimed to have wrought upon Native people. They are iconic in having come to stand for an elegiac settler colonial story of Indigenous transformation; regrettable, perhaps, but inevitable, and necessary for the building of U.S. nationhood. (Lomawaima, 2018, p. 16)

In truth, the “before-and-after” photos were commissioned to sell the idea of “civilizing” the students, to seek charitable donations and for recruitment purposes (Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center, n.d.). The teachers and, therefore, the students do not understand that the photos were altered to show the Indian students with lighter complexions, that the eagle feathers were props, and the main marketing tool was to convince the white visitors to the boarding schools that the Indian students were more the better for the changes.

When the era of government-mandated boarding schools ended, Native children began attending schools in their home communities. But the end of boarding schools certainly did not end the problems facing the children in Indian Education. Native students went from being

prepared mainly for industrial and domestic labor to attending schools certainly no less welcoming. The whole system, from design to implementation, was run by white people. The boarding schools destroyed whole generations of Native peoples: families, languages, cultures—gone.

Both students who discussed Indian mascots seemed interested in the topic, but both described the lesson as lacking in discussion: One student read some articles and then answered questions in the packet, while the other wrote an essay about his stance on the issue. Clearly, there is room for development here.

While the use of Indian mascots continues to be controversial, both for the state of Wisconsin and nationally (American Psychological Association, 2011; National Congress of American Indians, n.d.), only two students (11%) said they learned about Indian mascots. Indian mascots are being challenged at all levels in the K-12 public and private schools, colleges, and the professional leagues due to the harm they cause, especially to American Indian young people (Fryberg, 2008). As well, they teach non-Native young people to stereotype (Kim-Prieto, C., Goldstein, L., Okazaki, S., & Kirschner, B., 2010). I have heard of teachers taking a classroom poll—rather than having them conduct honest research so students can make informed decisions about the use of Indian mascots—but this issue is not about popularity. From the students' experiences, teaching about Indian mascots with a packet provided an impersonal learning experience in which the Kiffa felt her teacher “didn't care.” However, Alex had positive comments about the teacher. From Alex's words, he felt validated, “she loves the rights of everyone.”

When students are shown the research about the impact of Indian mascots on both Native and non-Native people, they can make better informed choices. In fact, all the tribes in

Wisconsin have called for the elimination of Indian mascots in schools. This is an issue that every school should incorporate into their lessons for students to learn from—that is the voice of the People.

I had not anticipated how emotional the interviews I conducted with Native youth and their parents would be. As they told their stories, they shared their pain. Some students cried, some did not, but I could hear the pain in their voices, in the words they chose. Whenever I saw students in pain, I would ask them if they wanted to end the interview. None of them did. As difficult as it was for them, they spoke through their tears, discomfort, and dismay. They want their stories to be heard and they want to be listened to and most importantly, they want to create change. As one student described her pain and the reason for wanting to continue:

It's very alienating, like, secluding...and it just feels like you're an afterthought...To not be in the curriculum, where everybody else is being learned about and talked about, and then we get a day. And it's frustrating. And it just *makes me not want to pay attention*. When I'm not included in the curriculum, it just makes me not really care about it that much. ...*It just makes me not want to be there which is hard because I love being in the classroom and learning. But it just makes me not want to be there.*

What I now realize is with years of fielding questions from random strangers, racist assumptions, and ignorance, over the years I have developed a thick skin in order to cope; however, the young people are only in the midst of trying to develop thick skins and really, they should not have to. It hurts to hear their realities. It hurts when we see our babies cry. And our hearts break as we know that, for our Indian kids, the trauma in the education system is only the beginning.

Limitations

The students who chose to participate all had one thing in common. Minimally, they reported attending pow-wows and feeling proud of their American Indian identities. Most of the students have parents active in the Native community. They either knew me or knew of me. While I tried to reach students who could provide a broad range of experiences, I noticed that some students felt that they had to give the “right” answer even though I assured parents and students that there *were* no right or wrong answers. Perhaps these youth opted out of participating because they had not been taught about American Indians in school—so they might have felt that their contributions would not have been meaningful.

Lastly, in order to understand their experiences, I tried to reach out to parents of students who had struggled with school academically and/or socially. I was not able to get the most frustrated students to participate. “I hate school,” “I don’t want to talk about it,” or “My kid hates school, [so] why would he want to do this?” were common reactions.

Other times I had to speculate. Perhaps parents felt that since their children had struggled with school, that they would not have been good candidates for an interview. Perhaps they were so frustrated with the school system, they did not want to talk about it. Or maybe they were not comfortable with sharing their frustrations, even thinking their words might lead to retaliation. Or maybe they were not comfortable with me. It is likely that the most discouraged families chose not to participate.

Ho-Chunk was the only tribe the students discussed. One reason may be due to the location of the study which was in the Ho-Chunk Nation’s traditional and ancestral homelands. The American Indian Studies program in the Department of Public Instruction recommends that schools start by teaching about the Native nations on whose ancestral lands the school is located.

Conclusion

This study focused on the context in which “Native peoples” (in Wisconsin or elsewhere) are presented in the classroom. My goal was to understand the efficacy of Act 31 by listening to the responses of the students. The voices of American Indian students attending Wisconsin public schools often go unheard. They are often silenced. Here, these children have trusted me with their truths, and I have promised them that these truths will be heard. My findings demonstrate that Act 31 is not being implemented with integrity.

Reclaiming Native Truth (2018) conducted focus groups over several years, primarily with non-Native communities: “The good news is that when people are exposed to accurate facts about Native American history and contemporary life, they believe the information, feel cheated that they didn’t learn it in school, and quickly become more open to a new narrative” (p. 8).

“Before we teach it, we have to learn it” (Moody, 2014, title page). We need programs that properly prepare administrators and educators to teach accurately and authentically about the tribes in Wisconsin. This means that teacher education programs need to evaluate whether they are properly preparing teachers and administrators to implement Act 31 with integrity. To begin this step, this means that teachers need coursework that helps them prepare appropriate lesson plans about tribes in Wisconsin and how to integrate these lessons into the school-year curriculum where they naturally fit rather than rushing through a singular unit lacking context. Teacher education programs need to help teachers learn where they can find accurate and authentic resources but it is the school board’s responsibility to provide “adequate instructional materials, texts and library services which reflect the cultural diversity and pluralistic nature of American society” [see §121.02)(1)(h)].

I recommend a full launching of Wisconsin First Nations: American Indian Studies in Wisconsin,⁹ a website that contains curated resources broken down by grade levels, tribes, lesson plans, maps, field trip ideas, and videos.

I recommend that all schools purchase accurate and authentic books for classrooms, book rooms, and libraries (see “A Selected Bibliography for American Indian Studies,” a curated list by Slapin and Byington, 2018).

I recommend that educators seize every opportunity for professional development. In Wisconsin, I recommend attending the Wisconsin Indian Education Association Annual Conference,¹⁰ Earth Partnership-Indigenous Arts and Sciences,¹¹ American Indian Studies Summer Institute,¹² and Widening the Circle.¹³

Unprepared and underprepared teachers—and lack of context and resource materials—have consequences to all students but particularly to Native students. What does this do to the heart and mind of an innocent child?

⁹ <https://wisconsinfirstnations.org/>

¹⁰ <https://wiea.net/>

¹¹ <https://earthpartnership.wisc.edu/>

¹² <https://dpi.wi.gov/amind/summer-institute>

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/WTCindigenouseducation/>

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Paper Three

Consequences of Relative Invisibility and Points of Validation

Abstract

For this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 urban American Indian youth, ranging from eighth grade to two years post-graduation to gain insight into their experiences. Focusing primarily on text and video resources used to teach about Native peoples, I use narrative analysis to explore the consequences of “relative invisibility” and “points of validation.” Results from students’ stories (“I felt attacked,” “I felt isolated”) indicate that they are harmed by the negative or inaccurate portrayals of *themselves* in the schools. While students reported fewer stories of feeling validated at school, their insights show how to create spaces and places for positive learning experiences.

Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question

How do you do?

No, I am not Chinese.

No, not Spanish.

No, I am American Indi-uh, Native American.

No, not from India.

No, not Apache.

No, not Navajo.

No, not Sioux.

No, we are not extinct.

Yes, Indian.

Oh?

So that's where you get those high cheekbones.

Your great grandmother, huh?

An Indian Princess, huh?

Hair down to there?

Let me guess, Cherokee?

Oh, so you've had an Indian friend?

That close?

Oh, so you've had an Indian lover?

That tight?

Oh, so you've had an Indian servant?

That much?

Yeah, it was awful what you guys did to us.

It's real decent of you to apologize.

No, I don't know where you can get peyote.

No, I don't know where you can get Navajo rugs real cheap.

No, I didn't make this. I bought it at Bloomingdales.

Thank you. I like your hair too.

I don't know if anyone knows whether or not Cher is really Indians.

No, I didn't make it rain tonight.

Yeah. Uh-huh. Spirituality.

Uh-huh. Yeah. Spirituality. Uh-huh. Mother

Earth. Yeah. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Spirituality.

No, I didn't major in archery.

Yeah, a lot of us drink too much.

Some of us can't drink enough.

This ain't no stoic look.

This is my face.

—Diane Burns, 1989/1992

(Lac Courte Oreilles/Chemehuevi)

Introduction

Not long ago, my husband and I were in a restaurant and I went to use the restroom. Two young white women were there, chatting. When I went to the sink to wash my hands, one asked, “Are you Mexican?” No. “Latina?” No. “Filipino?” No. “Asian?” No. “Well, what *are* you then? I’ve named *everything*.” I was not going to play her “What kind of not white person are you?” game (see Ahmed, 2013).

This type of interaction happens between white people and brown folks. All. The. Time. Many people do not know that we, as American Indians, still exist. If we do, they are likely to assume that we all live on an “Indian” reservation. Perhaps they have an image of what we look like. Whatever the case, they invisibilize us as individuals and as peoples.

Several years ago, I took a course called “American Indian Families.” The class was mainly made up of white, in-state (Wisconsin) students. On the first day, the professor asked everyone to introduce themselves and describe what they knew about American Indians. Despite the fact that Act 31 (see Appendix A for the full set of statutes) mandates that Wisconsin public schools teach about the history, culture and sovereignty of the tribes within the state, the students had very little to share: “We did *something* in middle school.” “We *did* the Thanksgiving thing,” “I had *it* in elementary school.”

By the end of the semester, the students were able to speak comfortably about how government policies impacted American Indian families. But what if they had not taken this college course? Would they have become like those women in the bathroom who had named *everything*?

Theoretical Framework

Invisibilization—the practice and process by which the dominating society marginalizes or excludes certain individuals and groups—is a long-standing societal issue (Macaulay & Salmons, 2019). Fryberg and Townsend (2008) note that those who are part of the white majority see a wide reflection of themselves in curricula and daily life. However, those from marginalized groups do not experience the same reality. We are either left out or represented negatively in curricula and media. Fryberg and Townsend (2008) define two types of invisibility: (1) *absolute invisibility*: refers to a situation where there is no representation at

all (2) *relative invisibility*: refers to a situation where outdated and/or erroneous images of a group persist. Perpetrated both historically and in the present—by the government, schools, and corporate media—invisibilization has a devastating effect on Native young people. Fryberg and Townsend (2008) argue, in part, that either type of invisibility “deprives individuals of a sense of belonging” (p. 189).

Social representations provide opportunities for students to see their possible selves (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008). For instance, some students see a wide range of representations of themselves as they are and as they can be. These varied positive representations are all over the schools: in curricular materials, on posters, and even be reflected in their teachers’ faces. American Indian students are not afforded the same opportunities.

In their study examining American Indian mascots, Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman & Stone (2008) conclude that exposure to these images has a negative impact on aspects of self-concept for American Indian students. According to the Research Findings: Compilation of all findings (Reclaiming Native Truth, 2018a), the narrative to which Native youth are exposed is created by non-Native people in positions of power that have been guided by misperceptions, assumptions and stereotypes focused on deficit and disparity. “This deficit framing reinforces negative stereotypes among the dominant culture and can harm the self-esteem and aspiration of our own people, and especially our children” (Reclaiming Native Truth, 2018a, p. 9).

Fryberg & Eason (2017) point out that the most prevalent characterizations of American Indians are sterilized, romantic depictions derived from 18th- and 19th century depictions which create individual and intergroup consequences. This exposure decreases American Indians students’ self-esteem, feelings of community worth and achievement-related future goals. Put another way, relative invisibility causes harm for American Indian youth.

Empirical Studies of Images of American Indians

Providing professional development and presentations in school districts, college campuses and conferences, Thunder and Leary (2008), over a five-year period, collected and analyzed responses using grounded theory from the diverse groups of participants. In each session they would ask participants to make three columns. In the first column, participants were to make a list to answer the first question, “What do you know about American Indians?” Their study found that the majority of people listed social characteristics; of these 216 were considered positive and 274 were considered negative. Ironically, receiving equal entries, the two most common characteristics listed were “Nature/Connection to Earth” (57) and “Alcoholism” (57).

After participants completed their list in the first column, in the second column, for each entry listed in column one, they were to list where they had learned the information from; 757 sources were identified.¹⁴ The breakdown includes: 45% of the entries attributed to mass media¹⁵ (340); 28% from personal knowledge/observation (211); and 20% from formal education. Mass media “taught” participants about American Indians twice as much as formal education.

In their study of images of Native peoples in the media, Leavitt, Covarrubias, Perez, & Fryberg (2015) demonstrate that the media either underrepresent Native peoples, or often limit or stereotype representations: “[W]e contend that the invisibility of Native Americans in the media undermines self-understanding by homogenizing Native American identity, creating narrow and limiting identity prototypes for Native Americans, and evoking deindividuation and self-stereotyping among contemporary Native Americans” (p. 39).

¹⁴ Not all entries listed sources

¹⁵ Top sources included movies, television and news

Analyzing books, television shows and movies set within a contemporary context from the early 1990s to 2011, McLaurin (2019) found two classic typesets: 1. The negatively portrayed characters tended to be out of touch with their cultures, often received benefits, operated casinos, were untrustworthy, and considered to be fake. 2. Those who were positively portrayed were generally poor, lived on reservations, were culturally knowledgeable, and had supernatural tendencies. In multiple focus groups, Reclaiming Native Truth (2018a) found “the most persistent and toxic narrative is the myth that many Native Americans receive government benefits and are getting rich off of casinos” (p. 9).

Sports teams’ Indian “mascots”¹⁶ represent egregious examples of identity stereotypes and limited representations that have a powerful impact on Native young people (see Chaney, Burke, & Burkley, 2011; Dolley, 2003; Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman & Stone 2008; and Kim-Prieto, Goldstein, Okazaki & Kirschner, 2010). According to Social Representations Theory, (Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman & Stone, 2008) such widely held ideas, images and meaning of the public’s perception of American Indians as are represented in the “mascots” of sports teams has a negative impact on American Indian youth. “A social representations perspective on these findings is useful because it suggests that American Indian images such as American Indian mascots and other fictionalized, idealized, and noncontemporary representations may be associated with low self-esteem and in-group ratings because they do not provide guidelines or images for how to realize positive and contemporary selves” (p. 216).

¹⁶ The American Psychological Association (APA), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), as well as many tribes including all of the Native Nations in Wisconsin oppose the use of Indian mascots.

Specifically, based on their integration of results from four studies,¹⁷ Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman & Stone (2008) demonstrate that Indian representations impact Indian young people through experiences of mental health problems, such as lower self-esteem, lower feelings of personal and community worth, and lower achievement-related possible selves.

School-based Sources of Misinformation, Disinformation, and Erasure

There is no doubt that marginalized communities experience both relative and absolute invisibility in the schools. The place that is currently referred to as the “United States” was built on a foundation of genocide, slavery, and land theft; and has resulted in erasure of the histories of Indigenous peoples, Black peoples, and Brown peoples. The responsibility of the schools—then and now—is to “educate” the young people in the dominant paradigm. As such, it develops and instills a national narrative.

Insofar as the schools in the state of Wisconsin are mandated by law to provide students with accurate information about the tribes in Wisconsin, we can assess the degree to which such a proactive intervention might provide an antidote to the erasure or stereotyping of Native people.

One way to understand how schools are implementing Act 31 is to analyze the “Wisconsin Education Act 31: Administrator and Teacher Survey Report” (Hadley & Trechter, 2014). The report contains responses gathered from these surveys an electronic survey that was sent out statewide to Wisconsin teachers and administrators. The purpose was to help state and tribal agencies determine ways to provide information, training, and technical assistance to

¹⁷ Study 1, 2 and 3 used Chief Wahoo, Disney’s Pocahontas, and negative outcomes (statistics about social problems); Study 2 used the same representations. Study 4 broadened the images to include Chief Illiniwek, the Haskell Indians mascot, and an achievement related representation (college).

school districts to support their work in teaching about the tribes in Wisconsin. Both administrators and teachers responded that textbooks and videos or DVDs were the two most common resources used to teach about the tribes in Wisconsin.

Textbooks

Following the unstated rules of “traditional American education,” textbooks serve as gateways to “official” knowledge. And, as such, they continue to marginalize the histories and experiences for American Indians and other marginalized groups. In other words, textbooks perpetuates relative and absolute invisibility of the peoples the education system views as “minorities.” In Padgett’s study (2015), he selected the top five U.S. textbooks with the most American Indian content out of the 25 U.S textbooks under consideration in one county of Florida’s public schools. He found that colonialism and assimilation were the upheld models for portraying American Indians including the lack of American Indian tribal governments, economic systems, women; further he found the discussion on American Indian religions was limited to general information. This invisibility is prevalent for other marginalized groups, too, including for Southeast Asians (see Wright & Boun, 2011), Asians (see Hartlep & Scott, 2016), African Americans (see Woodson, 2015) and Latino peoples (see Rodriguez & Ruiz, 2000).

In 1991, an ad hoc group of San Francisco Bay Area parents, students, school workers, and community activists came together to oppose the California statewide adoption of the Houghton-Mifflin history/social science texts for kindergarten through eighth grade. The group called themselves CURE (Communities United against Racism in Education, 1991). Their activism ultimately led to the decision by several school districts not to adopt the textbooks. Below is an excerpt from CURE’s introduction to their analysis:

After a thorough reading of the [texts], we found the series to contain stereotypes, omissions, distortions, exaggerations, and outright lies about peoples of color; and the justifications and trivializations of some of the most vicious social practices in history. The texts are racist, sexist and classist: marginalizing the lives and struggles of women, working and poor people, people with disabilities, and gay and lesbian people.

[HM's] idea of a "common history" ... portray[s] our lives as a mere peripheral part of world history; place[s] the white establishment at the center of the world and all the rest of us as their "burden." The insidious message is this: *In order for some children to be proud of their histories, other children must be made ashamed of theirs.*

If we are to nurture young minds, it is our responsibility to provide our children with socially and culturally relevant curriculum. We have to teach them who they are, where they came from, and how they can change the world (paras. 2-4).

Wisconsin has inherited this legacy of invisibilizing and stereotyping Native peoples as seen in a detailed history about how Wisconsin's textbooks and curricular materials from the 1920s to the 1980s presented American Indians (Leary, 2018). For example, in the *Wisconsin Indian Tribes* pamphlets created by the Wisconsin Historical Society for students in 1923, 1927, and 1931, Leary writes that the author "does not distinguish between peoples with an ongoing, contemporary presence and those whose presence or relationship with the region is primarily historical" (p. 156) and "American Indians were worthy of study, albeit largely as a sort of relic or curiosity (p. 159).

In the 1949 text, *It Happened Here: Stories of Wisconsin*, Leary pulls from an introductory passage, '...It is thought they came from Asia, but we cannot be sure. They left no written records telling their story. Later the woodland Indians came, perhaps from Canada. Many legends have been told about them. You can read these stories in other books. This book

is about the white people who came to our state’ (p. 160) noting that the book “specifically excludes” (p. 160) information about American Indians. In the 1977 edition of *Exploring Wisconsin*, Leary points out that “the actual incorporation of racial-, ethnic-, and gender-focused content is mostly cosmetic” (p. 221).

Fast forward to now. Looking at the Act 31 Report (Hadley & Trechter, 2014), we see that there is still cause for concern. “Textbooks” that respondents listed or described as the *most helpful resource*¹⁸ to teach about the tribes in Wisconsin included such remarks as, for example:

- “I actually use our social studies text, which *touches* (emphases mine) on early Native American life, which leads to further discussion. At some point we pull out the Wisconsin Map and begin to look for names of cities, rivers, and counties that bear Native American names” (p. 48).
- “I only have one resource, an old textbook that has a unit (emphases mine) on American Indian tribes” (p. 48).
- “We really do not cover more than what is included in our text (emphasis mine) about ‘America Moves West.’ I wish we covered more but there is no time for anything anymore” (p. 52).
- “Our textbook had a lot of information about the early settlement of Native Americans” (p. 49).

These examples of what teachers draw from in textbooks allude to ways that those sources homogenize hundreds, if not thousands, of nations of peoples into “Native Americans” and the “information” comes from an inaccurate historical perspective, at best. In addition to textbooks, teachers listed other print resources, which turned out to be “resources” for mis-/disinformation:

¹⁸ Unless a teacher listed a specific title, much of the information is difficult to evaluate. For example, many teachers listed only their “textbook” as their best resource or “picture books my students like.”

- *Black Elk Speaks* (Neihardt, 2008) is ostensibly a narrative by Black Elk, an Oglala Lakota elder and holy person who witnessed the Wounded Knee massacre. The Lakota people are from the Great Plains, not the Wisconsin area. (2) The “narrative” itself has been widely criticized to the point that it’s been called “fiction.” (3) And, the book is not a “resource” for anything. (for reviews, see Couser, 2004, pp. 42-43; Velie, 2004).
- *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky: A Message from Chief Seattle* (Jeffers, 1991). The problems with this source are: (1) the author attributes the speech “Chief Seattle.”¹⁹ (2) Jeffers derived this “speech” from a number of romanticized pieces written by white people; and (3) Seealth was Suquamish-Duwamish, from the Northwest Coast, some distance from Wisconsin (for review, see Seale, 2005).
- *The Sign of the Beaver* (Speare, 1983) (1) Speare filled this book with “sure-fire American Indian stereotypes,” including invented language and ceremony, and (2) The unnamed “tribe” is from Maine, not Wisconsin. (for reviews see, Slapin & Seale, 1992; Students and Teachers Against Racism, 2007; Reese, 2007)

Videos

In the Act 31 Report, videos²⁰ listed as the most helpful resource to teach about the tribes in Wisconsin are concerning as well. While some videos listed seemed to be of high quality such as “Video about Tribal Sovereignty, spear fishing, and Treaty Rights” others were problematic. For example, one teacher listed a video called “Spirit.” This title refers to Disney’s (2002) *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*, which “follows the adventures of a wild and rambunctious mustang stallion as he journeys through the untamed American frontier.

¹⁹ One spelling is Seealth and there are other spellings as well, but it is definitely not Seattle.

²⁰ As with textbooks, many teachers simply listed, “video.”

Encountering man for the first time, Spirit defies being broken, even as he develops a remarkable friendship with a young Lakota brave” (TV Guide, 2002).

Another teacher indicated using “Safari Montage Manifest Destiny,” a collection of three titles that refers to the statement of the inevitability of the continued territorial expansion of the boundaries of the United States. from eastern borders to the Pacific Ocean. The titles in this collection include: *In the Midst of Savage Darkness: Missionaries Go West*, *Westward I Go Free: The Hazards of Traveling West*, and *The Barren Rock: The Journey of the Mormons*.

My concern with using the problematic resources is that they may romanticize Native peoples, but at worst, they may promote false narratives and legitimize colonization, murder and Manifest Destiny (see Strass & Vogel, 2018; Raheja, 2010). Another added problem is that sources such as these have not been reviewed by Native scholars. Using a cartoon as “cultural” or “historical” material in teaching about any ethnicity is irresponsible, to say the least. Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, & Stone (2008) found that exposure to romanticized Indians such as Pocahontas, while may be less problematic as Indian mascots, still cause harm to American Indian youth. Nonetheless, this is the state of affairs in the materials used in classrooms every day in every way—to teach about “Indians.” Additionally, none of the problematic resources teach about the tribes in Wisconsin.

The Study

This study investigates the impact of relative invisibility by listening to American Indian young people about their experiences in Wisconsin schools where Act 31—which, in part, mandates that public schools teach about the history, culture and sovereignty of the tribes and bands at least three times in Wisconsin—should be operative. I use narrative inquiry to uncover youths’ experiences in school and, ultimately, the consequences of relative invisibility. Although

it should be noted that the impacts of *absolute invisibility* figure prominently in the Native students' comments—several students, for instance, reported not having learned about American Indians at all in elementary or middle school—I focus on *relative invisibility*.

Based on Fryberg and Townsend's work, I hypothesize that when educators utilize outdated, erroneous, and/or inaccurate resources to “teach” about American Indian peoples, students will verbally signify (e.g., “I didn’t want to read that book anymore”) that they question their sense of belonging in their school lives and/or indicate the harm that has been caused to them. Since my study focuses on the manifestation of relative invisibility, I also include stories in which students describe feeling validated. Byington (2015) found that when American Indian students participating in cultural programs had the opportunity to learn about American Indians, whether their own tribe or not, it created a positive sense of self and positive feelings towards American Indians as a whole and was a primary reason to continue in the programming. If the relative invisibility causes harm, points of validation creates belonging.

Furthermore, when outdated and/or erroneous images are used as instructional resources they can have unintended consequences that can lead to the deterioration of students' positive mental health, thus, leading to increased low self-esteem and negative perceptions of self.

Methods

My role as a Researcher

I am a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and grew up in an urban setting. I have always been active in my community which has provided me with the opportunity to build relationships with Native peoples over many years. When I graduated from college, I obtained a position serving American Indian students and families in my local public-school system. I

provided direct services to students as well as served as a resource and provided professional development to teachers and staff.

As a Native person, I attended urban public schools where I had very limited exposure to how American Indians were represented in the curricula. It should be noted that my education stemmed from a time before the enactment of Act 31. An instance that stands out for me is when I attended the ninth grade. In my ninth-grade history textbook there was one paragraph I remember that mentioned Indians, however, that paragraph was not discussed or referenced in the class.

I am hopeful to contribute scholarship that will highlight the work that needs to be done in order to make Act 31 more effective for practitioners, appropriate for students, and reflective of all Native peoples, particularly in Wisconsin. Since my time as a student in the K-12 educational system, I have seen some positive changes but there is so much work that needs to be done. I have been through the processes of developing, negotiating, and maintaining my identity as an urban Indian—and hope that my work will transform my grandchildren's and their grandchildren's experiences in school.

To do this work, I will draw from works outlined in *Research as Resistance: Revisiting Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-Oppressive Approaches* (Strega & Brown, 2015). Here, the editors caution against research that lacks perspective and provides views from a deficit model. As an Indian parent and a researcher, I do not view the struggles of minoritized communities as deficit; rather, my work creates space for their voices and generates knowledge. In order to understand and reverse the social ills (in this case invisibility), the need is to “reverse the gaze and investigate and problematize the other side of the equation—that is, the behaviours, discourses, and perceptions of the dominant—that we create possibilities for change that are transformative rather than incremental” (p. 6).

Participants

When I was in the initial stages of developing my research project, I proposed my idea to two groups of parents who served American Indian students. I had been involved with both groups for many years. Parents and students readily approved my proposal and several volunteered to be part of the study. I received IRB approval to conduct this study.

To recruit parents and students, I attended American Indian community events where I sought out parents of students in the study age ranging from seventh grade through high school including students who had recently graduated within two years. If prospective participants were interested in learning more, I provided an overall research description and provided them with an introductory letter (see appendix C), invitation, and consent form. Participating families included diverse groups representing various backgrounds, including educational attainment, community and tribal involvement, and varying socio-economic status.

This paper represents interviews conducted with 19 American Indian young people from public schools who ranged from the end of their eighth-grade year to two years postgraduation from high school within two years. Five students were either at the end of their eighth-grade year or had completed it. Eight students were in high school, grades nine through twelve. Six students had completed high school. Approximately half were female. In total, they attended 16 elementary schools, 11 middle schools and eight high schools. Pseudonyms were used for all participants for confidentiality.

Data Collection

I conducted semi-structured interviews (see Appendix D for youth protocol), which I recorded and then transcribed. Although I am not reporting on the parents here, I gave students

and parents²¹ the option to complete their interviews together.²² Not all students had a parent who provided an interview and not all parents had a student who provided an interview.

Interviews began in mid-May 2019 and were completed in late August 2019. The student interviews ranged from 13-65 minutes.

Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis Approach and Narrative Inquiry

Data analysis was conducted by using a qualitative thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns, or themes, within data. This method calls for getting familiar with the data and then generating initial codes. These codes, identified by the researcher, are gathered into clearly defined and named themes using an interpretive analysis where meanings are generated into initial codes regarding the phenomena. Initial coding can highlight similarities and differences across the data set and can generate unanticipated insights; this aspect is particularly useful in under-researched areas or when views on a topic are not known or when generating new found knowledge.

A key aspect in identifying a theme is that it captures something important to the research topic and it represents a patterned response within the data set. Reviewing and refining are part of the process. While researcher judgment is necessary to identify themes, using this approach where the data is collected specifically for the research means that the identified themes are linked to the data themselves. Thematic coding was performed by using NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis software program.

²¹ While parents were interviewed, the data is not shared in this paper.

²² A modified Talking Circle was offered but all participants opted for interviews.

Thematic coding allowed me to create an “impact” code—noting passages that students shared in which they discussed how they were impacted. With this code established, I used narrative analysis (Kohler Riessman, 1993) to “systematically interpret their interpretations” (p. 5). Storytellers provided accounts of their own experiences. I then selected which texts to use and decided how to display them to “provide ground for [my] arguments” (p. 13).

Results

RAELYNN

Raelynn shared an experience she had in elementary in which her music teacher had shown the class a video of “some white guy doing an Eagle Dance”:

I felt kind of offended. I don’t know. It was just weird because we never really did anything like that ever in that school. And we don’t do anything, hardly. They don’t go into specifics. They don’t talk about the land. They don’t talk about anything...They never said anything about us really...I just remember kids laughing and me leaving the classroom because it offended me a lot... I felt really attacked because—I don’t know. They just showed us that video and let the kids laugh. I was probably the only Native in my music class and I was just sitting there watching the video *and they [the teacher] didn’t really say, “Stop, don’t laugh.” They never said anything to any of these kids when they were laughing...I felt disturbed. I felt attacked.*

I asked Raelynn if anyone had called a parent or asked why she was upset:

They didn't call anybody. I just went into the breakroom. They were just like "are you ok?" *And I said no.* They just left me in the breakroom and didn't say anything...No one knew I was Native until I told them [my tribes]. It seemed like they didn't really even care, to be honest. It seemed like they just kind of shrugged it off and were like, "Oh whatever."

Raelynn also shared other disturbing experiences. This one from fourth grade:

When [the teacher] would pop in videos like that, kids would start *laughing because the white kids, you know, they didn't really know they were being ignorant...* [The teacher] was like, "Oh yeah, the *Last of the Mohicans*, hahaha"...We watched [that] video...and nobody paid attention, nobody really even cared....I felt like [the teachers] were making fun of us like it was supposed to be some kind of joke to them...All the stuff they showed us, when we were kids, it wasn't very accurate...The teachers basically made it a joke...Making fun of us. They were cracking jokes. They were laughing.

Raelynn did not know the students that bullied her:

In middle school when I was walking home...some kids were bullying me because I was Native. They put their hands over their mouths and doing that thing. *I remember running home and crying.* And then I remember the next day going back up to the school to say, "Hey, I'm being bullied because I'm Native." *They didn't really do anything.* They said, "Well, since it didn't happen on school grounds, we can't do anything."

Raelynn is sent to the "breakroom" for getting upset with the video. In some schools the "breakroom" is known as the time out room. She was punished for being upset with the poor choice in video selection and for reacting to kids mocking what they thought to be Native

culture. The teacher laughed and classmates followed. Whether or not the Eagle dancer was Native does not matter because the only thing this child felt was humiliated, not only for the derisive way that Native people were treated in the curricular materials but also for the way that she was treated for objecting/reacting to this derision. Repeatedly, teachers and school personnel not only demonstrate racism but ignore her concerns when she expresses upset.

Raelynn did not share any stories of feeling validated in school. Just about everything that Raelynn experienced inside and outside of the classrooms—from non-Native students and teachers—demonstrates how the school system invisibilizes Native children.

TANNER

I was interviewing Tanner's mom when Tanner arrived. He mentioned that that day, his teacher had shown a Diane Sawyer *20/20* Special, entitled "Hidden America: Children of the Plains."²³ As Tanner divulged bits of information, he appeared to me to be in shock. He was blurting out short phrases every so often, apparently trying to figure out and process what he had seen. I was troubled by the short-term and quite possibly long-term impact of viewing this TV show on this child:

It kind of made it sound like, you know, all Native Americans are poor....It was horrible....Alcoholics, like it was very sad. It was really horrible. I felt embarrassed....Low life....After class people were asking me like, 'didn't I grow up on a reservation' I told them a long time ago. The friends I did know were [this tribe], I'm [tribe] and I told them that it would never be like that. The video really made Native American people look like alcoholics, gamblers.

²³ For reviews see Schmidt, 2011; Keene, 2011

After a while, it seemed that Tanner was starting to make connections:

The textbooks, they bring up scalping and like, you know, it kind of makes us like primitive...In the textbooks it says Native Americans did that to make trophies or whatever. It made us look like savages. I didn't want to read anymore after that...

In class, we'd read the textbook, you know, we'd do a worksheet about it...I kind of learned other people's point of views on Native Americans...Like the video [*Children of the Plains*], it portrays them as gamblers, alcoholics, people with no money. And that's what they're making it look like; it's just not true.

They made him [Christopher Columbus] look like a good guy and that's what I thought to begin with, you know, he explored America. But then later on I realized that, you know—whoa—he enslaved them, he brought disease to them and everything...In elementary school they made them sound more primitive, like savages, you know, murderers, you know, the type of people that would rob you. And then now, alcoholics, gamblers, people who are poor, and not all of them are. I, myself, I've been called "gambler." One time I came to school— "Hey, just get back from [the casino]?"

When I asked Tanner what he thought his peers thought of Native people, he said: "Probably exactly what the video says, gamblers, alcoholics." I also asked Tanner how he felt as an American Indian. He said that he felt "antagonized." Asked to explain what he meant by that, he said, "I look bad because I am Native American." At this point, Tanner could not talk anymore. He looked broken, so we stopped the interview. I asked both Tanner and his mom if they wanted to stop, but they both wanted to continue. After giving him some time to recover, I

asked what he and his family did to build his American Indian identity. He said that he attends powwows, visits with Native relatives and families and attends other American Indian events.

The visible impact for this child—of reflecting on the TV show and making connections to other curricular material and messages—was raw and I was concerned about his well-being, especially after I had read the teacher’s reaction to communication from Tanner’s mom.

During our meeting, Tanner told his mom and me how the teacher had put him on the spot, asking him what he had thought of the movie. Of course, he had told her it was fine. He just wanted to leave the class. Later, Tanner’s mom had reached out to the teacher by email to let her know how Tanner had *really* felt about the video. The teacher responded that Tanner had spoken with her about the video afterwards but had given her a “completely different view.” However, more disturbing than if Tanner had “approved the video” or the fact that his teacher had not seemed to want to understand his mother’s concerns about Tanner’s real feelings, the teacher responded to Tanner’s mom that other students (read: white) of hers had visited “this reservation over the last few years, so we know that the descriptions in the movie are still accurate.”

Tanner’s story reminded me of a former student whose teacher at the same school (a different teacher than Tanner’s) had shown him this particular Diane Sawyer *20/20 Special* as well. He had been so upset that he had gotten up, punched the wall, and left the building. That day, this student’s mother asked me to accompany her in a meeting with his teachers. There were two teachers present. I let them know the enormity of this situation: This student had not punched the wall (“acted out”) because he was a “bad kid.” Rather, he had reacted to a harmful, racist film that his teacher was showing in his classroom. I explained that the one time they “taught” about Native peoples, it was in the negative context of alcoholism and dysfunction. They both agreed not to show this video again. However, from the interviewees, I learned that multiple schools show this Diane Sawyer *20/20 Special*.

FABI

Similar to Tanner's experience, after implementing a lesson about American Indians, Fabi's teacher asked her—or rather, told her—that it had been a “good lesson.” Fabi disagreed, “It's really not a good lesson,” but felt she was powerless to get her teacher to understand. “And I don't feel like they, I mean, I feel like they took my feedback, but they weren't going to do anything about it.” Fabi provided her thoughts,

I really wish they would show kids more of the truth. Of everything I learned...It was from the perspective of the colonizers. And for me, that made me feel *really bad* because I don't want to learn about people that hurt people like me, I don't want to learn about what they thought or what they did or anything like that. *I wanted to learn how my people felt* but since that's not really looked at a lot, I didn't get to learn anything about that, I've only learned that here [at home].

Fabi mentioned the problems with her textbooks and other resources:

The sources were not very good. The textbooks are usually written by a white author. I looked up the authors and they are people that just *learned about us*. It's never you know, a Native person that writes these books. So it's just a bunch of facts really smushed in there.

When asked what Fabi thought her non-Native peers thought about American Indians, she said:

I don't even think they thought much about us, like at all. I think we were just like [it's] another lesson. I think they thought we were just like, you know, we did powwows and we celebrated, and then we got destroyed and wrecked and like genocide and everything like that. I don't think they really understood that it's a lot more than that. It wasn't really that important to them. It seemed like it was just another lesson.

Prompted by her mom, Fabi shared an interaction she had had with the Vice Principal, who had worn a “Cleveland Indians” jersey to school. Fabi noticed it during the daily video announcements. Fabi said that she went to speak with this administrator about the jersey—and he denied having worn it. A couple of weeks later, Fabi asked him why he supported such an “offensive” mascot. Now, he appeared to have acknowledged her feelings—and, at the same time, minimized her concerns: “I get that [Indian mascots are harmful] but the Milwaukee Brewers are probably offensive to alcoholics.”

Fabi challenged the administrator by asking him if he was equating Native peoples with addiction: “So you’re comparing a race [of people] and alcoholics?” Getting nowhere with her argument, she walked away: “I could just see that he really thought, he truly thought that that was similar....it just really affected me because I just realized how little people know and how ignorant people can be about that.”

Fabi also shared two positive experiences that she described as validating her identity.

- (1) “One of my teachers really liked me, and she wanted to understand [American Indians] and she even attended my graduation in fifth grade, which I thought was great.”
- (2) Her middle school teacher put up flags to represent the heritages of the students in the class. Fabi had not been aware that the teacher was going to do this but “thought that was really cool and can’t believe they put [my tribe’s] flag there. I was like, ‘Look at that.’ So it was nice. It was really nice to see that.”

Both experiences may be seen as small, but to Fabi and to other Native students, it is a very big deal. It is clear that helping Native students to have a positive self- and community image is not difficult. All educators must do is to listen to them. Fabi uses her voice to attempt

to create change by providing feedback to her teacher as well as educate the VP on an issue. However, it is apparent that, although teachers generally may *appear* to be asking their Native students to evaluate a lesson or group of lessons, they are demanding *positive* evaluations. The teachers in this paper are positioned in a power dynamic and will not usually tolerate negative feedback from a student—especially a Native student. With the exception of her middle school teacher, in both cases where Fabi tried to educate her teachers, Fabi’s feedback fell on deaf ears.

LEIA

In her seventh-grade social studies class, Leia’s teacher showed the class a video about the “Land-Bridge Theory,” which purports “the idea that Paleoindians walked from Asia over an ancient land bridge approximately 15,000 years ago” (Ewen, 2014, para. 1). Although it is referred to as a “theory,” is commonly accepted and taught as scientific fact (see Ewen, 2014). This lesson, which was different from her home teachings, particularly bothered Leia, “I remember at the end of last year, we had a unit on Native Americans and how they got here. And the teacher said that Native Americans came from Asia.”

When I asked Leia what she thought her peers thought about Native peoples, Leia told me that, at the mention of Native peoples, her fellow students would simply “make a racist joke.” And when asked how learning about American Indians in school made her feel as a Native person:

Honestly, I feel fine because none of the tribes they talked about was the tribe that I am. And when they talk about them, they don’t say anything in a bad way, they just try not to say racist comments. If people do make racist jokes and then realize that I am Native American, cuz most people don’t know because you can’t tell, then they’ll stop, but it’s *fine*.

Although Leia is obviously “learning” in a hostile environment, her words (“I feel fine,” “they’ll stop,” “it’s fine”) indicate that she is unable or unwilling to process her feelings. It is possible that her school or family has taught her—by word or deed—that, as the great African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1980) wrote, “We Wear the Mask.” Or, perhaps she “wears the mask” to protect herself. It is how she has learned to cope. Leia’s dismissal of her feelings concerns me.

ALEXANDER

In middle school, Alexander was upset by a teacher’s comment: “I just remember him vividly stating that Native American creation stories are myths.” This information came from the curriculum which went unnoticed by administrators and teachers. At test time, a “true or false” statement to this effect also appeared on an exam, in which Alexander had the “choice” of answering in such a way that reflected his home teachings or answering in a way that reflected the dominant narrative and deflected his home teachings. This “choice” surely had to cause anxiety for Alexander. His mom described how upset he was when he got home—“they made me [answer the question], that was the only way to get the grade was to say that they were a myth.”

Alexander’s story reminded me of a time—many years ago—when I voiced my own concerns to a middle school Social Studies teacher who, after teaching unit about “Native creation stories,” had assigned students to create their own “creation stories.” I tried to convince him—to get him to understand—that this activity was inappropriate; that, rather than just something made up, Native traditional creation stories are to be treated with the same respect as any other religious beliefs. Similar to the reaction Fabi received from the vice principal and

reaction Tanner's moms received from the teacher, the teacher I was trying to have a discussion with became dismissive, telling me that he did not think he could talk to me anymore. Their (often unstated but demonstrated) message is: "In order for some children to be proud of their histories, other children must be made ashamed of theirs" (Slapin et al., 1991, para 3).

ANDRE

Andre started off by sharing positive stories where he felt validated at school. In one of his early elementary classes, Andre's grandma had been invited to show the class her regalia and talk about their tribal history. Later in fourth grade, Andre described having "the best experience with an educator so far." A book they were reading had a "depiction of American Indians that attempted to attack a mining camp." The book referenced "inevitable progress" claimed by a governor and Andre recalled knowing that his teacher got it when the teacher "stopped the book right there....[and said, 'the one] thing you got to understand about history is we're always trying to make our historical figures look good.'"

However, this positive experience with his fourth-grade teacher was not a consistent one in the rest of Andre's education. Andre said that the voice used in textbooks represents neither American Indian nor specific tribal viewpoints. However, Andre did feel validated from a captioned image in the textbook with a couple of lines regarding why the United States has a standing army; this prompted Andre to conduct his own research.

I was always trying to find where American Indians won some battles. The biggest defeat of American soldiers in the army by Native people; 900 people were killed by the Native people. If you look up the biggest defeat of the United States by American Indians, it should pop up... They just defeated them in combat, they ambushed them, they took out the whole colony.

This was the *only time throughout my interviews that any student described a situation in which the Native people “won.”* While many might see this small episode as meaningless Andre turned it into an affirmation: “I didn’t know anything about it beforehand. I just liked it. That made me *feel good about being Indian.*”

Out of all the interviews, Andre shared more stories in which lessons about Native people were taught; yet, he said that most of his peers still “knew nothing” about Native peoples. According to Andre, there are people who “simply do not know tribes exist anymore.” When I asked Andre how learning about American Indians in school made him feel:

Often a little embarrassed...like when American Indian stuff would get brought up, all eyes and all heads would turn towards me in the classroom. I’d be embarrassed when people talked about the utter domination because that is what colonization termed it, they dominated the Native people here. It sounds kind of gross.

Despite sharing several points of validation, we can see that relative invisibility weighs heavily. Andre attributes his anxiety disorder to the traumatizing “education” that forced him to endure the “sanitized, pre-packaged, almost propaganda” from the national narrative about Native peoples.

ALEX

Alex feels that his peers “don’t know much because it’s only what they see on TV and read about in textbooks” making them believe “we all live in the forest, like we all live in tipis.”

In middle school, Alex was initially happy when his teacher began speaking about a tribe he was familiar with; however, he shared that joy disappeared quickly when he corrected his teacher who mispronounced the name of a tribe: “She got pretty mad at me because she’s a

teacher and she knows everything. She just bit my head off...I didn't have her very long. I got switched out of her class."

Alex felt validated, though, with a particular high school lesson that focused on Indian mascots. He had been given an opinion article that was against the use of Indian mascots. It was unclear if all the students had received the same article. Alex said that the students had been instructed to write a paper stating their own positions about this topic. Alex said that "It was cool because that teacher loves the rights of everyone so she always has that kind of stuff. And it was cool because no other teacher said their point of view on that kind of stuff."

Although Alex previously had the opportunity to speak about something with which he was comfortable, the teacher had shut him down. But later, another teacher, who had allowed him and the other students to express themselves, gave him a feeling of validation.

REMY

Remy described having watched "Dances with Wolves"²⁴ in class. He said that this film was not part of any unit. Remy described feeling a connection with Two Socks, a wolf that the main character befriends. The wolf appears in several scenes throughout the movie—and is ultimately killed. When Remy found out that Two Socks would be killed in the second half of the movie, he *skipped school* in order to avoid seeing his death.

There are several possibilities here about why Remy "chose" to skip school. Maybe he felt close to wolves and could not bear watching the end of the movie. Maybe he is Wolf clan, and to have to watch a scene like this would have been traumatic for him. Maybe there was another cultural tie-in. In any event, there could have been several reasons why this Native teen

²⁴ For review see Keene, 2010.

“chose” to skip school. And the teacher, who chose to show this movie did not take any of this into account. In this case, the harm in an instructional selection, caused a student to skip school.

SAM

Sam was critical of his unit on Manifest Destiny which he remembered reading from the “standard issue, US History textbook” in his freshman year:

And that was the only class [where] I really talked about American Indians that I can remember throughout my whole high school...And I remember, actually, that the way they taught or talked about us, the way it was presented, was that we were in the past, and that we weren't, you know, that we're not still here though. *It was all past tense*, it didn't even bring it to where we are now, it talked about us just in the past, basically *we went extinct*...

I still don't really know a lot about my own culture but everything I learned, I *learned from home*. You know, when I went to school and saw that stuff, how it made me feel, *I didn't care for the information*. The way they were teaching it, the way they were talking about it, *it just got me disengaged*. I was just kind of sitting there, like, you know, *this is just something I have to do to get through it. I couldn't really care less...I didn't feel good about it—I wouldn't say that I felt bad, like really bad, but I felt disappointed*...

Sometimes this could lead to conflict in the classroom, especially if someone said something kind of ignorant. *It could get me upset*. Then I'd have to have a discussion and the teachers would be like, “Okay, *let's settle down*.” I guess they thought it was getting rowdy. I wouldn't be yelling or anything but they could tell I had disdain for what the [particular] person was saying. *[I was*

trying] to give information or just at least tell them what they were saying [was] ignorant and wrong. It's not right, you shouldn't be allowed to say that [those comments] in school.

Sam also shared that students did not see him as fitting the prototype of a Native person:

“Why do you dress like *that*? Why isn't your hair long? Kind of stereotyping.”

Sam shared his experiences on having to be the “cultural expert”:

I was getting more assertive in high school—I wasn't afraid to speak out as much when I saw something that was wrong. But in



middle school, I was very passive. And like I said, *I was colonized to a great extent* too, so it was like a lot of the time, even if I knew what they were saying was wrong, I didn't know what the right answer was. I didn't really know how to respond to them or anything like that. I just knew it wasn't right.

I did get questions from my friends, more so than from the teachers. I could definitely appreciate that *they were taking an interest in wanting to learn but at the same time*, like I said, at that time, I really didn't know much about my culture. [I knew] more about Indigenous People in general so I didn't really know what to say. It kind of put me on the spot to educate my friends about who I was when, you know, still at that age, I didn't even really know who I was or what I was doing.

Sam shared how he felt like he was a prop for his school's “diversity quota”:

It kills me [that my school] preaches about diversity and how diverse they are, and how they have kids from all kinds of backgrounds. When really, they don't cater to those kids at all, we're just poster children. Like "look at how inclusive and diverse our school is" when really, they don't do anything for kids like us, it falls on the kids to make those [cultural] groups so [they should] help support them in the school...And even though as small [a group] as we [American Indians] were in school, you know *some of them didn't even really like saying that they were Native American. I couldn't blame them because they were like me a lot of the time, which is they just didn't know what that meant...*

I felt *isolated* even if I was around a lot of people and knew a lot of people. I just felt like no one truly or fully understood what I was going through or what I was thinking or my ideas or like my identity as a [Native] person.

Sam describes how both teachers and peers made him feel invisible. Teachers had been describing Native peoples only in the past. Sam also describes feeling conflicted when he was younger because he would like to have been able to correct the misinformation. As Sam develops and increases his knowledge base, he attempts to provide accurate information. However, when the conversation amongst the students gets heated, and the teacher shuts the "noise" down. In attempting to bust racial and cultural stereotypes, Sam is doing part of what the teacher is supposed to do.

Sam's peers do not recognize him to be Native because he does not fit the images they have conjured about Native peoples. While Sam is proud of his Native identity, he acknowledges that some Native students are so ashamed of their *own* identities that they deny their heritages. Sam understands why they are stigmatized into hiding their identities. Like all of these Native

students, they have been taught misinformation, they have been mocked, laughed at, and shut down. They have been shamed.

RENEE

Renee reports in fifth grade having a lesson about the French explorer, Jean Nicolet, who came to Wisconsin in the 1630s: “And then the next day, we moved right on into the American history class to, like, the Eurocentric stuff.”

In middle school, Renee says that her class read Sherman Alexie’s novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*:

I remember it being assigned and that it was really cool. And we also watched that movie, the one where they go, “Hey, Victor!” [*Smoke Signals*]. Like it was cool, I didn’t grow up on a reservation but my mom did so I was able to find deeper parts of my life that I was able to relate to this book that I hadn’t seen in other places which was cool so I related to the book that way and with *Smoke Signals*.

Renee noted how middle school and high school students differed in their responses to learning about Native peoples:

I guess growing up hearing traditional knowledge and knowing about the whole genocide of Native Americans, and how settlers just came in [and] destroyed everything was different for me going into the lesson plan because I noticed other kids around me would just be like, “Oh, this is just another topic of stuff to learn for school.” Whereas I would get really into it, like “Wow, these are Native people and I’m Native!”

In high school, we watched that one movie with Kevin Costner [*Dances with Wolves*]. For that lesson, at that point, everyone was kind of aware that there

was a genocide on the Native Americans. And so they kind of felt more empathy maybe, to the whole group of people. So I noticed how other kids responded going into watching *Dances with Wolves*. It was like, “We’re gonna watch this movie, and we’re gonna understand the Native Americans back in the 1900s.” At that point, I had already seen the movie and laughed about it with my dad—we were like, “This guy, Kevin Costner, saving all them Indians!”

In addition to feeling validated from reading a book which she felt connected to, Renee described how, once a week, a teacher of color would bring students of color together, perhaps to encourage identity development and pride: “We were all little people of color and we would talk about culture and it was very encouraging at the time.” Renee said, though, that the program did not last long.

In this student’s story, she shared an episode from elementary school, in which the lesson purported to be about Native peoples, but was actually all about the French explorer, Jean Nicolet. In this lesson (similar to *Dances with Wolves*), the Native peoples “exist” to provide the backdrop to a white guy’s adventures. And while Renee was able to joke about *Dances with Wolves*, she felt that her peers felt empathy since they were aware of the “genocide of the Native Americans.”

EMILE

Emile reported learning only “basic” and “very shallow” information about a few “pivotal” events for one class period in high school:

They talked almost like it was in [the] past tense, a lot of things [the teachers] said about Native Americans and the way they talked about Indigenous peoples — which kind of gets on my nerves, *because our history is still continuing. We’re*

still doing stuff. There's still movements. [In school,] we didn't talk about the pipelines. We didn't talk about any current events. It was, "This is what happened. We're moving on."

There's no Native books by Native authors. Even fiction is really hard to find. I specifically looked for it, I specifically asked for it. And there's not a lot of children's books [or] young adult books [either]. There's not a lot available to us. They're not taught besides Sherman Alexie but he's not the only Native artist. We read that book [*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*] and analyzed it. And it felt like the rest of the class. It's just a weird environment, when someone is trying to read about your life and analyze things that you've seen and experienced, and then offer sympathy. And nobody can offer empathy or like, "Yeah, we deal with that kind of stuff too or this is what's going on with our minority group." It just feels very much *outsiderish—trying to learn about yourself through a book, in a classroom that are not really your peers....* And I feel like when you're not Native American, and you read Sherman Alexie books, your first reaction is humor because, you know, he's a funny writer but also, it's pity and sympathy, which there are a lot of other books out there that don't give that impression. I feel like there would have been a better choice for it. Because for many people, that's one of the first books they read by a Native American, it's one of the first books that they experience our lives through, and I feel like it should have been a different choice...

Emile spoke of watching an old video her class watched and how it impacts Native peoples:

[The old video] just makes us look uncivilized, quote unquote. And [they] just make me feel very separated from [other] people, because most people don't recognize me as an Indigenous person. And they don't see me that way. And when you ask them why it's because, "Oh, you don't dress like this, you don't talk like this, you don't do these things, you're not fitting the stereotype." And when you ask them *where they get those stereotypes from, they are from these types of videos, and the representations and it's really old history books in school, where they're learning that from, nobody corrects them*, and they're not getting [accurate] representations. It just makes me feel like *we're a left-behind people, that we're not included in modern-day activities, and we're not included in the school curriculum*. And it's just very separating, that people are reading these experiences and watching these videos, as if it's separated from them, obviously, but there's a really huge time gap and that it's so far from them, they don't have to worry about it, it's not happening anymore.

From my experience and the students' stories, a lot of people think Natives do not exist anymore. If teachers do not deal with the historical and current lives of Native peoples, how are students to know about us? If the schools present our Native peoples only as alcoholics and dysfunctional—or as disappeared—it is no wonder that non-Native students see Native students only if they "fit the stereotype." We are visible only if we "fit the stereotype."

DEVIN

Devin clearly sees and eloquently describes how the education system invisibilizes her, as well as other Native people:

Like in my US History class, they [taught about] the revolutions and the different wars that they went through, and they wouldn't talk much about any tribes or anything. It would just be based on white history... Like they went through all of the revolutions and through all the wars, like when we would have units where we need books, it would all be based on the white history... And then we'll have maybe like, one section about Native American, but it would still be kind of like told from a white perspective, just like telling what happened to them. And not really talk about how they went through that and how they like, got through it, and not how they are now like how they do with white history where they still talk about what's going on now with them, and what they did to get through all those wars and stuff, but they never do it for like Native Americans.

If we watched a video with Native Americans, they would be dressed all with just a skirt on or something and have dark skin and feathers and these people just lived in huts, around the lake and stuff like that. I mean, it's not how we are, it's not who we are, it's not what we do, it's just what white people have made it seem....

And I just feel like it should be talked about more. And me being Native American, when I tell people that I am Native American, they are like, "Oh, Indian," and they put it in *that* category. And not really [wanting to know] what it actually is to be Native American. Like, who we are, and all the different tribes that we have. So I feel like them [the teachers] not talking about it impact[s] everybody, including me....

[They teach it like Natives] were taken over by white people and they are a part of history that faded away. Like after all the wars happened, they all

died...And then the whites won...It makes me irritated that they don't notice that we are a big community and we are growing. It should be talked about more, as any other race or culture. And it just feels like I'm being left out. And I'm not being included, my communities are not being included...

Whenever we get writing prompts or when you can choose what you do, I always choose to write about my race and my culture and explain how it's impacting me and how it should be talked about more—and trying to get my teachers to notice.

Limitations

The students who chose to participate all had one thing in common. Minimally, they reported attending pow-wows and feeling proud of their American Indian identities. Most of the students have parents active in the Native community. They either knew me or knew of me. While I tried to reach students who could provide a broad range of experiences, I noticed that some students felt that they had to give the “right” answer even though I assured parents and students that there *were* no right or wrong answers. Perhaps these youth opted out of participating because they had not been taught about American Indians in school—so they might have felt that their contributions would not have been meaningful.

Lastly, in order to understand their experiences, I tried to reach out to parents of students who had struggled with school academically and/or socially. I was not able to get the most frustrated students to participate. “I hate school,” “I don't want to talk about it,” or “My kid hates school, [so] why would he want to do this?” were common reactions.

Other times I had to speculate. Perhaps parents felt that since their children had struggled with school, that they would not have been good candidates for an interview. Perhaps they were

so frustrated with the school system, they did not want to talk about it. Or maybe they were not comfortable with sharing their frustrations, even thinking their words might lead to retaliation. Or maybe they were not comfortable with me. It is likely that the most discouraged families chose not to participate.

Discussion

Through interviews, it is clear that many Indian students have expressed acts of harm committed against them, whether intended or unintended, that have negatively impacted their overall sense of well-being, mental health, and inclusion. The most painful story was Tanner's. It reminded me of a former student whose teacher at the same school (although a different teacher than Tanner's) had shown the students the Diane Sawyer *20/20 Special: Children of the Plains* as well. This other student had been so upset that he had gotten up, punched the wall, and left the building. That day, this student's mother asked me to accompany her in a meeting with his teachers. I let them know the enormity of this situation: This student had not punched the wall ("acted out") because he was a "bad kid." Rather, he had reacted to a harmful, racist film. I explained that the one time they "taught" about Native peoples, it was all about alcoholism and dysfunction. They both agreed not to show this video again. However, from the interviewees, I learned that multiple schools continue to show this video.

Although feeling a sense of belonging is crucial for student success, students shared with me their horrible school environments in which they were never understood: how they were mocked by other students and even by their teachers; they were bullied and the schools did nothing; they had to endure racist "jokes," they were embarrassed and dismissed and felt shut down and disengaged. Multiple students said that they didn't want to read the textbook or even be in class. They often skipped school or their so-called "acting out" led them to spend

classroom time in the “break room.” For some students, it was worse; one student, for instance, spoke of serious mental health issues involving an anxiety disorder.

Our Native students recognize that the curriculum materials and the teaching are from a colonial perspective:

- Native people are either savages, alcoholics, dead, or props for the white hero.
- Traditional creation stories are “myths.”
- Indian “mascots” in the classroom and outside become the face of history.
- Arts and crafts activities—especially during times such as “Thanksgiving” and “Columbus Day”—are used to enforce colonialism.

When students—and their parents—attempt to engage them to right the wrongs, teachers and school administrators shut them down. Alexander’s story reminded me of a time—many years ago—when I voiced my own concerns to a middle school Social Studies teacher who, after a teaching unit about “Native creation stories,” had assigned students to write their own “creation stories.” I tried to convince him—to get him to understand—that this activity was inappropriate; that, rather than just something made up, Native traditional creation stories are to be treated with the same respect as any other religious beliefs. Instead of trying to understand this perspective, he dismissed me.

Native American parents and grandparents are often responsible for teaching their children the truths of Native issues, which, typically, as these young people shared, conflict with the methods and materials prevalent in the schools. For instance, the myth of Christopher Columbus as courageous explorer, the myth of “The First Thanksgiving,” and the myth of the Bering Strait crossover, are all taught as unassailable historical truths.

In schools, selecting appropriate materials—and using them correctly—is critical. While the students I interviewed had few points of validation to share, all teachers can utilize many of the high-quality, accurate and authentic resources to make a difference in their students’ lives. For example, the Reclaiming Native Truth Project, a Native educational and advocacy organization founded in 2016, is an excellent resource for Native educators and allies to move away from the national narrative and to “reclaim Native truth.”

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand that impact of relative invisibility on American Indian youth in Wisconsin public schools in which Act 31, the mandated requirement that public schools teach about the history, culture and sovereignty of the tribes in Wisconsin.

Many teachers want to supplement the curricula with American Indian content. However, as the young people described, their teachers’ “educational” choices are problematic, and likely causing harm. “The lack of visibility, relevance, and humanization of Native peoples in modern life erodes support for Native issues and allows media-fueled stereotypes to persist” (Reclaiming Native Truth, 2018a, p. 18).

There is a dearth of excellent resources available to teachers that focuses on the tribes in Wisconsin for specific content areas. These include fiction, non-fiction, art, poetry, anthologies, photography, and other media. For a curated list of resources see “Selected Bibliography for American Indian Studies” (Slapin & Byington, 2018); Wisconsin First Nations (wisconsinfirstnations.org); Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Commission (glifwc.org); and The Ways (theways.org).

In *Changing the Narrative about Native Americans: A Guide for Allies* (Reclaiming Native Truth, 2018b), the authors provide a framework which includes four key themes for

creating a new narrative: values, history, visibility plus a call to action. The authors call on non-Native to help create this new vision. Below are some recommendations:

- Respect that Natives Americans must be the authors and primary storytellers
- Consider how stories, data and images can advance the new narrative
- Pay attention to the language you use. Call on your colleagues to help each other correct false narratives.
- Do your homework. Learn all you can. If seeking clarification, respect critical feedback.
- Seek a variety of Native voices.
- Do your homework, recognize whose land you are on.

And we all need to remember this:

The dominant American narrative dehumanizes, derides and objectifies us. The new narrative tells the truth, the strength of our history, the power of our contemporary attainments, the resilience of our cultures, the continuance of our values. Until we reclaim the narrative about ourselves, our distinctiveness, our diversity, our sovereignty and our nationhood, we will continue to be caught in an erasure quagmire that was designed to secure our extinction. **Reclaiming the narrative will be hard work, but it will work, if we do it together.**

-Suzan Harjo, Reclaiming Native Truth, 2018b, p. 9).

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Appendix A

Wisconsin School Statutes

State statutes relating to the Instruction in Wisconsin American Indian History, Culture and Tribal Sovereignty

Statutes and Rules

§115.28(17)(d), Wis Stats.

General duties. The state superintendent shall:

(17) AMERICAN INDIAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE EDUCATION.

(d) Develop a curriculum for grades 4 to 12 on the Chippewa Indians' treaty-based, off-reservation rights to hunt, fish and gather.

§118.01(2)(c)(7.and 8.), Wis Stats.

Educational goals and expectations.

(2) EDUCATIONAL GOALS. . .each school board shall provide an instructional program designed to give pupils:

7. An appreciation and understanding of different value systems and cultures.

8. At all grade levels, an understanding of human relations, particularly with regard to American Indians, Black Americans and Hispanics.

§118.19(8), Wis Stats.

Teacher certificates and licenses.

(8) The state superintendent may not grant to any person a license to teach unless the person has received instruction in the study of minority group relations, including instruction in the history, culture and tribal sovereignty of the federally recognized American Indian tribes and bands located in this state.

§121.02, Wis Stats.

School district standards.

(1) Except as provided in §118.40 (2r)(d), each school board shall:

(h) Provide adequate instructional materials, texts and library services which reflect the cultural diversity and pluralistic nature of American society.

* * *

(L) 4. Beginning September 1, 1991, as part of the social studies curriculum, include instruction in the history, culture and tribal sovereignty of the federally recognized American Indian tribes and bands located in this state at least twice in the elementary grades and at least once in the high school grades.

Appendix B

Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005)

1. Colonization is endemic to society.
2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain.
3. Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities.
4. Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.
5. The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.
6. Governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation.
7. Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.
8. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.
9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change.

Appendix C

Dear Parent,

My name is Rachel Byington and I am a graduate student pursuing a degree in Civil Society and Community Research at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. I am tribally enrolled with the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma but have grown up in Madison, Wisconsin. As an urban American Indian myself, my primary interest is focusing on American Indian youth and looking at how to best support their needs.

For this study, there are two main focuses: 1. I am looking at American Indian Youth and how they feel about the education, in particular to their experiences being American Indian, being taught about American Indians and tribes (or lack thereof), and these impacts in playing a role in shaping their identity; 2. The second focus is on the parent(s) of American Indian youth attending public schools (parents can be of any race and have students of any age currently attending or recently graduate students). I am interested in your thoughts on how American Indians and tribes are presented (if at all) and how you believe this impacts your American Indian student.

If you are interested in participating, we can meet in your home or another public area where you feel comfortable such as the library or a community center.

If you decide to allow your child to participate in this research you and/or your child will be asked to participate in a modified Talking Circle (a conversational space which allows for all voices to be heard with only one person speaking at a time in a respectful manner) or in a one-to-one interview with me. You get to decide if you and/or your child want to participate in the modified Talking Circle or the interview. I will ask for your permission to record the conversation using an audio recording device. You do not have to agree to be recorded or allow your child to be recorded. In this case, I will simply take notes. Only the research team will hear

the audio recordings. The recordings will be kept until the project is completed and then destroyed three years from the completion of the research.

Participation will last approximately 15-45 minutes for interviews and 30-90 minutes for the modified Talking Circle.

Other things you should know about this research:

- All participants whether in the modified Talking Circle or the interviews will be asked several questions about what your child is learning about American Indians in school. You or your child can answer or skip any of the questions.
- We anticipate only minimal risks to your child from participating in this study such as there could be a risk of a confidentiality breach; participants may reveal personal, sensitive, or identifiable information when responding to open-ended questions and/or participants may be upset by aspects of the research.
- We do not expect any direct benefits to your child from participating in this study.
- While there will likely be publications as a result of this study, his/her name will not be used.
- If you choose to or give permission for your child to participate in this study, I would like to be able to use direct quotes but will not use names.

Please let me know if you are interested in or think your child is interested in participating or let me know if you have any questions.

Title of the Study: Urban American Indian Youth Voices in the Public Schools

Principal Investigator: Constance Flanagan (phone: 608-263-2291) (email: caflanagan@wisc.edu)

Student Researcher: Rachel Byington (phone: 608-262-9591) (email: rbyington@wisc.edu)

Appendix D

Open-ended questions

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
2. How do you identify your race/ethnicity?
3. Tell me one thing you like about school,
4. What schools have you gone to?
5. Tell me one thing you dislike about school.
6. I am interested in learning about what you have learned about American Indian people, groups and/or tribes in school. Have you learned about any American Indian people, groups or tribes?
7. If yes, tell me about what you learned. Additional prompt: Can you provide some examples of what you read, heard or the activities you did when learning about American Indian groups or tribes? (If student seems to be talking about things such as movies or from other media sources, I will remind the student that I am interested in learning from her/him about their school related experiences.)
8. Tell me what you thought about this lesson (unit, activity—I will use the language of the student when they describe what they learned).
9. Additional prompt, if needed: Tell me about the materials that were used.
10. Did you feel that American Indians were portrayed accurately?
11. Tell me how it made you feel about that American Indian person/people, group or tribe.
12. Tell me what you think your peers think about American Indian people, groups or tribes.
13. Tell me how you feel about yourself as an American Indian person.

If the student says that they have not learned about any American Indian people, groups or tribes, I will ask her/him to think about all of the grades they have been in so far. For example, was there any time you were taught about American Indian people, groups or tribes? If still no, tell me how it made you feel about American Indian person/people, groups or tribes.

Additional prompt: If child shares only either positive or negative information, ask if there was ever a time when the opposite information was taught. For example, you have shared an example(s) of negative lessons and resources, are you aware of times that you felt teachers taught accurate and authentic information about Native people(s)?