"We are the advocates, we are the engagement": American Indian Educators' strategies on engaging students, families, and communities

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Abstract

In this paper, the author conducted interviews with five personnel from the Title VII Office of Indian Education to assess how participants engaged underrepresented and racially minority communities in a Southern rural environment. Qualitative findings revealed that participants deemed creating and maintaining a culturally responsive educative environment as the most vital method of engagement. Participants also identified building trust with parents and called for an environment that welcomes racial-congruency as additional ways to foster engagement. Finally, participants deemed a lack of transportation and resources as barriers to involving American Indian students and families. Ultimately, participants expressed having the privilege to work with members of their tribal communities and intended to use their findings to inform schools on ways to better support underrepresented groups.
Keywords: *student and family engagement, indigenous groups, school support*

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This article looks to the perspective of educators affiliated to the Office of Indian Education (OIE) in rural communities across a southern state in the United States and asks them to reflect on the essential strategies to engage American Indian students and families in schools. The OIE is housed in the U.S. Department of Education with the intent of supporting educational communities meet the unique needs of American Indian students through culturally representative pedagogy (OIE, 2018). Specific to the region, OIE states that their vision is for every American Indian student to graduate in academically rigorous and culturally enriching schools. For this paper, I defined engagement as strategies used to involve and captivate American Indian students, families, and communities, with the goal of promoting achievement, attendance, and awareness.

This study stems from a project funded by the US Department of Education where I and Sarah Crittenden Fuller were charged with investigating the schooling experiences of American Indian students in a southern state in the United States (Davis & Fuller, 2017). Quantitative results showed that American Indian students' achievement outcomes in grades 6th through 12th lagged their non-Indian peers. However, the gap between Indian and non-Indian shrunk when accounted for students within the same schools. An impressive result of this study showed that American Indian students in districts with low rates of racial representation and high cost per-pupil spending exhibited wider achievement gaps between Indian and non-Indian students as compared to those students living in districts with more American Indian student representation and lower cost per-pupil spending. These results baffled me. Research tells us that schools with additional spending tend to have students who academically outperform those individuals at schools with lower cost per-pupil spending (Lafortune, Rothstein, & Schanzenbach, 2016; Haegland, Raaum, & Salvanes, 2012; Jackson, Johnson, & Inman, 2015). If this were true, then why were American Indian students performing better in schools with fewer financial resources in rural

communities as compared to their Indian peers in urban districts with more money? What I found was that American Indian students in rural communities had access to personnel from the OIE, while their urban peers did not. I became captivated with their story and intrigued by what they attributed to more significant gains in their communities- targeting practices for engaging American Indian students and families.

In this article, I present the most successful methods used by American Indian Educators (AIE) to improve engagement of underrepresented students and families. I begin with a brief literature review on the reasons why student and family engagement are vital to improving academic achievement specifically in racial minority groups. Next, I present the methodology of this study, which was drawn from interviews of five self-identified American Indian educators. In turn, I include my participants' reflections on the best strategies for engagement and the challenges they faced. I then paired the results of successful methods with relevant literature to provide validity. Finally, I discuss how schools can foster a collaborative relationship amongst underrepresented families and school personnel to improve achievement.

The Usefulness of Engaged Students & Families

Nationwide data illustrates a persistent achievement gap between American Indian students and students of other ethnicities (NCES, 2011; NCES, 2010; Nelson et al., 2009; Fischer & Stoddard, 2013; Davis & Fuller, 2016). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2008), American Indian students have completed the fewest advanced academic courses in Science, Mathematics, English and Foreign Language. Besides achievement, American Indian students are more likely to be identified for special education services, live in rural communities, live in poverty, and have access to fewer student supplies in the home (NCES, 2011; NCES, 2010).

Educators continue to support the notion that engaging underrepresented students and families will result in an improvement in achievement scores, a reduction in student outcome gaps, and create a strong school-community partnership. Research suggests that high levels of student and family engagement are critical predictors of academic success (Henry et al., 2012; Gottfried, 2011, Barnard, 2004). Recent studies have found that an involved student is more likely to have higher achievement scores, lower absenteeism rates, and higher graduation rates, as compared to their less engaged peer. By investigating ways to engage American Indian students in rural communities, educators will have the tools to address achievement gaps amongst students from marginalized groups proactively.

Improving student achievement by engaging students is not a new concept within the education community. Historically, educators have promoted the importance of separating away from using rote learning and memorization tactics as a form of schooling to using interactive activities to engage students in the classroom (Dewey, 1916; Vygotsky, 1962; Freire, 1973). American philosopher, John Dewey (1916), argued learning occurs through active and relevant experiences of individuals within the classroom. Soviet philosopher, Lev Vygotsky (1962 & 1978), studied children's learning styles and recognized that children acquired knowledge through interacting with others in an environment that embraced the world of culture. And Pablo Freire (1973), most known as a Brazilian educator who advocated for critical consciousness, called for teachers to be cultural workers and create classrooms where students can transform knowledge through discovering the world.

Scholars posit that solely depending on engaging students to improve achievement is not enough (Yazzie, 1999; Apthorp, D'Amato, & Richardson, 2002; Rivera & Tharp, 2006; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008;

Lipka, 2002). In fact, researchers argued that educators must also involve families to see positive gains in achievement, student attendance, and behavior. Underrepresented families specifically find higher achievement amongst students when schools and communities share an educational congruency by which a reciprocal relationship is fostered and maintained (Yazzie, 1999; Apthorp, D'Amato, & Richardson, 2002). In this instance, both work jointly to link cultural tradition, collective interest, and educational aspirations and form a curriculum that meets the needs of students. Rivera and Tharp (2006) argued that the involvement of community members can empower students by shaping a meaningful and appropriate academic trajectory.

Understandably, I would expect to see similar positive gains for American Indian students and families. In the article entitled, *Schooling for Self-Determination: Research on the Effects of Including Native Language and Culture in the Schools,* Lipka's (2002) work revealed that when community members were involved in developing the curriculum, schools observed significant achievement gains. Yazzie (1999) surmised that the involvement of American Indians family and community is vital to the academic success of American Indian students. Authors Castagno, McKinley, and Brayboy (2008) argued that involving and engaging American Indian communities into schools has resulted in the best results for students overall. The practice of allowing families to be affected reflects traditions that are most common amongst tribal communities.

Methods

The purpose of this article is to investigate ways in which schooling communities purposefully engage American Indian students and families in rural communities. Accordingly, this paper focuses on the following research questions:

1. What strategies do interviewed participants believe to be the most effective ways to engage American Indian students and families?
2. What, if anything, did participants deem to be a challenge to engagement?

For this study, I conducted a purposeful sampling to select meaningful participants. Qualitative researchers use this method when they are interested in gaining new information from a specific group. In this case, I intended to hear how educators from racial minorities engage American Indian populations. This study was conducted within three rural school districts located in one southeastern state in the United States. I selected districts that were comprised of above state average enrollment for American Indian students, that is school districts with more than 1% enrollment for American Indian students. This resulted in a selection of three districts from across the state, each with American Indian enrollment above 7%. From there, I identified two schools within each district, one school with above average achievement scores for American Indian students, and the other school with below average scores. I then asked school personnel to identify the staff member who worked most closely with American Indian students or the individual who could speak on ways in which their school engaged American Indian students. From the request, I received a total of five participants.

Given the small sample size, I do not intend to generalize about ways in which schooling communities can engage underrepresented and indigenous groups. This study intends to provide an alternative perspective on how educators in rural districts engage American Indian communities in the hopes of sharing their stories to the broader community.

Participants identified as personnel from Title VII Office of Indian Education (OIE) at the state-level. For this paper, I recognized the participants as American Indian Educators (AIE). Participants averaged about 13 years in education, with a range of 3 to 23 years. They also averaged around three years in their current position, with a range of one and a half years to 15 years. Participants also represented the one-nationally recognized tribe, three-state recognized tribes, and were located in three different regions across the state.

During the interview, I asked participants questions regarding ways in which schools were able to engage American Indian students and families. Questions focused on participants' perceptions of engagement for American Indian students and the types of resources needed to engage these students. Also, I asked participants to describe strategies used to encourage American Indian parents to attend school-wide functions. Interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted between 60 to 90 minutes.

I analyzed a total of five semi-structured interviews with participants. I implemented grounded theory (Charmaz 2014) as a basis for interpreting the qualitative findings. The purpose of using grounded theory is to help generate and discover what is occurring through the data and allow for an inductive perspective instead of a deductive approach. This process forces the researcher to seek out and conceptualize patterns found within the data. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim, gathered for analysis, and imported into the Atlas.ti Qualitative Software package. All interview transcripts documents underwent multiple readings in their entirety. Finally, I used the content analysis method to identify commonalities and patterns found within and across the text. This form of analysis enabled me to identify the most frequent codes.

In the following section, I will present the strategies participants identified as the best ways to engage American Indian students and families and pair their results with relevant literature. Through this process, I set to frame their voice as the validation to the literature, instead of using the literature to validate and support their voice. Subsequently, I will present how participants defined challenges to engagement and included their solutions to address this barrier.

Findings

In this section, I will present findings from structured interviews to assess the two research questions: (1) What strategies do interviewed participants believe to be the most effective ways to engage American Indian students and families. And, (2) What, if anything, did participants deem to be a challenge to engagement. The first segment will provide findings for the first research question and results will be paired with relevant literature to provide context for each theme. The next section will reflect the findings of the second research question and describe the challenges to engagement as expressed by interviewed participants. Themes will be presented in order of most frequent to least.

Engaging American Indian Students & Families

Overall, participants described creating a culturally appropriate curriculum, building trust with American Indian communities, and increasing diversity amongst human resources, as strategies for engaging American Indian students and families.

Culturally relevant curriculum. All interviewed AIE participants believed it was necessary to incorporate cultural awareness activities to improve their students' connection to their heritage. Participants used the culturally appropriate curriculum to target and engage American Indian students within their schools and witnessed positive outcomes. One AIE described witnessing a positive correlation between including cultural practices in the classroom and student achievement. The participant stated, "One thing I found

interesting when students are connected to their culture their academics increase. They improve in the classroom. When you start connecting them to the culture, they do better." The educator recalled utilizing classroom activities (e.g., creating arts and crafts) that were directly linked to their tribal affiliation to draw students into the content.

Participants described immersing their students in relevant topics on a consistent basis. Through this process, students would become comfortable seeing themselves within the curriculum, and even outside of the classroom. One participant stated, "We try to make sure there is a cultural element or an educational element in everything we do." Another AIE participant commented on the pervasiveness of culturally relevant images in the hallways of schools. With the normalization of their American Indian culture, students respond positively. The participant stated, "When [students] start connecting to their culture and they start seeing things around the school that tell them, 'hey it's okay to be Native America down here,' then [sic.] they improve in everything."

Another AIE participant noticed the lack of classes that were catered to her American Indian students became the impetus for creating her own academic and cultural space. The educator described working toward increasing her American Indian students' self-awareness of their heritage by creating cultural classes that focused on language, history, and art that represented the area's dominant tribe. Although she admitted to not being fluent in the language, the AIE participant insisted that her students remained attached to their past. The participant stated:

Before I started the language [class]…there were no cultural programs set up in our school at all for these students. There was nothing on the walls; there was nothing. I started the language class, this is my 7th year, and I'm not fluent or anything… But I felt like there was something we needed to give back to those kids to keep them interested in that part of who they are, where they come from…Yes, they teach history in our social studies and all these classes…and they touch on Native American history, but it's still not that much.

Educators spoke in depth about engaging Native American students through their curriculum. Unintentionally, participants closely described tenants from Culturally Relevant Teaching (CRT) and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP). Research suggests that instruction and curriculum should be sensitive to how American Indian students learn. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) argued the importance of students receiving CRT, which also defined as a "pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, and politically by using a cultural referent to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p.20). Teachers are not only challenged to maintain high scholastic standards for all students, but the instructors also called to create a classroom environment that honors students' diverse cultural backgrounds and provides opportunities for critical discussions around equity. Through CRT, instructors can build a bridge between students' lives and the curriculum. Ladson-Billings (1994) insisted that teachers use the backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences of their students to inform classroom lessons.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy is another strategy to improve achievement amongst students of color by enhancing their curriculum via targeted teacher training (Gay, 2002). Gay (1999; 2002) maintained that a culturally diverse curriculum was necessary to meet the academic and social needs of ethnically-diverse students, arguing that students have a vested interest in the curriculum when it is more meaningful to them and aligns with their interests. Gay (1999) stated, "When the cultures of students and teachers are not synchronized, someone loses out. Invariably, it is the students" (p.223).

Evidence suggests that incorporating native language into the curriculum, like the example provided by the AIE participant, can improve outcomes (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Cowell, 2002; McCarty, 2003; Karathanos, 2009; Apthorp, D'Amato, & Richardson, 2002). According to a report found in the National Congress of American Indian, researchers Jones Brayboy and Angelina Castagno (2009) conducted a study investigated the extent CRP in education aligned with standardized testing. The researchers concluded that positive learning outcomes were achieved when culturally responsive education was offered to indigenous groups.

Researchers found that embedding CRT & CRP practices within the curriculum improves student achievement (Gay, 2002; Cain, 2015; Weinstein et al., 2003; Hanley & Noblit, 2009; Rychley & Graves, 2012; Banks & Banks, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). According to researchers, students will be more likely to achieve and excel if they can see themselves in their schoolwork. "The underlying assumption of this pedagogy is that using students' cultural and personal experiences will result in improved academic achievement, as indicated by increased interest and personal connection," Cain writes (2014, p.8). Higher achievement is also found among students that experience a curriculum linked to their cultural traditions and home life (Yazzie, 1999; Apthorp, D'Amato, & Richardson, 2002).

In addition to improving the curriculum to reflect their students, AIE participants used activities outside of the classroom to engage American Indian students. Some described using field trips to museums that spoke about their culture's heritage and assisting with community members on Elders' Day. One participant stated:

> We do a community trip where we take students on cultural, like an Indian awareness county cultural tour. We make them familiar with their own history and things that our race has had to endure in order to be where we're at today, so we take students on a cultural tour of the county, too.

Unquestionably participants shared a general sentiment that American Indian students should be aware of their past, be connected with the present, and work to build the future of their community. One participant stated, "[Our students] need a connection. They need a connection and something that connects them to their culture and to who they are and where they come from."

In addition to academic benefits, scholars posit additional rewards for students who receive a curriculum with embedded CRT and CRP practices. For example, scholars Gloria Ladson Billings (1994) and Geneva Gay (2002) stated that both methods support building reciprocal relationships between teachers and students and increase cross-communication with diverse student groups. Rychley and Graves (2012) argued that by implementing cultural practices in the curriculum improves students' self-esteem which allows them to appreciate their own culture and the culture of their peers and instructors. Scholars Rychley and Graves (2012) stated, "Students feel validated and capable of learning presented information when their learning environments and the methods used to present information are culturally responsive to them" (Rychley & Graves, 2012, p.45). Also, research shows that the inclusion of traditional cultural traits can be definite for American Indian students (Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Lipka, 2002; Winstead et al., 2008).

Overwhelmingly, AIE participants agreed that creating a culturally relevant schooling environment fosters engagement amongst American Indian students. Participants sited including aspects of their

culture into the curriculum and taking students on field trips that highlighted their heritage. Scholars praised the use of CRP and CRT practices to target all students but have shown to reduce the achievement gap amongst racially and ethnically marginalized student groups. In the next section, I will present how participants use intimate moments with families to improve engagement.

Building trust is the bridge to engagement. The next strategy that AIE participants described as necessary for engaging American Indian students and families is through building trust. Overwhelmingly, all AIE participants argued that building trust with American Indian families ultimately improved parent and student engagement by reconnecting families to their children's schools. Through trust, American Indian families viewed AIE as a vital resource. One participant stated:

> When you go in the homes you develop a rapport with that parent because the first thing in our county the parent wants to know – who's your people, what's the connection and then when they find out there's a connection here they begin to form that bond, that trust is developed, and they realize that the YDS and that the Indian Education Program is there to support their children and to help them.

Another participant articulated the importance of building trust with parents through personal engagement and surmised that parents were ultimately looking for an advocate and protector of their child. The respondent stated,

> Our culture is so much about hands on. They want you to tell them what's going on. They even want you to come in their homes and sit down and have a cup of coffee with them. They want to know what all is going on and how you want to protect their children.

Participants articulated that once American Indian families have established trust with AIE personnel, they begin to see the Title VII Office of Indian Education as a vital resource. It is through the collaborative effort of the Office of Indian Education and the AIE personnel where American Indian families recognized both as fundamental resources for keeping their children culturally engaged and connected to their heritage. From the voice of AIE personnel, families interpreted schools as an edifice that was centered on Eurocentric practices and would inhibit their child from staying connected with traditional cultural practices. One participant stated:

> They want their children to stay engaged in something that they think is positive and is cultural related you know, so they don't lose that part as they get older and…to go out and not forget who they are.

AIE participants also affirmed that with trust, American Indian families were more likely to be engaged in school as opposed to families without an established trusting relationship. American Indian families used their trust with AIE personnel to collect information regarding academics, testing, scholarships, summer camps, college, and resources. AIE participants recalled receiving contacts from family members concerning topics that fell under the school's responsibility. In one instance, a participant received a telephone call from a concerned parent inquiring about their child's attendance rate. Another participant stated:

> I have more parents calling me asking me, "What can my child do to study for an SAT? What can my child do to get more information about these scholarships?" And so we constantly tell them about the scholarships and the different activities…Parents are calling, "Please help my child make sure that they're registering for the right classes."

Due to trust from American Indian parents, AIE participants were compelled to pick up additional responsibilities that are traditionally given to school personnel. These responsibilities may seem as an overburden to their typical tasks; however, AIE personnel associated them to keep American Indian families engaged and ensured that the future generations of students were prepared for life after high school.

Participants also asserted that established trust from American Indian families allowed for improved communication regarding financial aid for college and out-of-school activities for their children. At times, parents noted the AIE personnel had more information about scholarships and events as compared to their child's school. One AIE respondent recalled offering the only scholarship night to discuss the diverse ways to finance post-secondary schooling. The participant admitted that at first, several parents attended the event. More recently, the event has expanded to a two-day showcase to support the greater community. Another AIE respondent had a similar experience with their American Indian families regarding a session on summer camps: "Like I said, we had to have two summer camp nights this year 'cause parents are realizing we are resources you just can't put aside."

Lastly, participants deemed an established trust with American Indian families created an environment where parents and students were comfortable enough to request school supplies. One AIE participant described their district as one with high rates of poverty. Oftentimes, American Indian families in her community did not have the financial means to purchase items for their child to use at school. The participant described maintaining a storage closet filled with art supplies for students to assist them in completing projects. The participant stated:

A lot of times people forget that we are in such a high poverty community. We have…[parents] saying I got to spend $20 on food or I'm going to spend $20 on a board and marker…and we do provide some of those resources here at the office.

Scholars have discussed the importance of building trust with parents and community members to benefit students and school communities (Author blinding, 2017: Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Goddard, Salloum & Berebitsky, 2009; Adams, Forsyth & Mitchell, 2009). In her assessment of community members' perceptions of their school suspension policy, *Author blinding* (2017) cited the absence of trust between community members and schools created difficulty in establishing school reform. Without trust, parents and community were not convinced that their district's personnel truly cared to meet the needs of racially minority students across the district.

Scholars Roger Goddard, Serena Salloum, and Dan Berebitsky (2009) conducted a study in which they investigated the relationships between poverty, race, and academic achievement. Researchers used administrative and student outcome data from 150 public schools and surveyed teachers on their perceptions of school-wide trust. Their findings revealed that trust was significantly related to academic achievement where a higher presence of trust was linked to higher student outcome scores in mathematics and reading on end of year state exams. Additionally, they found that in schools with higher proportions

of students of color and students from lower socio-economic groups, exhibited lower levels of trust. The researchers concluded that school leaders should look to addressing communal issues of trust to reduce the achievement gap between groups.

In a similar article entitled, *The Formation of Parent-School Trust: A Multilevel Analysis*, authors Curt Adams, Patrick Forsyth, and Roxanne Mitchell (2009) investigated the varying levels of parental trust found within schools. In the study, the researchers sampled 79 schools and surveyed 578 parents to assess parents' perceptions of their ability to make decisions within their schools and feelings of belonging and worth. Findings revealed that personal experiences garnered more value regarding shaping parents' trust than contextual conditions like race and socio-economic status. The researchers ultimately charged school administrators with the task of bridging trust with parents that represent diverse racial, ethnic, and social classes by including parents in school-wide policy discussions that are targeted to meet their needs.

AIE participants alluded that American Indian families were distrustful of school personnel and addressed strategies for bridging the gap between family and school. Participants believed that developing trust was vital to ensure for families to participate and be involved in school activities. Scholars have long since reported the importance of gaining trust with parents to promote engagement. In the next section, I will address how participants sited diversity as the final method for engagement.

Finding People who Look like Them. The final strategy that AIE personnel described as necessary for engaging American Indian students and families was through increasing representation of American Indians in schools. Participants spoke about the importance of including American Indian students from neighboring school districts and hiring additional adults who self-identify as American Indian. A reason AIE participants sited for high participation at their out-of-school programs was due to students building friendships with peers and adults who looked like them. One respondent observed that within their program American Indian students meet with peers from schools across the district. The participant stated:

> There's not a lot of other social events [for] Native-American students to
> just come in… Like we have the tables set up, and little groups set up so
> they can kind of socialize for those two hours, but they may come in, and
> they might work on their homework but do it with friends. So I think a
> lot of them like to come because they get to see their friends.

In another instance, one participant agreed that their American Indian students appreciated having adults around them who shared similar cultural backgrounds. The respondent believed that their students were receptive to feedback and correction because of their relation to the American Indian community. The participant stated:

Every child I think wants to see somebody that looks like them and talks like them that is important. You will be more responsive. I'm telling you now; my kids are so much more responsive to [an] Indian than they are to a non-Indian. Another participant stated:

> One thing that gets me in with these kids is that I am a member; I came
> from where these kids come from. I understand. I intervene especially
> when there are behavior issues, [like when a non-Indian teacher says]
> "can you talk to Johnny, he is acting up in my class." I start talking to

him in the hallways. They see someone in a neutral standpoint; they will;
talk to me when they won't talk to the teacher. It is not something that
the teacher is saying; they just see someone on the side.

As indicated earlier, An AIE personnel recalled being asked "who's your people" by American Indian parents as a way to establish trust and gain insight. According to AIE personnel, American Indian families found it paramount to establish kinship before developing a relationship. A shared kinship would guarantee competence and protection for their children in an educational environment that lacked diversity.

Research has steadily acknowledged the importance of pairing racially minority educators with students to improve achievement, engagement, and social-emotional well-being. In a report entitled *The State of Teacher Diversity in American Education* (2015), created by the Albert Shanker Institute, researchers investigated the impact of teachers from underrepresented racial groups in nine cities across the nation. What they found, racially minority teachers are more likely to support and have higher academic expectations for racially minority students as compared to their White peers. Also, students from underrepresented racial groups exhibit signs of positive self-worth when paired with educators from their own racial and ethnic group. Researchers argued that students with positive exposure to racially-congruent educators may reduce negative stereotypes and promote social growth.

Another study conducted by Jason Grissom and Christopher Redding (2017) noted a reduction of the Giftedness gap between high achieving Black and White students when accounting for the race of teachers. According to their findings, White students are twice as likely to advance on to honors classes even when considering for students with the same score. Interestingly, the gap between Black and White high achieving students vanishes once Black students are in classrooms with Black teachers.

Similarly, scholars M.D. Jones and Renee Galliher (2007) evaluated of a culturally responsive mentorship program to assess the extent Navajo youth deal with identity and psychological well-being. Researchers administered surveys to 137 high school students who identified as a member of the Navajo American Indian tribe. Findings revealed that youth who used strategies to help them belong to their ethnic group was instrumental in assisting them to overcome negative feelings of acculturative stress.

Overall, interviewed AIE identified three areas that were instrumental in engaging American Indian students in families within rural communities. These topics were (1) creating a culturally responsive curriculum, (2) building trust, and (3) increasing representation of individuals who are racially and ethnically congruent with the populations they serve. In addition to sharing participants' perceptions of ways to engage, AIE also highlighted challenges they faced to engaging American Indian students and families.

Obstacles to Engagement

In this segment, I will address how participants identified inadequate access to transportation and limited resources as a hindrance to engagement. Also, I noted participants maintained conflicting ideas of who is responsible for engaging American Indian students and families and thus may impact overall levels of engagement.

Overall, all interviewed participants agreed that a lack of transportation was the primary barrier to involving and engaging American Indian students and families. Respondents believed that

geographically large districts and limited family resources contributed to the low participation rates in school activities. One participant agreed that providing transportation would improve attendance at after-school programs: "Well we would…need some sort of transportation…With the after-school program, we may have more kids to participate if we had someone to go around and pick them up and drop them back off."

With limited access to public transportation and activity buses, AIE participants found it difficult to bring students and families to school and to take them to activities that were outside of the community. AIE participants were interested in introducing their students and families to colleges but were unable to, due to the limited access to transportation. One participant stated, **"**I would love to take [parents] to different parts of the country and let them know that this world is bigger than where you live in."

In addition to identifying transportation as a barrier to engagement, respondents also identified inadequate resources. Overwhelmingly, all participants agreed that additional resources like cultural enrichment programs, supplies, and technology, would significantly improve involvement from American Indian students and families. One participant recollected administering parenting programs that specifically catered to the American Indian families within the community. The respondent asserted that additional programs for parents would directly benefit students.

Another participant indicated that improving their use of technology would help improve parent involvement. Over the course of the school year, a respondent recognized having a difficult time communicating with parents. Recently, she decided to send text messages and update activities over social media. For her, this has proved to be very successful with involving and engaging American Indian families. Unfortunately, with limited access to the Internet and social media outlets, the AIE participant was only able to engage and involve her families to a limited level. The participant stated, "Maybe with unlimited resources, we can tap into the social media resources to communicate with parents more."

Lastly, AIE participants differed in their views on who should initiate engagement. One AIE participant argued that engagement was the school's responsibility, but that parents should be more involved in sponsored activities. The AIE participant recalled using various communication methods to reach American Indian families for her events but was unable to pull one parent to her workshop. She stated:

> We advertise in the local newspaper; we sent out word to our local church at each of our schools, I posted a flyer out by the office where every parent that comes in can see it on the bulletin board…I think that is one of the biggest problems we have with our Native-American students is a lack of parental involvement…

In contrast, two AIE participants agreed that schools should not be responsible since they were focused on ensuring that *all* students received adequate resources and support. By purposefully encouraging one ethnic group would be inconsistent with their philosophy of educating *all*. However, a majority of AIE respondents (three) insisted that the personnel from the Title VII Office of Indian Education, mainly the Indian education coordinators and youth development specialists, were the key to improving engagement. One AIE took great pride in being responsible for engaging the American Indian community. She stated, "We are the advocates. We are the engagement." One participant believed that their focus to support American Indian students releases school personnel like guidance counselors and

social workers from having to spend time in assisting these students. The participant argued that their work ensures that students remain connected and parents are engaged. The participant stated:

> A lot of times people say well "they only work with Indian students", but we need to look at [AIE] as a resource because they're taking some of the load off the social worker, they're taking some of the load off the counselor, so that counselor and that social worker at that school have more time to spend with that non-Indian student because the [AIE] is spending extra time with the American-Indian student.

Another AIE participant concluded with the following quote: "Having [AIE] throughout our county would help every, I mean throughout our state and our nation, would help all of our people and I'm an advocate for our people."

AIE participants asserted that the most significant challenge to engagement was a lack of transportation and resources to meet the needs of their community better. Although there was a disagreement in who was ultimately responsible for engagement, overall AIE participants viewed their role as a privilege to engaging American Indian families and students. In the next section, I will provide a discussion and concluding remarks around this study.

Discussion & Conclusion

For AIE personnel, engagement has turned into an all-encompassing job with responsibilities to uphold culture and heritage within the classroom, update parents on the resources needed to keep students connected to a school, and become advocates for Indian students - even if it means spending one-on-one time with them in the halls to prevent suspensions. A majority of AIE personnel believed that it is their role to engage, and their responsibility to improve student and parent connectedness with schools. One may see as a burden, but to them, it is a privilege.

Results from this study show that achievement gaps between Indian and non-Indian students can be reduced despite the rurality of schools and their lower than average cost-per-pupil spending. In this case, higher cost-per-pupil spending did not lead to American Indian students to receive more significant outcomes. By no means, am I making the argument that American Indian students do not need additional financial support? Instead, my findings suggest that these students excel with the guidance of OIE personnel who demand for culturally representative curriculums and successfully engage Indian families, despite their schools' cost-per-pupil spending.

Is it important for American Indian students to have a curriculum that mirror's their heritage? Is it essential to build trust with marginalized communities to help form a bridge between them and racial majority groups within schools? Should schools actively hire educators that mirror their student populations, and create spaces where groups of underrepresented students can work together in a general area? According to the AIE participants, the answer is a resounding yes. These individuals believe that through creating a culturally relevant curriculum, fostering trust with parents, and building racial congruency within the classroom can help improve American Indian student and family engagement, which has the power to impact student achievement.

However, what happens when classrooms represent various tribes? How are students from the most underrepresented tribe, or ethnic group, being valued? Are those students unable to reflect their identity,

or do they establish a broader identification of Indian-ness or human-ness in the broader community? These questions could be used to form additional research that investigates the unintended consequences of multicultural learning for all underrepresented groups.

Achievement gaps between Indian and non-Indian students demonstrate the need for alternative strategies to address and improve outcomes for Indian students. However, the existence of academic gaps should not focus on the individual student, but on the pedagogical institution that maintains and perseveres them. The very presence of consistent achievement gaps between Indian and non-Indian students proves that these edifices perpetually utilize a systemic oppressive curriculum that uplifts those who assimilate to the normative educative culture. Schools must figure out a way to educate all; if not, marginalized and underrepresented populations will be left behind.

Limitations

Interviews with AIE personnel provide a starting point for collecting information on the best strategies to engage American Indian students and their families living in southern rural communities. Given the small sample size, it is difficult to generalize about the best approaches to engage indigenous populations. As indicated earlier, that was not the intent of this work, but I was interested in sharing the perspective of engagement from AIE personnel.

Another limitation is due to the diversity of participants. All participants represented three of eight (38%) state-recognized American Indian Tribes across various regions. However, I did not collect interviews from individuals who represented the remaining five state-recognized tribes or individuals from tribes that are not acknowledged by the state. Given the literature on engagement with underrepresented groups and indigenous communities, I would assume that interview responses would be similar to the remaining state-recognized and non-state-recognized tribes. Nevertheless, without representation from these groups, I am unable to agree with this assessment wholeheartedly.

Conclusion

Overall, structured interviews with AIE personnel provided preliminary evidence on strategies on how to promote engagement within American Indian students and families. Members of the Title VII Office of Indian Education are using a culturally relevant curriculum, building trust, and purposefully gathering racially congruent students and adults to improve engagement.

Interviewed participants also improved access to argue that the participation amongst students and parents would increase if transportation and resources were to be addressed. Participants admitted that the use of a bus system to transport students and families to- and from- school activities would directly improve engagement. Although participants expressed conflicting perspectives on who is responsible for engaging the American Indian population, a majority of AIE personnel believed that it was their responsibility to engage and support American Indian students and families.

Additional research is needed to understand more fully the strategies used by AIE personnel that are more successful in serving American Indian students, and to determine the extent engagement is improving student outcomes. A vital addition to the study would be including qualitative data from parents and students to assess how both define engagement and identify which strategies are the most meaningful and useful.

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