

TEK-4: Addressing Crisis and Conflict in Urban Indigenous Education

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Abstract

In this thought piece, the authors address the growing and persistent challenges present in urban Indigenous education. Conversations between the researchers and Indigenous community members led to the connections and thought processes of how curriculum could serve as a lever to promote culturally responsive practices for Indigenous students' lived experiences while also helping school leaders understand the utility of promoting the funds of knowledge within their community. The authors garnered insight into urban Indigenous communities and present an integrated curriculum model that incorporates Indigenous knowledge systems and that speaks to Indigenous family and community concerns within the context of education with the concomitant goal of making learning more meaningful in urban education settings.

Keywords: Urban Indigenous education; community partnership; Traditional Ecological Knowledge; equitable instructional leadership; educational leadership

Introduction

Important conversations in American Indigenous education originate from shared laughter and collective intergenerational understanding among community members. It is therefore our responsibility to ensure we continue to carve meaningful educational pathways for Indigenous children. These pathways become more difficult to navigate as they cut across deeply embedded structural commitments within schools that affirm racial inequity and unjust schooling practices that render invisible the vast knowledge and cultural contributions of American Indian communities. Even more challenging is carving space in urban educational institutions where meeting the unique educational needs of American Indian students is not as well understood as it might be in rural communities near Native nations. We view these challenges as opportunities through which we can foster shared understanding between Indigenous communities and school leaders, thereby strengthening trust and shared commitments to urban Indigenous students.

The origins of this article are not easy to discern, nor would we be entirely accurate in naming ourselves as “thought leaders” regarding the ideas we present. Like all great thoughts, many hours of conversation and reflection with others helped develop our ideas about the role of school leaders to create and sustain relationships with Indigenous communities that honor and affirm Indigenous ways of knowing while acknowledging the role of colonization in contemporary society. We find ourselves in times of crisis with a global pandemic continuing to threaten Indigenous knowledge keepers, increased race-based tensions in schools resulting from national and local efforts to dismantle inequitable knowledge systems, and resistance from educational leaders to meaningfully incorporate Indigenous epistemologies into existing content and curriculum. We also find ourselves in a *crisis response* in collaboration with many others who, like us, have recognized the urgency of the time and have encouraged us to share our thoughts with a greater audience.

Our thoughts are guided in large part by a recommendation from an urban Indigenous nonprofit leader and community organizer who suggested that we “reinvent the enemy’s language” (Harjo & Bird, 1997) in education. These authors eloquently inform us that while “it is through writing in the colonizers’ languages that our lands have been stolen, children taken away ... these colonizers’ languages ... now hand back emblems of our cultures” (pp. 21-22) when used to heal, regenerate, and create understanding about Indigenous knowledge. We applied this guidance to how we

think about culturally responsive curriculum in relation to Indigenous students' lived experiences. This thought article presents components of an integrated curriculum redesign model for K-12 education settings that incorporates Indigenous knowledge systems that speak to Indigenous family and community concerns about education with the concomitant goal of making learning more meaningful in urban education settings.

Community Context for Urban Indigenous Education

We turn our attention to the context for our attempt to reinvent the language of curriculum and student learning as an avenue for dismantling entrenched Western worldviews in school curricula. We had the opportunity to spend two days with urban Indigenous parents, educators, and community members as part of an Indian Education Summit held annually in North Dakota. The event was at the North Dakota state capitol building where less than one month prior, state legislators passed a law requiring school districts to teach about the histories of the five sovereign nations located within the state. The excitement was palpable among attendees, particularly those who had been working in urban Indian education programs to support students who were far removed from their Native communities. On the first day of the summit, a key topic of conversation for Indigenous participants was the long-running tensions between urban school district leaders and Indigenous parents and educators in their districts. These tensions centered on the lack of representation in content and curriculum, inattention to the COVID-19 pandemic, and disregard for parental and community input that school districts are required to obtain when accepting federal Indian education funds. Further race-based conflict started in urban districts where non-Indigenous community members and educators felt it was not necessary to implement the new North Dakota legislation mandating tribal histories be incorporated into the curriculum.

This paper's authors began the process of engaging with urban Indigenous parents and community members at the close of the Indian Education Summit through weekly meetings (that continue as of this writing) to gain a deeper understanding about how educational leaders might develop and sustain authentic relationships with them. We also learned how we, as educational leadership researchers, could contribute our knowledge to build bridges between urban school districts and Indigenous communities. Our thought partnership was deliberate to ensure that we could leverage the tools of Indigenous epistemology with non-Indigenous school practices to provide educational resources and instructional leadership materials to increase discussion and collaboration among all interested parties.

Attending to the "unique educational needs of American Indian students" does not fall solely within the purview of principles embedded in culturally responsive teaching, leading, or pedagogy. Unique to American Indian populations is the federal trust responsibility mandate written into legislation and funded through multiple federal programs, including the Every Student Succeeds Act, the Johnson-O'Malley Act, and Impact Aid. This mandate advances the work of incorporating Indigenous community funds of knowledge (e.g., Moll et al., 1992) by establishing parental advisory committees in urban school districts that apply for and accept these funds. Urban school district leaders rely on the urban Indigenous population for feedback because there are typically a wide range of Tribal nations represented in the district, making it difficult to represent individual nations. Federal American Indian education policy coupled with the new North Dakota legislation provided urban Indigenous community members the opportunity to hold accountable school leaders who disregard Indigenous knowledge systems and world views in the curricula.

Conflict and Crisis: Urban Indigenous Community Members Respond

The defining line between conflict and crisis related to the ongoing assimilation efforts through education tends to blur as we work with and learn from Indigenous community partners. Our thought partners nearest to the problem, including parents who are members of parents committees, view the legacy of American Indian education as an unresolved crisis resulting from colonization. Urban educational leaders have exacerbated this crisis through their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, as Indigenous community members living away from their home reservations often do not have access to their nation's emergency response measures.

However, conflict, as experienced by Indigenous families and communities, is more associated with the day-to-day inconveniences related to interactions within an inequitable system that refuses to acknowledge the effects this inequity has on Indigenous students' sense of identity and worth. Whether we attempt to draw a bright line distinction between conflict and crisis or not, the fact remains that urban Indigenous students have never been well served by public schools designed to privilege Western knowledge systems at the expense of diverse worldviews (Cajete, 1994; Sabzalian, 2019). In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the unrealized legacy of self-determination for Indigenous communities, is a catalyst for Indigenous parents, students, researchers, policymakers, and educators to come together to make the most of the moment to advance Indigenous knowledge systems into school curricula.

We next present components of a curriculum design that combines Traditional Ecological Knowledge with principles comprising four curriculum shifts for deeper student learning. We present this as a community-inclusive approach to integrate relevant, Indigenous epistemology into traditional curriculum models in urban schools serving American Indian students. Curriculum is a practical lever for this type of change as it is one of the voices associated with colonization. American compulsory education brings students together and attempts to educate them all uniformly in ways that were designed for one subpopulation. The messaging happens early and often for Indigenous students, and for this narrative to change so too must the curricula.

TEK-4: Community Engaged Curriculum Redesign

Traditional Ecological Knowledge

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is fundamental to community-engaged educational research that reflects Indigenous funds of knowledge (Adams et al., 2014). TEK centers the conversation around a wholistic understanding of our world and the valuable lessons passed from generation to generation from time immemorial. It privileges values associated with connectedness, place-based context, and communication, all of which demand that educational leaders move beyond the historically held sentiment that only teachers are disseminators of knowledge. School leaders are then situated as the bridge for schools and communities to develop stronger relationships and build on the funds of knowledge held within a community. Unique to TEK is the component of spiritual relatedness and the view that our innate sense of identity cannot be fractured to separate the mind, body, and spirit. Though there is no monolithic Indigenous identity or worldview, commonalities do exist among and across tribes. This is similar to Meyer's (2013) discussion of holographic epistemologies that outlines an Indigenous perspective, asserting:

We communicate through our world view shaped within knowledge systems prioritized by the needs of people and the lessons of place ... simplif[y]ing indigenous [sic] epistemology ... [to] principles and practices ... used to design a (k)new understanding of the philosophy of knowledge inclusive of all three aspects of nature: physical, mental, and spiritual. (p. 94)

Given the critical positioning of educational leaders and the rapid pace of economic and societal change, the school-level learning outcomes for students must be dynamic and aligned with new, emergent realities that are context-situated and context-dependent (Seong, 2019). Addressing these needs is a significant enough challenge for educational leaders during ordinary times but has been even more so during a global pandemic. The focus for many educators, students, and families has not been on collaboration or connection between the school and the community but simply on surviving.

For some educators and community members, this pandemic has highlighted the importance of collaboration. Many relationships have grown from the need to communicate more with one another; however, these relationships have not typically bridged the broader Indigenous community with the school community. While many districts have made recent strides toward identifying what they believe a future-ready graduate looks like, centering around the 4 Cs of education (i.e., creativity,

collaboration, communication, and critical thinking), few have purposively looked at their instruction and the strengths within the urban Indigenous community to see how they can be intertwined to benefit students. TEK provides an additional set of principles to student curricular engagement that creates the conditions where Indigenous students can thrive rather than just survive.

We view crisis as opportunity. Ample space exists for educators to examine their own praxis and experiment with integrated knowledge models. For many, the role of the instructor has not deviated from the way they experienced it as a student. The teacher was the sage-on-the-stage disseminating knowledge to the compliant children sitting in neat rows. The divide between the school world and the outside world was so striking that seeing your teacher in the grocery store brought about chaos for many students. Today, many schools, out of necessity, have shifted this way of thinking to be more wholistic and connected. Subjects are less siloed, and assignments have more real-world and contextual implications. While this move to include more creativity and critical thinking is remarkable, the reality of who is making the decisions about what to teach and how students demonstrate proficiency remains the same. Topics are still taught using the same texts and the same factory-line model where context is almost irrelevant. The ubiquity of many of these resources is staggering. It is fascinating, and terrifying, to consider how many students are forced to read the same book and complete the same project across the country. For example, many students must read *Where the Red Fern Grows* to develop their reading comprehension even if they have no schema for fur trapping or hunting. Other times students have the choice of how to present their research, but the topic must be the Revolutionary War. Ever present are the decisions of others about what is appropriate for students to read and the banning of those texts or ideologies that are not in lock step with the conventional. We are interested in students who create, collaborate, communicate, and think critically, yet we force one way of knowing, often devoid of students' lived experiences, and reward compliance. We suggest that real-world context would be strengthened for all students by incorporating components of TEK derived from working with Indigenous communities to make contemporary educational settings meaningful.

The disconnect between the desired outcomes for students and what they are taught stems from a relevance gap in education. The relevance gap, as described by Perkins (2014), differs from the previous notion of an achievement gap as it asks not what are the students achieving, but what will it matter in their future lives? This focus on the student relevance highlights our work. Who is making the decisions about what is relevant? How is reading a book that has nothing to do with your passions or contexts relevant? What can educational leaders do to reconcile the glaring disconnect between what schools and the community deem relevant? Our urban Indigenous community partners extend these questions to a more community-specific focus. How will language and culture further erode in institutions privileging Western knowledge? How will public education prepare Indigenous students to engage in a parallel form of governance never taught in school? How does disregarding the sovereign status of Tribal nations prepare students for entrepreneurial or economic development activities with communities with vastly different legal structures for establishing businesses?

Four Shifts for Deeper Learning

Our thoughts and work have shown us that the most complicated questions have the simplest answers. If we want school to value context, connection, communication, critical thinking, and collaboration we need to change how we do school. We need to shift instruction away from the teacher being the sole giver of knowledge and follow a more Indigenous model by allowing students to engage authentically with the world around them while the teacher facilitates the learning. In their book *Different Schools for a Different World*, McLeod and Shareski (2018) outline four shifts in education: deeper thinking and learning; student agency and personalization; authentic work; and technology infusion. We assert that these shifts, coupled with TEK, will address many concerns related to instruction voiced by urban Indigenous communities.

These shifts act as a lever for our work. Deeper thinking and learning mean asking educators to move away from requiring lower-level thinking tasks such as factual recall and regurgitation to assignments that are more thought-provoking and rigorous. Student agency and personalization

asks educators to move away from teacher-controlled learning and allows students to make the decisions about what, why, and how they demonstrate their learning. Authentic work moves beyond siloed assignments that have students asking, “why do I need this stuff?” to providing students with real opportunities to engage with and contribute to the relevant location and national communities. Technology infusion allows students to connect globally to become stronger collaborators and communicators. Technology can help students engage with issues and concepts far beyond their local community as technology-infused instruction can be enhanced in ways simply not possible in years past.

The four shifts allow educators to leverage the voice of community. In an urban school district, it is often the case that educators see the curriculum as something rigid and incapable of change as it must be taught with fidelity. The four shifts allow educators to adhere to the standards they must cover while giving a voice to their students. This voice allows multiple perspectives and passions to be expressed within the curriculum in authentic ways. It moves beyond the teacher assigning a text that they assume will resonate with Indigenous students, to students taking the lead and sharing with the teacher and their classmates what they find influential. When all students are allowed to do this, culture and community are no longer juxtaposed lessons that happen in prescribed months, but a core component of how that classroom functions.

This shift is simply understanding that education standards are intentionally broad. Educators can make changes based on their students’ interests and the funds of knowledge that exist in the community while adhering to their district curriculum. We are not saying *Where the Red Fern Grows* is not a useful text for many students, but allowing students to read Indigenous authors such as Cinnamon Kills First or Vine Deloria, Jr. is a small task from the teacher’s perspective that can promote social justice through a more authentic understanding about the people and pasts of this country. If we really do value the 4 Cs of education, then we also must see the value in TEK, as the alignment between the two is tenable. Communication, collaboration, creativity, context, connectedness, and critical thinking are all highlighted within TEK. Educational leaders can then advocate for these shifts and allow more families and community members into the decision-making process.

Connecting TEK-4 with Urban Indigenous Community Concerns

At the core of TEK-4 is an understanding that relationships between educational leaders and members of the Indigenous community must be tended to at all times if educators expect the relationships to be sustained through crisis. The multiple crises of COVID-19, racial inequity, unjust schooling practices, and increased race-based conflict in school districts serving urban Indigenous families has become a catalyst for bringing the Indigenous community together to advance curricular changes incorporating Indigenous knowledge in ways previously unseen in most settings. Moreover, the global pandemic has exposed previously difficult to discern areas where schools must improve if they are going to meet the unique educational needs of Indigenous students.

We acknowledge that our proposed curriculum strategy for incorporating TEK into existing curricular shifts does not offer a practical “how-to” solution, nor is it our intention to do so. The diverse bodies of knowledge existing across the 574 federally recognized Tribes and more than 60 state recognized Tribes, most of whom attend public schools, makes it irresponsible to claim a one-size fits all model. More practically, the goal is to encourage school leaders to develop stronger relationships with urban Indigenous students and families to shift the messaging delivered to Indigenous and non-Indigenous students across the country. Indigenous communities have long tried to assert traditional knowledge into school curriculum to better equip Indigenous students for a future that advances the goals of American Indian communities. When educational leaders attend to Indigenous education goals related to realizing increased self-determination for Tribal communities, meaningful collaboration across the local and school communities is not only possible, but far more likely to succeed.

A first step for many educational leaders is to listen. “Solution-itis” is an issue far too many educators suffer from where the work to find an answer supersedes the work to understand the “why” behind it. Educational leaders need to have conversations and dialogues where they recognize and

accept they do not have all the answers and knowledge. Seeking out guidance and direction only occurs when listening to understand instead of listening to solve.

The four shifts in this work are tools that can help educators transform their lessons to promote deeper learning. In our understanding, they go beyond lesson design. The shifts highlight the significance of autonomy and the perils of maintaining the status quo. At a time of mass exodus, students and educators are in vital need of support that is farther reaching than a test score or grade—it is the support for students' identity and fundamental worth. Educational leaders must then reflect upon the work they are doing and the messages, intended or unintended, they are delivering loudly to their communities. Similar to the work of Cajete (1994), reflection is a critical element and can even be seen as the fifth shift in this work. Leaders can reflect on how they respond to and address overt instances of racism, as well as how they respond to covert messaging expressed in the omission of culture and community. From the deafening yell of students, families, and teachers, we then ask the principals who are given the space to maneuver within standards: Where do you stand? Are you willing to cultivate your relationships with teachers, students, and the broader urban Indigenous community? Or is it safer and easier to continue to fail urban Indigenous students when they need us the most?

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