

“SOME DAYS IT’S GOOD AND SOME IT’S HARD”:
THE EXPERIENCES OF FACULTY AT NATIVE AMERICAN BOARDING
SCHOOLS

by

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Within the greater body of knowledge surrounding Native American schools there is a lack of knowledge surrounding the value of teacher experiences. The knowledge that can be gained from the experiences of teachers is an important untapped source. Several problems surrounding Native American schools include a lack of identity for students, high dropout rates, low self-esteem and self-worth on the parts of the students, high rates of substance abuse and more recently a rise in gang activity (H, Interview 1; Nel, 1994; Reyhner, 1992a). These are problems faced by every school, but with Native American dropout rates doubling the national average (Reyhner, 1992a); it appears that these problems are more prevalent within this population. Staff and teachers are with students much of the time and can provide another story which can aid in understanding the problems faced not only by the Native American students but also by the schools. These stories, experiences, and perspectives should be shared.

Purpose of Study

Several studies have been conducted on the experiences of Native American students entering mainstream school settings (Brayboy, 2005; Knack, 1978; Wilson, 1991). Brayboy (2005) follows students leaving the reservation to go to several different colleges and captures the feelings and experiences of the students away from home for the first time, while Knack (1978) and Wilson (1991) follow Native American students leaving reservation schools to enter into the public high schools and the difficulties faced by the students. These studies share and explain the experiences of the students and try

to capture an understanding of the new experiences these students face entering new environments and allow outsiders/readers to understand the difficulties face by Native American students.

Although several studies have concentrated on students at Native American schools, not many studies have focused on the faculty or staff of largely Native American schools. This study will share the experiences of the Native American adults working at a Native American boarding school to gain a further understanding of their feelings and emotions, including their perspective on the Native American school system. Focusing on the teachers' perspectives of interacting with the children will introduce a new level of understanding for Native American schools.

Significance of Study

The experiences of teachers at schools are often overlooked, especially those at schools with largely Native American populations. In the past, several researchers have investigated the experiences of Native American students coming from reservation schools and entering mainstream schools (Brayboy, 2005; Wilson, 1991). In these studies the teachers at the mainstream schools may be interviewed to get their opinions about the Native American students, but only in relation to the other students in the mainstream school system.

The teachers who work at largely Native American schools have experiences and opinions that are valuable to the overall body of work on Native American school systems. Studies in the past have focused on teachers in specific circumstances (Malott & Waukau-Villagomez, 2008; Patrick, 2008), such as standardized testing (Knack, 1978; Patrick, 2008), importance of culture in the classroom (Lipka, Sharp, Brenner, Yanez &

Sharp, 2005; Patrick, 2008; Starnes, 2006), or learning to work with students in poverty (Knack, 1978; Malott & Waukau-Villagomez, 2008).

This study is different from all other studies in its focus on teacher perspectives. Through interviews I hope to bring a better understanding of the experiences of faculty and staff at Native American schools. This study contributes to the larger body of research and knowledge of Native American school systems with a new perspective: one of the teachers and staff. These individuals are with the students a large part of the day and they see what works and what does not work in the school system. The interviews can shed light on problems that exist within the schools, but can also aid in breaking the stereotypes surrounding Native American schools, especially federally funded boarding schools with the assumption that they are an alternative school for Native American students. Narratives have the ability to give voice to traditionally silenced populations. The faculty and staff do as they are instructed as they would in any school, but they see and experience things that no administrator or member of the Bureau of Indian Education [BIE] sees or experiences. Giving voice to the faculty and staff allows for their experiences to be shared, can have the ability to make changes for issues that need to be changed, and can shed light on the relevancy of boarding schools today.

Definition of Terms

It is not unusual for terms that are used in everyday settings to have particular meaning when used in an academic setting. Words can also have particular meaning for a subset of the population. The terms used in this study are defined below:

Boarding Schools: Historically used for the assimilation of Native Americans, and currently used as a community (or as some argue to create Pan-Indian traditions) which

bring Native students across the United State together for school and to live at during the school year. Some boarding schools also have day students but the students at the school are mostly from somewhere else and a long way from home.

Dominant Culture: Is the culture of colonization one of European/Anglo traditions.

“Many English believed they could save the world by the imposition of their culture and religion” (Spring, 2010, p. 4). Freire (2001) and Tuhiwai Smith (1999) continue that education is still focused heavily within the dominant or imperial culture and that the job of educators is to break away from this tradition.

Elder: An elder in a community is someone that guides, supports and leads members of that community. In Brayboy (2005) elders were interviewed in order to gain insight on the community and to recount their memories as children.

Indian Nations: Can also be stated as an Indian tribe or community. An Indian Nation or Tribe as defined by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA, 2008) is “distinct community” that “has been identified as an American Indian entity...since 1900” and “has existed as a community from historical times until the present” (p. 270). This definition can be problematic as tribes come together to create a new cultural identity incorporating traditions from several different tribes (McBeth, 1983).

Native American: Are native peoples indigenous to North America within the United States. “The International Labor Office defines indigenous peoples as ‘populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonization’” (Spring, 2010, p. 21).

Reservation: “A reservation is an area of land ‘reserved’ by or for an Indian band, village, or tribe (tribes) to live on and use. Reservations were created by treaty, by congressional

legislation, or by executive order. Since 1934, the Secretary of the Interior has had the responsibility of establishing new reservations or adding land to existing reservations” (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], n.d.).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to acquaint the reader with current research, this chapter begins with an examination of the existing research on Native American education regarding the historical development of the school system and how it related to the current education system in place for Native Americans. Following this is a look at Native American students and teachers from a perspective of current research. Lastly, the review ends with related literature on teacher perceptions.

Native American School System

Colonialization

The system of education for Native Americans since colonialization has been a rocky road. Through oppressive acts and laws, Native Americans have been pushed from their traditional lands, forced to downsize onto land allotted west of the Mississippi river, and forced to change their school systems several times. The current law regarding Native American school systems is *Article 27 of the Indigenous and tribal Peoples Convention* (1989) a section of the International Labor Convention. The Article states that Native Americans will have a say in developing a curriculum that will incorporate their histories, their cultural knowledge and their tribal value system (Spring, 2010). This Article comes after two hundred years of Federal government control of their educational system.

Long before any intervention of the government, “traditions, philosophy, and tribal history [were] handed down orally from generation to generation” (LeBrasseur & Freark, 1982, p. 6). There was no written language; everything was oral. When the

Protestant missionaries began their missionary schools for Native Americans, the first thing they wanted to do was develop an alphabet for the Native American languages in the late 1780s (Bear, 2008a; Spring, 2010). However, Sequoyah, a mixed Cherokee, independently created an alphabet and started a newsletter to record the histories for his people. Sequoyah's alphabet became the commonly used alphabet for the Cherokee, because his alphabet depended on knowledge of the language (Spring, 2010). The Protestants refused to adopt the alphabet in the school systems because they did not want to use Sequoyah's alphabet, and they were not willing to learn the language to develop a sufficient alphabet. The Protestant schools were federally funded and supported by the Civilization Act of 1819. At the time Thomas McKenney, Superintendent of Indian Affairs thought "of Indians as children who only needed to be protected from evil and sent to school, he concluded that under the conditions of isolation and education Indians could be civilized in one generation," (Spring, 2010, p. 23). This of course was a common belief of the time, that Native Americans were children who needed to be properly education in order to join the larger society. McKenney negotiated with Congress to receive federal funding for the Protestant schools, through the Civilization Fund Act (Spring, 2010). This method of Native American education continued through the 1870s, even during the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which pushed Native Americans west of the Mississippi River. The schools moved with them. After the Indian Removal Act, some schools changed by allowing educated Native Americans to teach alongside the Protestant missionaries, yet little progress was made toward sovereignty due to white Protestants still continuing to account for over half of the teachers (Spring, 2010).

The Historic Boarding Schools

In the late 1870s, during the American Indian war a new system of education was developed for Native American children: the boarding school. The boarding schools or off reservation schools were another “attempt to ‘assimilate’ the American Indians into the dominant society” (LeBrasseur & Freark, 1982, p.6). Richard Pratt, the originator of off reservation schools, believed that in order to save the man, the Indian inside must be killed (Bear, 2008a; Lomawaima, 1993). Several methods were used in an attempt to strip young Native American students of their traditions and culture; because of course it was necessary to “save” the children (Bear, 2008a; Lomawaima, 1993). Some practices included strict physical education, grueling emotional and mental challenges, and a complete denial of traditional language, dress, and way of being (Bear, 2008a; DeJong, 2007; Lomawaima, 1993; Moayeri & Smith, 2010).

All of the methods and theories behind educating Native Americans was not for the benefit of the Native Americans but rather to produce workers, and to educate them with the intention or hope that students would abandon their traditions and sign over their land: to be more “patriotic”.¹ “Colonialism set out to undermine the foundation of the First Nations people. To force assimilation, colonialist attacked the most vulnerable component of the First Nation societies – they took the children” (Moayer & Smith, 2010, p. 409). Children attending boarding schools were taken far away from their families and reservations. In some cases the boarding schools were actually orphanages or asylums for “destitute Indian children” (Burich, 2007, p. 95). The children were not allowed to speak in their native language and were forced to behave as white children

¹ Though a continued imperial-esque curriculum and ways school function as a factory society continue to push a worker patriotic attitude on to all children (Gardener, 1991; Robinson, 2011).

(Burich, 2007; Spring, 2010). For instance, a popularly celebrated holiday at the boarding schools was the day the Dawes Act² became a law, February 8, 1887. The schools “use[d] that occasion to impress upon Indian youth the enlarged scope and opportunity given to them by this law and the new obligation which it impose[d],” (Spring, 2010, p. 34) a need to be civilized.

The idea of boarding schools began to fade in the 1930s and 1940s after the publication of the *Meriam Report* (1928) and the end of World War II. The *Meriam Report* (1928) was commissioned through the Institute for Government Research and published through John Hopkins University by Lewis Meriam. Meriam found “that the modern point of view in education and social work lays stress on upbringing in natural setting of home and family life” (as cited in Spring, 2010, p.37) and that the problem with the system was the “government attitude” (Spring, 2010, p. 36-37). The other contributing factor adding to the fading idea of boarding schools came after World War II “there was a renewed interest in the economy with the focus on a rapid emancipation of the Indian from federal supervision and responsibility. It was time, advocates of Social Darwinism view argued, for the Indians to survive or become extinct” (DeJong, 2007, p. 273-274). A larger number of boarding schools began to shut down and most were closed during the 1950s with only a few remaining today. Due to the methods used in the historic boarding school several consequences came about from the boarding school system, including the students dependency on the faculty and staff at the schools, the

² Henry Dawes believed “in the civilizing power of private property with the claim that to be civilized was to ‘wear civilized clothes...cultivate the ground, live in houses, ride in Studebaker wagons, send children to school, drink whisky, [and] own property.’” The Dawes Act provided allotments of land based on heads of families (PBS, 2001).

poor health conditions in the school, and the lasting mental or destroyed self-worth of the students (Bear, 2008a; Burich, 2007; DeJong, 2007; Nel, 1994).

The Current System

Currently there are still four federally funded boarding schools for Native Americans, but with the passage of *Article 27* (ILC, 1989) the schools are now completely run by Native Americans. Working or attending school any of the four boarding schools requires that one must be able to prove Native American lineage, as designated by the tribe of lineage.

One of the major struggles for largely Native American schools is the lack of funding. After President Dwight Eisenhower's administration, several Indian Nations were stripped of their federal recognition, which meant a loss of federal assistance (Malott & Waukau-Villagomez, 2008).

Not only are money and resources an issue but there is also a conflict of what should be taught to Native American students and who should get to decide. As recently as 1989 Glen Latham argued for a strong assimilationist method for teaching Native American students to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Latham "viewed the goal of BIA education as making Indians lose their cultural identity and become real Americans by melting into the general population where they can be successful" (as cited in Reyhner, 1992b, p.30). While on the other hand, a current argument states there should be "a focus on culture and traditional knowledge coupled with mainstream skills, [while] some people on the reservation argue that students only need to know how to read English and do math" (Malott & Waukau-Villagomez, 2008, p.166). Although this is not the case for every reservation or predominately Native American school, issues of curriculum content

and what is important for the students to learn continues to cause more debate in these schools than solutions. An assumption “that education, as an abstract concept, is the sole and proper function of the formal school system & further that education only occurs in the classroom” contributes to the conflict (Knack, 1978, p. 216). However as quoted by Henrietta Whiteman in 1978 “contrary to popular belief; education – the transmission of and acquisition of knowledge and skills – did not come to the North American continent on the *Nina*, *Piñata* and *Santa Maria*” (as cited in LeBrasseur & Freark, 1982, p. 6). This struggle within the system is relatively new in that it only started after the educational system of Native Americans was taken back for Native Americans to control in the 1980s.

Problems not only arise within schools on reservations but also public schools in largely Native American areas. In schools with large Native American populations that are not controlled by an Indian Nation, Native American “leaders would like all students to learn about the local Indian heritage, while white parents perceived preserving Indian heritage as irrelevant to non-Indian students” (Ngai, 2006, p. 233). This balancing act is not only a problem for the school systems but also for the students and faculty at the schools.

Native American Students

Several studies have undertaken the goal of finding the experience for generalizability of Native American students at boarding schools (Bear, 2008b; Manson, Beals, Dick, & Duclos, 1989; Scott & Langhorne, 2012), mainstream public schools (Wilson, 1978), in higher-education settings (Brayboy, 2005), or on the reservation (LeBrasseur & Freark, 1982; Nel, 1994).

The lasting effects of the historic boarding schools are a presence still felt by several Native American communities. According to Moayeri and Smith (2010) “residential school[s] failed to assimilate First Nations people. They failed to totally destroy their culture and language, but they often succeeded in destroying the self-esteem and self-confidence of the student who attended the schools” (p. 415). This lack of self-worth and self-confidence is a problem several Native American youth still deal with today. Johanna Nel’s (1994) study *Preventing School Failure*, reported that “Native American children have been found to be more rejected, depressed, and withdrawn than white children. Studies also show that Native American teenagers have lower self-image than any other minority group, the highest rate of suicide” (p.169). This diminished self-worth is believed to contribute to students’ disregard for their own health and for some can lead to drug and substance abuse (Manson, Beals, Dick & Duclos, 1989; Scott & Langhorne, 2012). Boarding schools have changed their purpose and mission working toward educating Native American youth and sustaining culture but some issues continue as the system as a whole may still have similar underlying psychological implication for children (Burich, 2007; McBeth, 1983). The students are still sent away from home, whether by choice or as a last resort which can contribute to low self-worth (Manson, Beals, Dick, & Duclos, 1989; Scott & Langhome, 2012).

Students entering mainstream schools may also be confronted with racism. In Wilson’s (1991) study of high school aged Native American students attending mainstream high schools for the first time were found to be treated unfairly. Teachers believed the students were “incapable of handling university preparatory work” (p. 373) and suggested the Native American students “be placed in either vocational or special

education classes” (Wilson, 1991, p. 373). As noted in Wilson’s study, the teachers were either unaware or indifferent toward the cultural traditions and practices of the students or chose to ignore them (Wilson, 1991). “Minority students are being ‘disabled’ or ‘empowered’ as a direct result of their interactions with school personnel,” (Nel, 1994, p.169) the interactions and relationships have the ability to make the difference in the lives of the student, but they go unnoticed.

Teachers need to be aware of the internal conflict of Native American students and that their “objective [as teachers] is not to have students change their cultural beliefs and behaviors but to help them adapt to specific situations and acquire coping skills” to be able to be around the dominant culture and interact within the dominant culture society (Nel, 1994, p. 170). Teachers must attempt to help “minority children to develop the skills necessary to communicate in the language of power, while, at the same time valuing their own differences from members of the dominant culture” (Starnes, 2006, p. 387). When these goals are not attempted by school personnel, the internal conflict of the Native American student becomes much greater. As an elder told Brayboy (2005) about his experiences in a boarding school, “[w]e never learned to be white...they tried, but they failed” (p. 194). Several regions with large Native American populations are thus still attempting to assimilate rather than educate.

Even when Native American students do succeed in mainstream schools, the internal battle continues. “Some American Indians in higher education find it difficult to be true to the cultural norms of their communities while ‘succeeding’ in predominately white institutions” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 196). To the dominant culture, it is a wonderful thing for students to go on through higher education and succeed, do well and even

continue onto post baccalaureate degrees. However, the two main participants in Brayboy's (2005) study struggled with their identities throughout college. This included internal struggles as well as friends and family back home on the reservations. "Some members of their communities believe Heather & John have lost their way or that they can never really be tribal people in the same way that they were before leaving their communities" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 207). Both Heather and John use their education to help the communities, Heather as a lawyer worked on land cases for the reservation and John as an anthropologist worked to document the history for federal purposes. Yet both are viewed as lost by other members of their communities. With the difficulties students face, it is important to have strong cultural roots and still be able to interact with the dominant society. It is the job of teachers to enable students to do this rather than allow the students to succumb to assimilation (Brayboy, 2005; Nel, 1994; Reyhner 1992b).

Native American students are confronted with many internal and external conflicts that affect their feelings about themselves and their heritage. In many cases Native American students are responsible for the continuation of cultural traditions and these responsibilities affect each student individually, some handle it better than others. Teachers need to be aware of the struggles facing not just Native American students but students of any marginalized population and be willing to work with the students in a way to best serve them.

The Debate of Culture in the Classroom

As stated earlier, many different groups debate whether or not culture and traditions should be taught at schools run by both reservations and state governments. Patrick (2008) observed

The majority of teachers stated that cultural inclusion was fundamental...

‘Including culture is one of the most important things we need to do for the pure and simple fact that our children’s culture is so different than the White culture and the White culture is what we’ve been trying to shove down these kids throats for all these hundreds of years and I think it’s wrong. I feel it is the responsibility of the teachers as well as the parents and the community to keep their culture alive and well in these children so when they do go out in to the real world, they have something that is uniquely theirs (p. 76).

Part of what makes the United States unique is that the population is culturally diverse.

The cultures of students should be taught in order for children to know their histories and see similarities in their pasts to bring them together. “Indian people believe that their language, history, and values should be reflected in the educational offerings in all systems, be they public, private, or tribally operated” (LeBrasseur & Freark, 1982, p. 7).

Culturally responsible teaching is important as “the teacher is engaged in the creative act of transforming schooling from its colonial past into a form that respects both Western and, in this case, [Native American] traditions” (Lipka, et. al, 2005). According to Freire (2001), part of living is creating culture, but in order to do that we must know our cultural past to effectively change or work with the future.

Teachers of Native America Students & Their Perceptions

There is always an important relationship between teachers and students; this is especially true in largely Native American schools because “teachers can play an important role in reducing the sense of alienation that so many culturally different students suffer” (Nel, 1994, p. 170). There are many obstacles for Native American

school systems; one of the most difficult pertains to the teachers and their ability to work with the students. Teachers combat daily to accomplish this on reservations or largely Native American schools. Teachers must learn to deal with different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. They are faced with a struggle to teach and be true to their own cultural traditions. Most importantly, teachers at largely Native American schools have a very steep learning curve, “teachers should therefore be very honest with themselves and not take a job just for the paycheck...being a good teacher takes a life commitment” (Malott & Waukau-Villagomez, 2008, p. 172). Because of these difficulties facing teachers at Native American schools

[m]ost teachers, whether white, Native, or from other cultural and ethnic groups, would say they were ill prepared for their first teaching experiences. Therefore it is not surprising that most teachers working in reservation schools are poorly equipped to meet challenges (Starnes, 2006, p. 385).

Waukau-Villagomez, once a principal at a reservation school, recounts,

It is difficult for teachers who do not have the personal experience to truly understand the difficulties of children who come from poverty, who come from dysfunctional families, who come from the inner cities or reservations...They send culturally unprepared teacher into a social context marked by changing demographics in schools manifesting itself in may more children from different cultural backgrounds in classrooms...you still have white middle class teachers who have very difficult time relating to what’s happening in these children’s lives (Malcott & Waukau-Villagomez, 2006, p. 164).

All teachers struggle with the Native American school systems. White teachers believe Indian families do not want them there (Patrick, 2008), while Native American teachers at times “fear putting forth [their] true style of teaching, because [they] fear that [they] will lose [their] positions” (as cited in Lipka et al, 2005, p. 34). They have difficulty dealing with the system and the teachers feel “unsupported by students’ families” which is “a factor they said increased the difficulty of making significant academic goals” (Patrick, 2008, p. 73).

All of the studies previously mentioned look at the struggles faced by teachers, but fail to examine how teachers get to the positions they are in and how their personal histories led them to these positions. There are definitely difficulties facing reservation teachers, but the literature does not comment on why they choose to continue to work with these children. Waukau-Villagomez states that according to “Bandura’s social cognitive theory, you will realize the importance of role models which holds true not only to Indian children, but all children...they need to see their own people in positions of power and authority,” which is why she continues to teach (Malcott & Waukau-Villagomez, 2006, p. 174). Yet as Castagno (2012) reveals in her study, several teacher preparation programs that should be focused on preparing Native American teachers for reservation schools lack cultural aspects and follow the same curricula as mainstream teacher preparation programs. The fact that these teachers feel no better prepared to work with Native American students than any other teacher only contributes to the problems and challenges faced by teachers. Teachers, Native and non-Native, of Native American students are continually cited as being unprepared culturally and not having the right

mindset to do the job put in front of them (Castagno, 2012; Malcott & Waukau-Villagomez, 2006; Patrick, 2008).

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

A case study looks at a particular group of people at a place and time; it creates bounds for a study. Throughout a one-year period I interviewed 3 people who all work at a Native American boarding school. The interviews were with faculty and staff to learn about their personal history, feelings and experiences as it related to working at a Native American boarding school.

Narrative inquiry, according to Chase (2011), is still a growing area of study that involves many methods and several approaches. Narrative inquiry although a type of qualitative research can in fact diverge from the traditional means of analysis and allow for the stories, the life experiences of the participants/narrators to stand alone as significant (Chase, 2011). The interviews move beyond simple recollections of events to illuminate the meaning behind the events and the knowledge gained from particular experiences. Pushing participant to not just “generalize about their experiences (as qualitative researchers often do) [but] to invit[e] narrators’ specific stories” to be told (Chase, 2011, p. 423).

Participants

The participants for this study are faculty and staff who work at a Native American boarding school. The three participants, Henry, Rebecca and Jan, all come from similar upbringing and background but diverge after their high school experiences. For Henry, working at the school comes after a life of participating in the advancement of Native American education through his early work with American Indian Movement

(AIM) (H, Interview 1). For Rebecca and Jan, the job came as an opportunity at a time of needing a job. Rebecca had a friend working in the admissions department refer her, and Jan used her sister as a connection to the school. Rebecca has worked at the school longer than Jan, and has taken to her role and defines herself as a substitute mother for her students. Jan continues to get irritated and crabby with the girls who have dubbed her “the stubborn grandma” (R&J, Interview 1). All three view their experiences individually and take away different opinions and ideas from any given event.

Data Collection

Over a period of a year I met with the three individuals. Two of the interviews were one-on-one, participant and researcher, at a location that the participant felt comfortable. The last two participants met together at the home of one of the sisters, Rebecca. Rebecca and I met briefly over the phone prior to the group interview with her sister, Jan. Each participant participated in at least one interview that lasted at least an hour.

Data Analysis

Using thematic analyses, I found several themes or categories within the data, including drug/substance abuse, violence, teacher reliability, extracurricular activities, passing culture, struggles for students, poverty, and teacher impact. I have, however, chosen to write about the interviews separately in order to fully understand the positionality and experiences of the individual. Each participant had different views and opinions on any given topic, even within the group interview, as all have different styles and methods when working with the students. All three points of views are valid and contribute to the knowledge surrounding the experiences of Native American faculty. In a

larger study this may not be possible and the themes would be a necessity, but the smaller participant size allows for this approach. Narrative inquiry allows for each individual to fully express his/her experiences and not just generalize them to the experience of being a faculty or staff member. There are stereotypes present in Native American schools just as there are in any school. It is the ability to move past these stereotypes to look deeper at the three individuals, as they interact and express their feelings toward the students, the school, and the system as a whole. Keeping the narrators separate allows for this closer observation.

While looking at the interviews separately I have pulled specific stories from each narrator that would be a part of a theme but listed it within their sections rather than blocked all three together in a paragraph. Looking at patterns across interviews while keeping them separate allows the individuals to stay true as just that an individual with a specific experience, but it also allows for a “stronger understanding of those environments” (Chase, 2011, p.424). Although this approach diverges from the normal qualitative analysis it stays true to narrative inquiry, and I believe allows for a much richer experience for the reader.

CHAPTER 4

DATA AND DISCUSSION

Not everyone can do this job. Sure people think it sounds good and they like the money but not everyone can do this job. There is a craft to it, a skill. Teachers come in and they go. It takes a certain kind of person. I don't know, I mean. To see what these kids go through on a daily basis they come from poor broken homes. School is the last thing on their minds. So much is put on to these kids to continue their culture, to be responsible for an Indian nation and to keep it from going extinct (H, Interview1).

Sitting across the table from me was a man, Henry³, who has been involved with and responsible for Native American children in a school setting for the last ten years. His jobs have changed over the years from being a teaching aid, to dorm manager, to life skills developer, but he always remained in close contact with the students. Henry is a Native American who lived on a reservation in Arizona until the death of his mother when he was ten, at which point he moved to live with his grandmother in a small, predominately white town in Oklahoma. He has seen and experienced the changes in the development of Indian Education programs. Henry has participated as a lobbyist for the Department of Education Indian Affairs and as an activist in AIM.

The Setting

The experiences of the faculty and staff at Native American schools are integral parts of the Native American school setting. Stories like Henry's and others are lacking from the greater body of work surrounding Native American education. Scholars have investigated the experiences of Native American students, the amount of preparedness of

³ All names have been changed in order to protect confidentiality.

teachers, and even the debates on the amount of culture that is appropriate in schools, but the experience of faculty and staff seems to be missing (Brayboy, 2005; Castagno, 2012; Knack, 1978; LeBrasseur & Freark, 1982; Nel, 1994; Patrick, 2008).

According to the Bureau of Indian Education there are 187 schools that are recognized as Native American schools that fall under their supervisions and, of those, 172 are included in the annual report card (Bureau of Indian Education [BIE], 2011a). The total enrollment of the 172 schools is 49,152 with a graduation rate of 59.07% (BIE, 2011a).

Henry and the other faculty in this study all work at one of the last federally funded boarding schools, this particular school has a total of 732 students ranging from fourth to twelfth grade with a high graduation rate of 83.33% (BIE, 2011b). This particular school has been open for almost 150 years. The administration and goals of the school have changed over time, transitioning from a school for assimilation to one of the more popular and sought after boarding schools according to Rebecca (R&J, Interview 1). Native American boarding schools are coming under fire “as one of the most destructive agents of the heavily-handed and clumsy federal policy,” (Burich, 2007, p.93) but several studies and the public perception fail to take into account the whole picture and truly understand the reasoning and purpose of their continued use (Bear, 2008a; 2008b). Burich (2007) explained that boarding schools became a “refuge for children” (p. 96), a place that families hoped would give the children better opportunities and a more balanced life. Parents want what is best for their children even if it means the miles of separation; they want their children to get away from their home lives or just to have a better chance at life (Burich, 2007; R&J, Interview 1). Today’s boarding schools, just as

they were historically to some, are seen as a better opportunity for the students who attend them. Some of the students are there because of court orders, but many are there because they or their families want them to be there and get that education (Burich, 2007; R&J, Interview 1). This boarding school in particular does have some students attending due to court orders, and those students may not want to be there but it is their last resort. However, several students choose to attend this school and travel across the country in order to attend. The faculty is on the front lines as they are with the students daily and especially the dorm staff who are with the students all hours of the day.

Author's Positionality: Being an Outsider

Given the history of exploitation, genocide, predation toward and cultural desecration of Native American people by those of European descent, Indigenous scholars have argued that researchers from outside tribal communities ought to approach Native American research participants with respect and take pains to conduct studies for the benefit of participants and those they represent rather than for their personal career advancement (Smagorinsky, Anglin & O'Donnell-Allen, 2012, p. 23).

Knowing this was half the battle. I have always been interested in the Native American educational system and how it functioned within the American public school system while maintaining sovereignty and control of their distinct curriculum. Henry is a family friend whom I have known all my life. During my childhood, he would tell me stories about the school where he is currently working. He recounted to me that he felt he had to push the Native American students and wished they saw the potential in themselves that he saw in them. Listening to all the problems he was having with the students and

reflecting on my own education really upset me as a child. I was attending one of the top private schools in my town, receiving the best education my parents could afford, while he was chasing down kids in the middle of the school day trying to convince them to go back to class. In a way Henry inspired me to look deeper and focus on the experiences of teachers at Native American schools.

Once I started looking I began questioning my motives and even my capability. Because of my position as a graduate student at a prestigious southern university and being of European descent, I wondered if I was going to be able to leave my traditional white American upbringing and colonialist attitude behind.⁴ By no means do I consider myself a prejudiced or judgmental person, but I do believe everyone is instilled with attitudes that can become contrary to their own beliefs. I fought with myself to keep an open mind throughout the process and to not be influenced by my own biases or by other studies.

These stories are not mine to tell but are given to me with the hope of making an impact, in opening another door to peer through and look at the Native American educational system.

Henry's Story

On a Sunday morning the diner was a bustling place with people coming and going. I asked to sit in a corner booth, my attempt for a bit of privacy in such a busy place. I hadn't seen Henry for a few years, but no matter the amount of time between visits we always seem to pick up where we left off, me as the young girl and he a good friend trying to instill life lessons and encouraging me to always question situations and

⁴ A full discussion of White researchers working with/in Native American communities (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; Grande, 2009; Swadener & Mutua, 2008) is beyond to scope of this paper.

never to assume anything. As mentioned previously, Henry has lived and worked at one of the last remaining boarding schools for the last ten years. After spending his twenties and thirties fighting for the rights of Native Americans, Henry believes that his role now in his later life is to give back by being a positive role model for students on campus.

The most rewarding thing for me is the phone calls. You try and preach not drinking, not doing drugs, and what else. Well, when you are doing that you don't think it gets in their heads. But then I get those calls every now and again. I tell them to come by whenever they are out that way, they can stay at my house and go fishing or whatever. It makes me feel good to think that every once in a while that I can affect somebody's life by what I say even though I don't know them that well. It's all worth it then. So it's those and I have had a few three or four (H, Interview 1)

Henry is not alone in this belief or desire to be a positive role model for the students at the boarding school. Malott and Waukau-Villagomez (2008) shared it is important for the students to see "their own people in positions of power and authority" (p. 174). Henry goes on to say that the school is fortunately able to be selective and choose teachers of Native American descent, which is a policy started by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1972 (McBeth, 1983).

An issue Henry discusses involves both the students and some of the faculty, one of substance abuse. Henry goes as far to say that he believes not all of the faculty at the school would be able to pass a drug test. Henry continues, "it's not like they are addicted or anything, they get bored, just like the students, the problem is as far as role modeling goes, I mean how do the kids know it's wrong if they can tell their teachers have been

messing with the stuff” (H, Interview1). The students are faced with peer pressure and may even experience the effects of substance abuse in their home lives. Henry explains that several students develop addictions to substances while they are at the boarding school, for some it is merely a means of filling time while at school and for others it becomes a real problem that follows them the rest of their lives, which is why in Henry’s opinion not all the faculty or staff should be at the school. Malott and Waukau-Villagomez (2008) continue that it is important for teachers to be brutally honest with themselves and know if they are in a position to handle this job: “being a good teacher takes a lifetime commitment it’s not something you can stumble into” (H, Interview1).

The job Henry has been involved in the longest and enjoys the most is working in the dorms. It allows him to have the most contact with the students and as he puts it,

I am the one they come to in the middle of the night when they get a call from home and something is wrong. I am there for them when they don’t get calls, also.

The kids, they act tough but in the middle of the night when everything is silent you can hear them cry. This job allows me the most access and ability to really make a difference in their lives (H, Interview1).

Part of working in the dorms was to develop life skills classes for the high school students. One thing that Henry thought was an important lesson for everyone, no matter their age, is learning the concept of respect. “Respect is not just something you can ask for, it is something you should give freely to everyone and then you can expect it in return. Respect for each other, for the school, for family members, and especially for themselves” (H, Interview1). Henry felt that if the students could learn this lesson, a lot of the problems the school was having could be fixed. Nel (1994) found that teachers

have the ability to disable or empower students through interactions. In this way, Henry's main goal and focus was to empower his students. Henry recounts that every month they have people from a local university come and speak to all the staff members and tell them how to handle students who come from poverty and broken homes, and every month they have a different topic or lecture. The people come from the university and ask every month for all the staff to fill out cards on what they would like to learn, and every month Henry asks them to teach a lesson on how to teach responsibility and respect (he has yet to get a response).

It boils down to how do you teach them to be responsible because someday they are going to have to be responsible if they are going to have any impact having a family, teaching their own kids, and being a good citizen of their community (H, Interview 1).

Looking specifically at the idea Henry is trying to teach about he goes into a story of an event that had happened recently. The fourth grade students were allowed to sign up for events where the staff take the students into the big city for an evening of fun. In this particular instance they were taking the fourth grade boys into the city to go see a movie and to go to dinner (H, Interview 1). As they were getting ready to head back to the boarding school, the staff noticed that three boys were missing. The faculty who were there called Henry to come up to the city and help them find the boys. They called the police and the boys' parents, and all the staff who were not currently on duty at the school drove up to the city to help look for these three fourth grade boys. As it turned out, they "paid some guy \$50 bucks to drive them to where one of their parents lived. Well, we had called the parents and told them that their sons were missing and they went

AWOL and to please call us if they hear anything. Well the one parent never called and they knew that the boys had caught a ride to see them” (H, Interview 1). Henry believed if the boys had understood the term respect and the parent would have taken responsibility and told the teachers and the police that the boys were at their house, it wouldn’t have been such a huge mess.

As we left the diner together, Henry reached into his pocket and handed me a small wood carving of an eagle. One of the boys from the school received it from his father along with several others to sell. The boy’s father is unable to send extra money to his son, so he sends these little wood carvings for the boy to have some spending money. Henry said he gave it to me as an encouragement for a few reasons: (1) he wanted to encourage the boy to stay out of trouble and (2) to remind me where these students are coming from.

The Sisters: Rebecca and Jan

Driving down the rural highway, signs fly past me, leaving one county, entering a reservation, leaving a reservation, entering another county, and so on. An hour and half off the main highway I finally reach the edges of a small town. Like several small towns in the area, there are remnants of the big oil and gas boom in the 1980s. Rebecca informed me that most of the people in the town were of Native American descent of all different tribes, but that in the late 1980s to early 1990s, several tribes had received money for the oil and gas on their reservations, and thus the money was divided out among the tribal members. She continues, “no one was ever taught what to do with money, and so it is very evident the periods or times that people in the community receive their share from their Indian Nation. They go out and buy all new fancy toys and

don't save any of it," and now only the relics of dated cars and trucks remain (R, Interview 1). I pull up to the address given to me over the phone, a small house in a row of identical cookie cutter houses right off the state road. The house is technically Rebecca's and her husband's, but several other faculty come stay there during the school year, only returning to their homes and families in the city on their off weekends and summer break. Rebecca and her sister, Jan, had been watching Dr. Oz while waiting for me when I walked into the living room. Rebecca's husband has Type 2 diabetes. Over the summer break, he had been at a PowWow and injured his foot which resulted in an infection and eventual amputation. He had only recently returned home from the hospital which was quite evident as things had been pushed to the side to clear a path, leaving the back room and living room full of boxes of things that once cluttered the pathways piled to the ceiling. Around the television stood cases filled with Native American art from several tribes and family photographs lining the walls, signifying the importance of heritage and family. Her husband also typically works at the school but has taken the year off for rehabilitation while he adjusts to life as an amputee. Just as I was coming in Henry was leaving, heading to the school for his afternoon shift with the students as they got out of class. We exchanged quick greetings with Henry and then sat down for the interview as he left. Rebecca and Jan were both working the midnight shift that night and wanted to take a nap before heading to the school.

Rebecca has been working at the school for six years while this is Jan's second year at the school. Rebecca recalls, "I mean, it's a big shock when you go there, we raise our kids to be respectful and so I had a hard time with these kids, they just have so many problems it was an adjustment I wasn't used to kids fighting all the time and huffing,"

Jan continues, “some of these girls their first few weeks call you ‘bitch’, ‘slut’. I mean, it was a huge adjustment” (R&J, Interview 1). As Malott and Waukau-Villagomez (2008) discuss, it is a major change for anyone who is unfamiliar with working with students who come from poverty and possibly dysfunctional homes. Although Rebecca and Jan both identify themselves as maternal figures for the students they are clear to make the distinction that the students are not their own depending on the topic.

For the sisters it was not only difficult their first year, but every year new students come, and the school gives all the students a “clean slate” (R&J, Interview 1). The first month of school is always a transition: leaving home, several students experiment with boundaries, while others push the limits in the amount of times they can be sent to the discipline dormitory in attempts to get sent home. When I met with Rebecca and Jan, it was still just within that first month window for the school year. Rebecca works with the ninth grade girls and shared that “some of them are court ordered so they have to be here or they have to go to juvenile detention, and that’s like maybe a quarter of them, and then there’s some that come and have been here since fourth grade and can’t wait to get here” (R&J, Interview 1). Jan continues that the boarding school is very good for the girls because of the structure it brings to their lives, “they get into a routine of waking up, getting ready, going to school, afternoon free time, and lights out. The girls tell me all the time that when they were home they always staying up way too late and wouldn’t even go to school half the time” (R&J, Interview 1). In Rebecca and Jan’s opinion, it is so much better for the girls- “they cry to go home. They’re always crying and their parents don’t want them to come back. They say to us ‘we don’t want them home we want them to stay there and go to school’” (R&J, Interview 1). According to Burich (2007), parents

“agonize over the decision to send their children to distant boarding school[s],” but the opportunity offered “their children a chance to receive a better education than was available of their own reservation, even if it meant long and painful separations” (p. 96-97). It is a difficult part of the job for Rebecca and Jan to deal with lonely students, which is why they both try to treat the students as they would their own children to make them feel welcomed and loved.

A large part of the conversation we shared dealt with the girls dealing with peer pressure, a new found freedom of being away from the commotion or struggles at home, and the hormones that come along with young girls in dorm settings. The girls have already been at odds with the staff this year with a new choking fad

They do it for 10 seconds and then they stop because you know once the staff gets up there and checks on everything they’re all done and they’re not doing anything and so you ask them all and none of them say anything so then you have to punish all of them so we split the girls up and put them in individual rooms. With half of our girls new this year, we don’t know what background they have so once we figure them out we might move them and rearrange the rooms separate out the girls but it’s just getting used to these girls and seeing who’s who because they all come in with blank slates (R&J, Interview 1).

Jan continues that even the dorm she works in, which houses fourth to seventh grade girls, they are already having problems with the girls huffing⁵ anything they can get their hands on, “currently the big thing for them is hair spray, because it is something they can get easily from the drug store” (R&J, Interview 1). A new report from Evan-Campbell,

⁵ Huffing, sniffing, and bagging are all methods of inhalant substance abuse (Alliance for Consumer Education, 2012).

Walters, Pearson and Campbell (2012) found that “boarding school attendees reported higher rates of current illicit drug use and living with alcohol use disorder” (p.421). This is nothing new among this marginalized population as Burich (2007) continues that historically students felt “resentment and abandonment” from being sent to boarding schools which “would manifest itself in self-destructive behavior” (p. 100). Rebecca and Jan feel for some students using drugs or attempting to get high was an attempt to be sent home and for others it was purely out of boredom or just simply it was something different or “fun” to do. They encourage all their girls to get involved in school activities, Rebecca shared

I tell the girls to sign up for anything and everything. One, it is a great way for them to meet new people and make more friends. Two, they get to go off campus more often if they are part of a team that plays other schools or some different cultural groups will go off for field trips. And lastly, there is this group called BIING which is BeLieving in Native Girls, which has counselors and people for the girls to talk with (R&J, Interview 1)

By encouraging the girls to be active in extracurricular activities and separating girls who don't get along, Rebecca and Jan stated that usually by the second or third month of school most of the girls disciplinary actions go down in number because the girls are making friends. This gives Rebecca and Jan more time to talk with the girls that are really having problems and focus on the girls that need help, not just the dramatic girls.

Rebecca states

Sometimes I just feel sorry for these girls. They have such difficult home lives that it becomes my job to take them under my wing and help guide them while

they are at school so that they want to come back to following year. For our kids, they're not really into school, they're just here and go through the motions. They don't really want to be in school. There's very few that will probably go to college, like maybe 10%, but we still try to get them to want to go. As long as they can get through high school, that is a big accomplishment. A lot of them will tell you they are the first one to graduate in their family. Once they graduate, they always come back, and they talk with us and say thank you, miss, you did so much for me, and it makes you feel good. So, there's a lot of them the will stick it out, but it's hard for them to stay because there's so much going on at home, and they know they can't succeed if they go back home. That's why I'm here, to get them through those tough times and put up with it all (R & J, Interview 1)

Discussion

The federally funded boarding schools have so much history tied to them, a history of assimilation and "civilization" stemming back to coloinization and their implementation in the late 1870s at the suggestion of Richard Pratt (Bear, 2008a; 2008b; DeJong, 2007; Spring, 2010). However, McBeth (1983) found that boarding schools are still relevant as they "foster an environment which allowed Indian students to remain together and to generate an ethnic unity which might not have been possible in the public school system" (p.123). The boarding school should be an opportunity for the student to learn and experience life with other students going through similar situations (Bear, 2008b). "I try to put it in terms of a contract, their job is to go to class and make the grade, our side of the contract is to pay" for food, education, health care, and transportation (H, Interview 1). It is hard for students to be away from home for so long

at such crucial points during their adolescent development, which may attribute to low self-esteem and self-worth, but the faculty and staff at the schools and the parents at home believe in the boarding school system, and hope for their children better futures through education (Burich, 2007; H, Interview 1; McBeth, 1983; Nel, 1994; R&J, Interview). All three of the individuals I interviewed shared that once students find their place within the school by joining a cultural group or some extracurricular activity, they find friends, many of which continue to be best of friends throughout their years at the boarding school (H, Interview 1; R &J, Interview 1).

Well we have this motto with the kids; if you are interested in something we can find somebody to sponsor a group to maximize that experience. And the most popular is the cultural groups, we have the Zuni club, Omaha, and from Oklahoma we had the DRUM group: they sing Cheyenne and Arapaho songs, Kiawah, Comanche mostly this region the western part of Oklahoma. And the color guard, which is for the students, well part of the culture of Native Americans is the dances. And the colors guard is to show respect for those that fought in the World Wars and other conflicts to show respect for their contribution. So anytime a student gets elected into that it is a really high honor for them. So yeah the cultural aspect is something dear to them, and so we form them into groups and little organizations where they can practice part of what their heritage is and we try to encourage that (H, Interview 1)

By bringing students from across the United States to a boarding school an identity is created across tribes leading to an experience of being a Native American and all the cultural traditions and history that come with this pan-Indian identity (McBeth, 1983).

Reyhner (1992b) argued that this more culturally pluralistic approach is needed in Native American education for students to succeed. Boarding schools have not lost their place among Native American communities; they are a part of the history and to some remain a dark time in their lives while new students are able to reclaim the use of the schools for a better purpose (Bear, 2008a; 2008b). The faculty and staff at these schools have lived through a tough time for the rights of Native Americans and have come out ahead with the schools now a part of Native American sovereignty (ILO Convention, 1989). For these three individuals the school provides a place for them to work and to interact with the younger generation and hopeful future leaders of Native American communities (H, Interview 1; R&J, Interview 1). The boarding schools have come a long way but still have difficulties to overcome. Henry, Rebecca, and Jan all struggled with their own education being Native Americans in small white rural towns (H, Interview 1; R, Interview 1; R&J, Interview 1). They remember their own difficulties being “different” in public schools and truly believe that the boarding school offers a safe place for the students to learn and interact with other Native American youth (H, Interview 1; Knack, 1978; R, Interview 1; R&J, Interview 1). The literature and interviews are clear, boarding schools in general provide an environment for Native American students to grow and allows for culture to be sustained and developed (Bear, 2008b; H, Interview 1; McBeth, 1983; Reyhner, 1992b; R&J, Interview 1).

These three individuals have shared their stories and experiences at a federally funded boarding school. Because these are their narratives, this may not be the case for all individuals working at the school. The interviews and literature both discuss the struggles faculty and staff members face working within Native American schools

(Castagno, 2012; H, Interview 1; LeBrasseur & Freark, 1982; Lipka et. al, 2005; Malott & Waukau-Villagomez, 2008; Patrick, 2008; R&J, Interview 1). It is a difficult job, and most faculty members have described feeling culturally, socially, emotionally and physically unprepared for the demands of the position (Castagno, 2012; H, Interview 1; Malott & Waukau-Villagomez, 2008; R & J, Interview 1). According to the three people I interviewed, some teachers are there only for the money and do not put the amount of time or energy into the job that is needed (H, Interview 1; R&J, Interview 1). The students view these individuals as role models and may believe that a do what is required to get by and not worry about the rest is an attitude to have toward life (H, Interview 1; Malott & Waukau-Villagomez, 2008; R&J, Interview 1). As stated previously, it is important for any student to see teachers and adult staff as role models, especially students within a marginalized population (H, Interview1; Lipka et. al, 1982; Malott & Waukau-Villagomez, 2008).

It was never my intention to contribute to the negative stereotypes surrounding Native American boarding schools, and my research revealed that there is merit for the stereotype surrounding unprepared and insensitive teachers. There are individuals, like Jan, that fit that stereotype, do what is minimally required, get frustrated easily with the students, and simply choose to teach. Then there are those like Rebecca, who might have started out with that indifference or negative opinion toward the students, but have worked at the school longer and have really started to care about the wellbeing of the students. And then there are those like Henry that have worked their entire lives for the betterment of Native Americans and their education, and it is he and others like him that

break the mold and stand out against the stereotype and are working to change the school system.

This study is only one lens of the larger picture which is Native American boarding schools in the United States. This study is limited in the fact that only three individuals experiences are shared, but these three individuals represent three types of teachers working at Native American schools, one fitting the stereotype, one in the middle, and one exemplary going above and beyond what is required of him. There may be other types of teachers as well, but these were the three present in this study. Future studies may look at the complexity of the systems and compare federally funded boarding school to the newer boarding schools that are privately funded through donations and money set aside by Indian Nations. Possibly comparing experiences of teachers at federally funded boarding school verses a privately funded boarding school may show that the stereotypical faculty or staff member is really no longer the standard in Native American schools.

The faculty and staff members at Native American boarding schools are challenged on several levels, from teachers doing the bare minimum (H, Interview 1; R&J, Interview 1); students that are struggling to find a place within the school (H, Interview 1; LeBrasseur & Freark, 1982; Nel, 1994; R & J, Interview 1); representing culture in the classroom and extracurricular activities (H, Interview 1; Lipka et, al., 2005; Ngai, 2006; R & J , Interview 1); drugs and substance abuse (Evans-Campbell, Walters, Pearson, & Campbell, 2012; H, Interview 1; R & J, Interview 1); violence (H, Interview 1; R & J, Interview 1); the ever looming thoughts of families struggling back at home (Burich, 2007; Evans-Campbell, Walters, Pearson & Campbell, 2012; H, Interview 1;

McBeth, 1983; Nel, 1994; R & J, Interview 1; Reyhner, 1992b) ; students coming from poverty (H, Interview1; Knack, 1978; Malott & Waukau-Villagomez, 2008; R & J, Interview 1; Starnes, 2006); lack of respect (H, Interview 1; R &J, Interview 1); and the negative stereotypes surrounding boarding schools as an alternative school for Native American students (Bear, 2008b; Burich, 2007; H, Interview 1; McBeth, 1983; R & J, Interview 1; Reyhner, 1992b). Even with all of these issues to consider, the three people I interview still maintain that the boarding school is a good place for students to come, learn, and share in the experience of other Native American students (H, Interview 1; R & J, Interview 1). Boarding schools have endured throughout history changing from a tool of colonization to now attempting to meet the vast needs of Native American students.

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ABSTRACT

“SOME DAYS IT’S GOOD AND SOME IT’S HARD”: THE EXPERIENCES OF FACULTY AT NATIVE AMERICAN BOARDING SCHOOLS

By Teresa Powers Stephenson, M.Ed., 2012

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The experience of staff at Native American boarding schools is commonly overlooked in literature. These narratives fill a gap in the literature that show and illuminate problems within the schools and problems children have in these settings as they are with the students throughout the day. Boarding school still have a place within Native American education system, as they allow students to come together to foster a new Native American culture.