Editorial Introduction

Leadership in Indigenous Education: Challenges and Opportunities for Change

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The mark of effective leadership is that it can adapt to changing conditions and create new possibilities for its people. The extent to which Indian leadership in education can accomplish that will demand creativity and energy in a difficult social environment. (Lynch and Charleston 1990)

This special issue of the American Journal of Education was originally conceived in commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the American Indian Leadership Program (AILP) at The Pennsylvania State University. Since 1970, the AILP has graduated more than 220 American Indian and Alaska Native students who have earned their master’s or doctoral degrees in educational administration and educational leadership. The AILP grew out of the tribal self-determination movement of the 1960s. During this era, there was increased awareness of the need for Indigenous leaders in schools and educational organizations serving Indigenous students in the United States (e.g., Lynch and Charleston 1990). This need for Indigenous leadership was fueled in large part by ongoing trends of low academic achievement and associated measures of social, economic, and physical well-being for Indigenous students post-graduation. In spite of efforts to increase the number of Indigenous school leaders and to wrest control of Indian education from the hands of non-
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Indigenous actors, the educational attainment of Indigenous students continues to lag behind that of their non-Indigenous peers. This is evidenced by high dropout rates, low graduation rates, and disproportionate referrals to special education programs and services (e.g., Faircloth and Tippeconnic 2010). If these indicators are to improve, we believe that we must strengthen our commitment to the preparation, recruitment, and retention of school leaders who are culturally proficient and who reflect the values and beliefs of Indigenous communities and peoples across this nation. We believe, as do the authors in this special issue, that there is something inherently unique about Indigenous peoples, and, as such, there must be something unique about those who teach and lead the schools in which these students go to learn.

If leadership is to be used as a tool for transforming schools into sites of empowerment and promise for Indigenous students and their communities, it is important for academics and practitioners to reflect upon the ways in which leadership is conceptualized and practiced in schools and communities across this nation. As the manuscripts in this special issue illustrate, leadership is multifaceted and shaped in large part by the contexts in which it takes place. And, as these manuscripts further illustrate, in many cases effective leadership should not rest solely in the hands of a singular authoritative figure, but rather in the hands of those who are often viewed as being led rather than leading. The ability to lead effectively in schools serving American Indian and Alaska Native students is complicated by the diversity and geographic dispersion of these students and the schools they attend. Today, the majority—approximately 644,000—of American Indian and Alaska Native students in the United States attend public schools. These schools are located in a variety of settings from rural Indigenous communities to urban areas (DeVoe and Darling-Churchill 2008). In addition to those students who attend public schools, more than 40,000 students attend Bureau of Indian Education (BIE)
operated or funded schools. The BIE is a national federal school system that supports 183 schools and dormitories in 23 states; 126 of these schools are tribally controlled (Bureau of Indian Education 2013). A small but increasing number of students also attend American Indian charter schools and private schools. The challenges to effective leadership are further complicated by the diversity of cultures and languages represented by the students who attend these schools. Today, there are more than 700 tribes, with nearly 600 recognized by the federal government (US Department of the Interior, Indian Affairs 2013) and more than 60 recognized by the states in which they are primarily located (National Conference of State Legislatures 2013). Among these tribes, approximately 200 tribal languages are spoken, with varying degrees of fluency (US Department of the Interior, Indian Affairs 2013).

For too long, the policies and practices of formal education for American Indians, Alaska Natives, and other Indigenous peoples across the world have been characterized by a colonizing (i.e., hegemonic, assimilationist, acculturating) and oppressive approach to education that aimed to assimilate and eradicate the languages and cultures of Native peoples. Although education is generally better today in its attempts to provide culturally responsive schooling, the effects of these past policies and practices continue to be felt and are reflected in recent educational studies and data. For example, the 2011 National Indian Education Study (National Center for Education Statistics 2012), a national study of Indigenous students in the 12 states with the highest numbers of Indigenous students in the United States, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that American Indian and Alaska Native students not only scored lower than their non-Native peers, but the gap between American Indian/Alaska Native and non-Native students in math and reading at grades 4 and 8 widened. Also, our own research found that, on average, in the states with the largest numbers of Native students, a disproportionate percentage of Native students do not go on to graduate from high school (Faircloth and Tippeconnic 2010). These data reflect the difficulty and tragic failure many Native students experience in schools.

Although the extant data present a rather bleak picture of the state of Indigenous education, there is reason for hope as anecdotal evidence from parents, family, and community members indicates many Indigenous students are successful in school, graduating and going on to college. We are also encouraged by ongoing efforts to prepare educational leaders and researchers who are committed to improving student achievement by providing culturally responsive schooling, supporting parent and family partnerships, and engaging in research using methods based on Indigenous ways of knowing and doing. What these efforts demonstrate is an ongoing attempt to decolonize the Western educational experience (e.g., Grande 2004) in part by working to Indigenize the curricula, the way in which the curricula are delivered, and the
vehicles (i.e., teachers and school leaders) by which the curricula are delivered. Here, the term “decolonize” is used to describe the process of reforming the educational system from one that privileges Western beliefs, practices, and priorities into one that recognizes and respects the role of Indigenous ways of knowing and doing in the education of Indigenous students. As Sium et al. (2012, III) write, “the decolonizing project seeks to re-imagine and re-articulate power, change, and knowledge through a multiplicity of epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies. Decolonization cannot take place without contestation. It must necessarily push back against the colonial relations of power that threaten Indigenous ways of being.”

Although this special issue originally focused on leadership as practiced in schools with American Indian and Alaska Native students in the United States, a call for papers elicited a number of interesting abstracts from scholars in Canada and New Zealand, each highlighting similar histories of culturally inappropriate education and poor academic outcomes for Indigenous students in these countries. Intrigued by these interconnections, we broadened the scope of this special issue to include a sampling of this international work on Indigenous education. The six articles selected for this special issue on leadership in Indigenous education demonstrate the extent to which Indigenous students and the schools they attend struggle against mainstream models of educational delivery. In the lead article, Harrington and Pavel highlight the importance of using Indigenous research methodologies, the role of school leadership, the need for culturally relevant teaching and learning, the impact of school reforms such as those mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act, and Indigenous ideologies and history. In the second article, López, Heilig, and Schram discuss the relationship between culturally responsive schooling and student academic achievement. This study uses data from the National Indian Education Study. Bird, Lee, and López further explore the role of school leadership, the importance of Indigenous points of view, the role of family and community, and the existence of unequal power relationships within schools. Drawing on his work with Aboriginal students in Canada, Tunison examines partnerships, particularly those partnerships between families, schools, and Indigenous tribes or nations. Quijada Cerecer focuses on the culture and climate of schools serving Indigenous students. She cites the existence of hostile campuses, issues of identity, politics, leadership, and colonization. The final article, written by Hohepa, addresses leadership in schools serving Indigenous students in New Zealand. This study underscores the tensions that emerge when Indigenous students are educated in a mainstream system of education shaped in large part by Western ideologies and practices. It is a call for an ongoing re-visioning and restructuring of education and schooling for Indigenous students. This article also offers a window into the possibilities and promises of a transnational research agenda on the strategies and approaches Indigenous peoples around
the world are using to regain control of their children’s education. Collectively, these articles demonstrate the ways in which Indigenous education can and should be a part of the larger discourse on teaching, leading, and learning in school.

Although the articles included in this special issue are not inclusive of all the challenges facing the education of Indigenous students today, they do serve as a unique opportunity for educational leaders, researchers, tribal members, and others to reflect on current policies, practices, and research and to expand the knowledge needed to improve education for Indigenous students in the United States and other countries. An important lesson gleaned from these manuscripts is that the educational experiences of Indigenous students in the United States are very similar to the educational experiences of Indigenous students across the world. What this tells us is that we as Indigenous peoples have much to learn from each other regarding our efforts to mobilize to effectively change the educational system from one of acculturation, assimilation, isolation, and colonization to one that embraces the cultural and linguistic diversity of Indigenous students, their families, and communities. As Moll et al. (1992) argue, these individuals and communities offer unique funds of knowledge that can and should be treated as valuable resources to be honored and respected rather than dishonored, disrespected, and discarded.

References


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