TeachME PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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CEUs for Teachers and Educators

Meeting the Needs of American Indian School-Aged Children

Introduction

"Meeting the Needs of American Indian School-Aged Children" aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the unique experiences and challenges faced by American Indian (AI), also referred to as Native American, youth in the educational system. Section 1 delves into the social and emotional difficulties these students encounter, focusing on issues related to identity, historical trauma, and cultural disconnection. Sections 2 and 3 will offer insights into best practices for fostering cultural competence, adopting effective teaching approaches, and implementing trauma-informed strategies. Section 1 starts with understanding the unique experience of American Indian youth, which is critical for educators. It involves recognizing the importance of addressing their specific needs, appreciating their rich heritage to promote cultural understanding. This section also examines specific challenges faced by AI youth, exploring strategies to dispel the challenges and create equity in the school environment.

Section 2 will explore school-wide best practices to support American Indian youth, as well as specific teaching strategies. We will look at how to build cultural competence among educators, incorporate traditional knowledge and practices into the curriculum, and support cultural diversity. This part of the course also includes a case study of a successful culturally responsive program, and best practices for its implementation. Finally, section 3 addresses culturally responsive trauma-informed approaches that recognize historical trauma and its impact, and how to create safe and supportive learning environments. Supporting identity development and nurturing cultural pride are also key components. Engaging families and communities to strengthen partnerships and involve them in the educational process will be emphasized. The course concludes with a classroom example for educators to apply their knowledge of best practices that they have gained from the course.

Section 1: The Unique Experience of American Indian Youth

Understanding the unique experience of American Indian youth is essential for creating an inclusive and effective educational environment. This section will explore the critical importance of addressing the distinct needs of American Indian students, beginning with an appreciation of their rich cultural heritage. We will delve into the historical context that shapes the identities and experiences of these students, highlighting the importance of cultural understanding in education. Additionally, we will tackle the challenges faced by American Indian students, such as chronic absenteeism, the academic achievement gap, and disciplinary disparities. By analyzing these issues, we can develop strategies to promote equity and ensure all students have access to the support they need. In discussing these challenges faced by American Indian students, this section will also cover some best practices and strategies for improvement, which will be explored in greater depth in section 2. Through this comprehensive approach, we aim to foster an educational environment that honors and uplifts the heritage and potential of American Indian youth.

Diversity in Native American Traditions

Today, Native American communities across 574 federally recognized tribes and villages, demonstrate remarkable resilience and diversity within the United States (Pluralism Project, 2020). They speak a multitude of languages including English, Spanish, Navajo, Ojibwe, and over 100 others. Living in sovereign nations and within the 50 states, Native Americans are farmers, business owners, doctors, legislators, and artists. Their cultural vitality is deeply intertwined with spiritual practices that form the core of their identity and experience. For Native American people, these spiritual foundations are rooted in the ancient history of the land.

While archaeologists debate the exact timeline of North America's initial settlement, Native traditions assert continuous presence since time immemorial. Archaeological evidence, such as a nomadic campsite in present-day Colorado dating back 13,000 years, supports the enduring presence and complex cultures like the Adena and Hopewell civilizations along the Ohio River Valley from the first millennium BCE to around 700 CE (Pluralism Project).

Native American traditions are characterized by their diversity, yet they often share fundamental elements such as a strong emphasis on oral discourse, a profound connection to their ancestral heritage through ceremonial practices, a strong connection to their land, and a belief in the spirit world (Pluralism Project, 2020). These traditions not only preserve cultural identity but also enrich the broader fabric of American society with their enduring spiritual and cultural contributions. These traditions have evolved uniquely within each Native American tribe and nation, shaped by their specific landscapes and historical experiences. Central to Native religious practices is a deep-rooted relationship with the land, where ethical values and spiritual symbolism derive from sustainable interactions with the natural world. For instance, among the Tlingit people of the Northwest Coast, the annual salmon run holds immense spiritual and practical significance, symbolizing livelihood, sustenance, and the interplay between human existence and nature (Pluralism Project). Similarly, the Muscogee (Creek) people of the Southeast and Oklahoma center much of their ceremonial life around corn, emphasizing its cultivation with respect and gratitude for its bounty.

Native American cultures revere oral traditions, passed down through generations via storytelling and ritual practices. This oral tradition not only preserves cultural knowledge but also contributes to the fluidity and diversity within Native belief systems, defying attempts to categorize them under a singular "Native American religion" (Pluralism Project, 2020). While commonalities exist across tribes, such

as the affirmation of a spirit world and the transformative role of music, dance, and symbols in rituals, each Native tradition remains distinct and sophisticated. It is essential to appreciate the unique complexities of each tradition rather than generalize them. Despite the diversity, Native communities have historically faced common challenges under colonization, including dispossession and forced assimilation, which continue to shape their adaptation and resilience in contemporary society. In exploring Native American religious traditions, it becomes evident that their richness and diversity are best understood through respectful engagement with individual communities and their unique practices. While certain intertribal phenomena like the Native American Church, sweat lodges, and powwows provide insights into shared cultural expressions, they represent only a fraction of the wide spectrum of Native religious diversity across the United States (Pluralism Project).

Intertribal Traditions and Practices

Native American traditions are incredibly diverse and rich, encompassing a wide range of spiritual, cultural, and communal practices. While it would be impossible to cover all of them, a few key traditions are highlighted below to provide a glimpse into the depth and vibrancy of Native American heritage.

Powwows

Powwows, which originated in the 19th century, are vital cultural gatherings for Native Americans, serving as both ceremonial and celebratory events (Pluralism Project, 2020). These gatherings include dancing, singing, and drumming, and they play a crucial role in expressing and reinforcing Native American identity on both tribal and broader intertribal levels. Across the United States and Canada, over 900 powwows are held annually, varying in size and nature. Historically, the powwow movement is associated with promoting intertribal peace and friendship. Powwows can be dedicated to various causes, such as honoring elders,

giving thanks, remembering historical events, or celebrating sobriety. These gatherings frequently feature a communal feast prepared by the host community, and the atmosphere is enhanced by food stands and stalls selling jewelry and gifts.

Sweat Lodge Ceremonies

Sweat lodge ceremonies are a significant spiritual tradition shared by many Native American tribes. These ceremonies involve rites of preparation, prayer, and purification, often with deep personal and communal significance (Pluralism Project, 2020). The process typically includes heating stones until they are red hot, bringing them into a darkened chamber, and pouring water or aromatic herbal teas over them to create steam, which punctuates the participants' rounds of fervent prayer (Pluralism Project). The sweat lodge itself is a sacred structure, typically a dome-shaped tent made of bent willows and covered with blankets, hides, or tarps to hold in the heat. Participants in sweat lodge ceremonies experience purification of body, mind, spirit, and community as they endure the heat and offer prayers and songs. Emerging from the lodge, participants often plunge into a body of water for a cleansing bath, symbolizing rebirth (Pluralism Project). The sweat lodge plays a crucial role in contemporary Native American life, especially for those raised apart from their specific tribal traditions. It is central to efforts aimed at personal and social healing and the reaffirmation of collective values.

Historical Context

Before European colonization, American Indian tribes governed themselves effectively for centuries, nurturing their youth and maintaining thriving communities. The principles of the Iroquois Confederacy even influenced the U.S. government. However, the arrival of Europeans led to devastating consequences for Native American communities, including forced relocation, warfare, broken

treaties, and foreign diseases that decimated populations (Running Strong, 2024). During the 18th and 19th centuries, the "Indian Wars" and aggressive U.S. government policies led to the loss of Native homelands (Running Strong). Tribes were displaced to reservations, often on lands far smaller and less resource-rich than their ancestral territories. The Dawes Act of 1887 further disrupted tribal life by reallocating land and undermining tribal social structures. Federal laws and policies sought to suppress Native cultures. These laws prohibited religious practices and ceremonies, a prohibition not fully lifted until the 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act.

History of American Indians and Education

In the 19th century, the U.S. government established Native American boarding schools as part of a broader strategy to assimilate Indigenous youth into mainstream American culture through education (Mejia, 2021). This strategy ultimately aimed to eliminate Indigenous peoples and their cultures through destruction, forced assimilation, or cultural erasure. From 1860 to 1978, approximately 357 boarding schools operated across 30 states, housing over 60,000 Native children. Native American children were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in these Christian boarding schools, where they faced severe punishment for speaking their languages or practicing their traditions (Running Strong, 2024).

One of the most notable institutions to emerge from this era was the Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, established by Richard Henry Pratt (Mejia, 2021). Drawing from his experience overseeing an assimilation program at Fort Marion Prison in St. Augustine, Florida, Pratt forced the assimilation of Native American youth into mainstream American culture. He served as the Headmaster of Carlisle Indian School for 25 years and outlined his influential philosophy in a speech delivered in 1892, "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man" (Mejia).

Schools such as this enforced mandatory attendance, often without parental consent, and aimed to erase Indigenous identities by giving children Anglo-American names and military-style uniforms (Mejia). Education in these schools focused on trades to integrate Native children into American society, with boys learning manual labor skills and girls learning domestic tasks. Academic subjects emphasized American values, and students were forced to convert to Christianity and celebrate American holidays. Students faced harsh and severe punishments for not conforming to the rules set by the institutions. They were strictly forbidden from speaking their native languages and had to speak only English, regardless of their ability. Failure to do so resulted in severe penalties. Punishments varied and included the loss of privileges, restricted diets, threats of corporal punishment, and even confinement.

Beyond these disciplinary measures, the students endured various forms of abuse, both physical and emotional (Mejia, 2021). They were beaten and forced to perform hard labor. The routine at these schools was grueling, with hours of marching and limited recreation, often involving disturbing activities like watching movies that portrayed harmful stereotypes. Food and medical care were often withheld as forms of punishment, leading to poor health conditions. The lack of proper nutrition and medical attention made the students more susceptible to diseases like the flu, tuberculosis, and trachoma, resulting in frequent illness and death (Mejia). The overall environment was one of neglect and abuse, leaving many students deeply traumatized and scarred for life. While most Native American children were forced to attend boarding schools due to the lack of alternative educational options, some parents opted to send their children there. However, various forms of resistance arose against this forced separation (Mejia). Entire villages sometimes refused to enroll their children, coordinated mass withdrawals occurred, and parents encouraged their children to run away from the schools. In response to these acts of resistance, Indian agents, who acted on

behalf of the U.S. Government, retaliated by withholding rations and supplies from Indigenous communities. These agents were also responsible for forcibly removing children from their families and homes to fill the boarding schools.

Although the era of Native American Boarding Schools has largely ended, the U.S. government still operates a few off-reservation boarding schools. As of 2020, seven boarding schools are federally funded, three of which are under the control of Indigenous community leaders (Mejia, 2021). The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 marked a shift toward Native American self-determination and governance, reducing federal control over Native affairs. Today, many tribes are revitalizing their traditions and cultures, with a focus on language and ceremony (Running Strong, 2024). Language learning programs, pow-wows, and cultural practices are being revived, providing strength and healing to American Indian communities. Despite historical challenges, Native cultures remain vibrant and resilient, continuing to enrich the broader American society. Simultaneously, unique challenges continue to persist among American Indian youth.

Modern Challenges of American Indian Youth

Historical trauma and generations of discriminatory policies have significantly impacted American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) children, youth, and families, leading to disproportionately poor outcomes across many health and well-being measures compared to the general population (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). The adverse effects of trauma on the physical and mental health of AI/AN populations have been well-documented and continue to affect subsequent generations. Additionally, ongoing U.S. policies and practices have resulted in isolation, economic deprivation, food scarcity, and chronically under-resourced health care and education systems for AI/AN communities. The following data not only highlight the disparate conditions experienced by AI/AN children and families

but also underscore the urgent need to prioritize equity at all levels of government and expand opportunities and support for AI/AN communities (Annie E. Casey).

Historical Trauma

Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart defines historical trauma as "the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over one's lifetime and from generation to generation following loss of lives, land and vital aspects of culture" (as cited in Native Hope, 2024). Brave Heart and other researchers suggest that historical trauma is repeatedly experienced by each generation, even if they are far removed from the original events. In a 2004 study, researchers surveyed adult Native Americans with children, both generations being far removed from the atrocities experienced in the past, and developed the Historical Loss Scale. The study revealed that 36% of participants had daily thoughts about the loss of traditional language in their community, 34% thought daily about the loss of culture, and 49% reported having disturbing thoughts related to these losses; additionally, 35% were distrustful of the dominant White culture due to historical losses suffered by their people (Native Hope). These findings indicate that many Native Americans are profoundly affected by daily thoughts of loss, stress, grief, discrimination, and cultural displacement. The shadow of history imposes significant stress on their physical and mental well-being, affecting generation after generation.

Epigenetics and Intergenerational Trauma

So how does trauma get passed down from generation to generation? An emerging field of science, epigenetics, is investigating how trauma can be passed down intergenerationally. Epigenetics studies the expression of genes and has shown increasing evidence that highly stressful environmental conditions can leave a mark on the epigenome (cellular genetic material), which can be carried

into future generations with serious consequences (Native Hope, 2024). Studies led by Rachel Yehuda, director of the Center for Psychedelic Psychotherapy and Trauma Research at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, have examined whether Holocaust survivors and their children exhibit changes to "epigenetic markers," which are chemical tags that attach to DNA and can switch genes on or off (Zimmerman, 2023). This research compared blood samples from Holocaust survivors with those of Jews who lived outside Europe during the war. The findings revealed that mothers exposed to the Holocaust showed changes in the activity of DNA segments involved in regulating the stress response. Remarkably, their children, who were not directly exposed to the Holocaust, also exhibited these changes.

It is not the traumatic experience itself that is passed on, but rather the anxiety and worldview of the survivors, as noted by Ed Tronick, a developmental and clinical psychologist at the University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School in Worcester (as cited in Zimmerman, 2023). Many Holocaust survivors viewed the world as a dangerous place where terrible things can happen at any moment, and their children intuitively sensed this fear. Researchers like Dr. Brave Heart and others have used these concepts from the Holocaust survivor studies to examine intergenerational trauma in Native Americans. As Judy Bluehorse Skelton, an adjunct professor at Portland State University's Graduate School of Education, explains: "This history lives on in us. There's that memory, that physical memory that some have talked about. It lives on at a cellular level – a cellular memory" (as cited in Native Hope, 2024). Obviously, there is also a behavioral component to intergenerational trauma, as parents' communication methods and coping mechanisms significantly impact their children. Although the science of epigenetics is still in its early stages, the emerging research has significant implications for understanding and discussing the impact of generational trauma.

Physical & Mental Health Challenges

Native American youth face significant physical and mental health challenges, reflecting the enduring impacts of historical trauma and systemic inequities. They experience higher rates of health issues, such as diabetes, obesity, and substance abuse, partly due to chronic underfunding and under-resourcing of healthcare services in their communities (Annie E. Casey, 2022). Further highlighting systemic inequalities, AI/AN youth are more than twice as likely to lack health insurance compared to their peers.

Mental health challenges are equally concerning, with higher incidences of depression, anxiety, and suicide attempts compared to their peers. AI/AN youth experience the highest suicide rates among all cultural or ethnic groups in the United States (Youth.gov, n.d.). Suicide is the second leading cause of death for Native American youth aged 15-24 years old, according to SAMHSA (As cited in Annie E. Casey, 2022). They die by suicide at a rate more than four times higher than the general U.S. youth population. AI/AN males aged 15-25 are four times more likely to die by suicide compared to their peers from other racial or ethnic backgrounds, while AI/AN females in the same age group have rates up to 11 times higher. According to the CDC's 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 27% of AI/AN high school students have seriously considered attempting suicide, compared to 22% of other students; additionally, 16% of AI/AN students reported at least one suicide attempt in the previous year, significantly higher than the 10% of all high school students (Annie E. Casey). These students were the most likely among any racial and ethnic groups to report such distress.

Furthermore, a 2023 report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine highlighted that AI/AN populations suffer from profound feelings of sadness, anxiety, anger, and shame due to historical traumas, including forced migration, broken treaties, and cultural losses; the report

emphasized the need for more comprehensive data on AI/AN well-being and recommended prioritizing this issue at the federal level (Annie E. Casey). The complex interplay of historical trauma, economic deprivation, and cultural dislocation continues to exacerbate these disparities, necessitating targeted interventions and resources to support the well-being of Native American youth.

Additional Health Discrepancies

In addition to the challenges of mental and physical health, American Indian youth face several other significant health disparities, discussed in the list below.

- **Substance use** is a serious health issue faced by American Indian communities. This issue is especially pronounced among AI youth. Adolescents aged 12 to 17 in this community exhibit higher rates of cigarette use (16.8 percent vs. 10.2 percent), marijuana use (13.8 percent vs. 6.9 percent), and nonmedical use of prescription drugs (6.1 percent vs. 3.3 percent) compared to the national average (Youth.gov, n.d.).

- **Teen pregnancy** rates have declined by 67% on a national scale since its peak in 1991; however, disparities for American Indians remain. The Center for Indigenous Health (2024) reports, "Native American teens have the highest teen birth rate of any U.S. group and 4 in 10 Native American women begin childbearing in adolescence."

Family and Community Challenges

Native American youth face numerous community and family challenges, deeply affecting their well-being and future prospects. Nearly one-third (29%) of AI/AN children live in poverty, almost double the national rate of 16%, a disparity that has persisted for decades (Annie E. Casey, 2022). Additionally, AI/AN kids are nearly three times as likely to reside in high-poverty neighborhoods compared to

their counterparts (22% vs. 8%). The economic struggles are further reflected in the employment status of their parents, with just under half (43%) of AI/AN children living in families where parents do not have secure, full-time employment, compared to 29% nationally (Annie E. Casey). The economic challenges extend into adolescence, with about 1 in 8 AI/AN teens aged 16–19 (12%) not being in school or working in 2021, outpacing the national rate of 7%.

AI/AN children are also disproportionately affected by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), with over one-third (37%) having faced at least two ACEs, more than double the national average of 17% (Annie E. Casey, 2022). These traumatic events, such as exposure to violence, parental death or incarceration, and economic hardship, are closely linked to the historical trauma of colonization. Moreover, AI/AN children continue to be overrepresented in the foster care system, making up 2% of those in foster care despite being only 1% of the general child population (Annie E. Casey). The inconsistency in the implementation of the Indian Child Welfare Act and systemic bias in the child welfare system contribute to this overrepresentation. AI/AN youth transitioning out of foster care report high rates of homelessness (43% between ages 19 and 21) compared to the national rate of 29%.

Juvenile Justice System

The justice system also disproportionately affects AI/AN youth, with the latest data showing that 181 AI/AN youth per 100,000 ages 10 to 21 were in juvenile detention in 2021, significantly higher than the national rate of 74 per 100,000 (Annie E. Casey, 2022). American Indian youth also face harsher treatment within state and federal juvenile justice systems. They are 50 percent more likely than White youth to experience punitive measures such as pepper spray, restraint, isolation, out-of-home placement, or transfer to adult criminal court (Youth.gov, n.d.). A significant portion of the juvenile justice population is comprised of tribal

youth, with some studies indicating they make up as much as 60 percent. These youth often end up in long-term facilities located far from their tribal communities. Factors such as high rates of violent crime, domestic violence, child abuse, alcohol use, and gang involvement within tribal communities contribute to the delinquency risks faced by Native youth (Youth.gov). Despite declining rates of juvenile crime nationally, tribal communities continue to experience rising rates of violent juvenile crime. Challenges include inadequate social services and resources for juvenile justice systems, leading to insufficient training for law enforcement and justice personnel, as well as a scarcity of comprehensive prevention, intervention, and sanction programs tailored to Native youth needs. Further, this high detention rate has long-term negative impacts on these youth and does not contribute to improved public safety (Youth.gov).

Challenges in the Education System

Native American students in K-12 education face significant challenges across various metrics. They exhibit higher rates of chronic absenteeism, suspension, and office discipline referrals compared to their peers (Balow, 2022). Academic achievement in reading and math remains significantly lower for Native American students than for White students, with a substantial portion scoring below proficient levels in both subjects. Alarmingly, dropout rates among AI/AN high school students are higher than the national average, further hindering their long-term academic and economic prospects (Balow). Additionally, American Indian students have the highest rates of special education identification and placement among racial groups, indicating systemic challenges in meeting their educational needs.

Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism presents a critical challenge for Native American students, surpassing all other racial groups in terms of prevalence (Balow, 2022). Defined as missing at least 10% of the school year due to any reason, chronic absenteeism significantly correlates with higher dropout rates and poorer academic performance among students. Research underscores that early absenteeism in middle school is a strong predictor of future academic struggles and potential dropout in high school (Balow). Moreover, chronic absenteeism exacerbates achievement gaps, contributing to lower standardized test scores and widening disparities between consistently attending students and those who are frequently absent.

Chronic absenteeism among Native American students can be attributed to a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors. Understanding these underlying causes is crucial for developing effective interventions to improve attendance and academic performance. The legacy of boarding schools established for Native American students has had a lasting negative impact on their connection to K-12 education in America (Balow, 2022). These schools aimed to assimilate Native American students into the dominant culture, often disregarding their cultural backgrounds and subjecting them to harsh disciplinary practices. The boarding school movement's attempt to "civilize" Native American culture has led to a scenario where many Native American youth struggle to find their place in today's educational environment (Balow). This struggle is exacerbated by a lack of awareness and integration of Native American cultures within U.S. schools.

Chronic absenteeism is not merely a result of a lack of awareness about the importance of regular school attendance. Socio-economic challenges play a critical role as well. Factors such as housing insecurity, family instability, and lack of

access to transportation, particularly in rural communities, significantly impact attendance (Balow, 2022). Additionally, cultural practices such as extended tribal funerals and powwows often conflict with academic schedules, leading to increased absences. The current educational environment in U.S. schools often fails to accommodate the cultural norms and values of Native American students (Balow). Typical classrooms emphasize individual achievement and competition, which contrasts with the Native American focus on group achievement and community. Native American students often feel uncomfortable being "put on the spot," a common practice in many classrooms today (Balow). Public praise is also often resisted, as it is culturally inappropriate to single out individuals in many Native American communities. Further, teachers' attitudes and the lack of self-esteem among Native American students are frequently cited reasons for absenteeism and dropping out of school (Balow). The typical grading systems and classroom dynamics may not resonate with Native American students, leading to disengagement and chronic absenteeism.

Reducing Absenteeism

Reducing absenteeism among American Indian students requires a comprehensive approach that focuses on building positive, trusting relationships with students and their families. According to Balow (2022), creating these relationships is essential for increasing attendance rates and improving overall educational outcomes for Native American students. Engaging Native American families involves understanding their unique needs and stories, moving beyond general communication to a more personalized and culturally sensitive approach (Balow). To effectively connect with families, educators must shift from a deficit-based model to one that embraces family strengths. Recognizing that families want to help their students succeed, educators can develop strong relationships between home, school, and community. This strength-based collaboration fosters trust and respect, essential for supporting students' attendance and learning (Balow).

Effective cross-cultural communication is also critical in engaging American Indian families. It involves being sensitive to differences in communication styles and acknowledging families' cultural values as strengths (Balow, 2022). This sensitivity helps prevent misunderstandings and encourages participation in school functions. Educators should listen more than they speak, ask open-ended questions, and be aware of nonverbal communication cues such as downcast eyes or humor, which may carry significant meanings (Balow). Building relationships early in the school year, well before formal parent-teacher conferences, is crucial. Teachers can promote cross-cultural communication by starting conversations on a personal level, mixing personal and academic discussions, showing respect for the whole family, and using indirect questions to gather information (Balow). Partnering with the larger Native American community to promote family engagement also helps schools make deeper connections.

Another effective strategy to reduce absenteeism is to foster good relationships through collaborative efforts between school personnel and tribal leaders. An example from Minnesota shows the success of a "truancy collaborative," where regular meetings focus on attendance, sharing ideas, and discussing effective strategies. This collaborative approach emphasizes restorative remedies rather than punitive responses, helping students feel cared for and supported (Balow, 2022). Partnering with communities, businesses, centers, and faith-based organizations creates bi-directional influences that benefit students. Research shows that students are more likely to hear consistent messages about their success and the importance of school when all stakeholders work together (Balow). Inviting role models from different Native American cultures to share their stories in the classroom can also incentivize attendance and highlight the significance of education.

Academic Achievement

American Indian students are performing significantly below their white peers, trailing by two to three grade levels in reading and mathematics (National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL], 2022). This academic lag is just one aspect of a broader and more troubling picture. Native students are 237% more likely to drop out of school and 207% more likely to face expulsion compared to their white counterparts (NCSL). The disparities extend beyond K-12 education into higher education. For every 100 American Indian/Alaska Native kindergartners, only seven will go on to earn a bachelor's degree. In contrast, 34 out of every 100 white kindergartners achieve this milestone (NCSL). These statistics starkly highlight the extent of the educational challenges facing Native American students.

Several factors contribute to the persistent achievement gap experienced by Native American students. One significant issue is that many American Indian/ Alaska Native students are not adequately prepared to learn when they enter school (NCSL, 2022). This lack of preparedness can stem from various socio-economic challenges prevalent in many Native communities. The NCSL provides an overview of these exacerbating factors, shedding light on the various elements that widen the achievement gap for American Indian students.

- **Economic Conditions:** Poor economic conditions in Native American communities play a crucial role in widening the achievement gap. Many Native families live in low-income households, which can affect students' ability to perform well academically. Economic hardship often leads to inadequate access to essential resources, such as nutritious food, stable housing, and educational materials.

- **Health Care:** Lack of adequate health care is another critical factor. Health issues can interfere with students' ability to attend school regularly and

engage fully in their studies. Chronic health problems, unmet medical needs, and limited access to mental health services can all negatively impact academic performance.

- **Other Socio-Economic Factors:** Additional challenges, such as limited access to early childhood education, language barriers, and cultural differences between home and school environments, further exacerbate the achievement gap. These factors can create an educational environment that is not conducive to learning for many Native American students.

This persistent inequality is evident in various aspects of academic performance, including standardized test scores, graduation rates, and college enrollment (Balow, 2022). Each of these elements plays a critical role in shaping the educational experiences and outcomes of Native American students.

Improving Academic Achievement

Improving academic outcomes for Native American students requires a multifaceted approach that respects and integrates their cultural heritage while addressing their unique educational needs (Balow, 2022). Several strategies are essential for creating an environment where Native American students can thrive. These strategies, rooted in cultural sensitivity and high expectations, are designed to enhance self-esteem, foster respect, and incorporate Native American culture into the curriculum (Balow). Specific strategies will be discussed in greater depth in Sections 2 and 3.

Research emphasizes that to raise achievement among Native American students, educators must implement strategies to increase students' self-esteem (Balow, 2022). This includes creating a positive and accepting classroom climate where students feel valued and respected. By focusing on student strengths and maintaining high expectations, educators can help Native American students build

confidence in their abilities. Incorporating Native American literature, art, culture, values, and activities into the curriculum is also crucial. This inclusion not only gives students pride in their heritage but also makes learning more relevant and engaging (Balow).

Instructional coaching has been shown to significantly improve academic performance among Native American students as well. A 2011 study showed that embedding instructional coaches in the field to work directly with teachers led to notable improvements in literacy, math, and science test scores for Montana Native American tenth-grade students (Balow, 2022). These coaches provide feedback and guidance, helping teachers develop the necessary instructional, behavioral, and relational skills to engage students more effectively. Effective interpersonal strategies are also vital for building strong teacher-student relationships.

Discipline Disparity

One significant contributor to the educational disparities between Native American and white students is the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices (Balow, 2022). These include office discipline referrals (ODR), in-school suspensions (ISS), out-of-school suspensions (OSS), and expulsions. Such practices disproportionately affect American Indian students, leading to a range of negative outcomes that hinder academic achievement. Research has shown that exclusionary discipline is not only ineffective in addressing behavior issues but also detrimental to students' academic and social development. Balow reports that suspension and exclusion are associated with several negative outcomes, including:

- Future disciplinary infractions

- Repeated suspensions

- Academic failure

- School disengagement

- Dropout rates

These outcomes are particularly pronounced for students with disabilities and Native American students, highlighting the need for alternative disciplinary approaches.

Improving Discipline Practices

A growing body of research supports the effectiveness of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in improving disciplinary behavior, reducing antisocial behavior, and decreasing incidents of bullying and peer victimization (Balow, 2022)). PBIS has been shown to significantly reduce the use of suspensions and the associated negative outcomes. An interesting study conducted in 2013 found that schools with a strong American Indian influence that were also implementing PBIS reported zero out-of-school suspensions for both Native American and white students (Balow). Balow explains that the factors contributing to these positive outcomes included:

- Incorporating Native culture into instruction

- Providing significant staff development on American Indian issues

- Encouraging parent involvement and fostering strong community relationships

- Emphasizing nurturing teacher-student relationships

These schools had behavioral expectations and responses that clearly reflected Native traditions. Their student handbooks emphasized exhibiting positive behaviors and encouraged parent involvement, contributing to a supportive and

inclusive school environment. Schools with the lowest disparities in disciplinary exclusion between Native American and white students closely collaborated with the larger Native American community (Balow, 2022). This collaboration improved staff development around cultural sensitivity and culturally relevant instruction, combined with fostering healthy family relationships. When successfully integrated with the PBIS model, these practices led to greater disciplinary equity and improved academic outcomes for Native American students (Balow).

Section 1 Conclusion

Understanding the unique experiences of American Indian youth is a crucial step toward fostering an inclusive and effective educational environment. By appreciating their rich cultural heritage and addressing the historical and contemporary challenges they face, we can develop strategies to promote equity and support their academic and personal growth. This section has highlighted the importance of cultural understanding and the need to address issues such as chronic absenteeism, the academic achievement gap, and disciplinary disparities. By focusing on these areas, we can create an educational system that not only acknowledges but also celebrates the diversity and potential of American Indian students. In the next section, we will explore additional best practices for improving outcomes for American Indian youth. We will explore practical strategies and interventions that have been shown to make a positive impact, aiming to provide educators and policymakers with actionable insights to support these students effectively.

Section 1 Key Terms

Academic Achievement Gap - The disparity in academic performance between groups of students, often defined by race/ethnicity, income, or other factors.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) - Traumatic events occurring before age 18, such as abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction, which have lasting impacts on health and well-being.

Alaska Native - Indigenous peoples of Alaska, including groups such as the Inuit, Aleut, and various Alaska Native tribes, each with distinct cultural practices and languages.

American Indian - Also referred to as Native American; refers to Indigenous peoples of the contiguous United States, encompassing various tribes with unique traditions, languages, and histories.

Chronic Absenteeism - Missing at least 10% of the school year for any reason, which significantly impacts academic performance and increases dropout rates.

Disciplinary Disparities - Differences in disciplinary actions, such as suspensions or expulsions, experienced by different groups of students.

Epigenetics - The study of how environmental factors can affect gene expression and be passed down to future generations.

Historical Trauma - A type of intergenerational trauma; the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding experienced by a group across generations, resulting from significant historical events.

Intergenerational Trauma - Trauma that is transferred from one generation to the next, affecting descendants even if they did not directly experience the original traumatic events.

Oral Traditions - The practice of passing down stories, history, and cultural knowledge through spoken word rather than written text.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) - An evidence-based framework used to improve student behavior and create positive school environments.

Powwows - Cultural gatherings among Native Americans that include ceremonial and social activities, celebrating heritage and community.

Sovereign Nations - Independent and self-governing nations recognized by the U.S. government, often referring to Native American tribes.

Sweat Lodge Ceremonies - Spiritual practices among Native American tribes involving purification rites conducted in a heated, enclosed structure.

Systemic Inequities - Institutional policies and practices that create unequal access to resources and opportunities for different groups.

Truancy Collaborative - A partnership between school personnel and community leaders focused on addressing and reducing student absenteeism.

Section 1 Reflection Questions

1. **Historical Context:** How does the history of American Indian boarding schools influence your understanding of current educational challenges faced by Native American communities? How can you use this understanding to inform your teaching practices?

2. **Educational Policies:** Reflect on current educational policies at your school or district. How do these policies support or hinder the success of Native American and Alaska Native students? What policy changes would you advocate for?

3. **Equity vs. Equality:** Reflect on the difference between equity and equality in education. How can you apply the principles of equity to better support Native American and Alaska Native students?

4. **Student Advocacy:** Consider your role as an advocate for Native American and Alaska Native students. How can you advocate for their needs within your school and district? What strategies can you use to amplify their voices?

5. **Educational Equity Initiatives:** Examine any current educational equity initiatives at your school or district. How effective are these initiatives in addressing the specific needs of Native American and Alaska Native students? What improvements could be made?

Section 1 Activities

1. **Research Tribal Histories:** Conduct in-depth research on the tribal histories of the Native American and Alaska Native students in your community. Prepare a presentation to share with your colleagues.

2. **Student Survey:** Design and administer a survey to Native American and Alaska Native students about their educational experiences and needs. Analyze the results to inform your teaching practices.

3. **Policy Analysis:** Analyze your school's disciplinary policies and their impact on Native American and Alaska Native students. Propose changes to promote equity.

4. **Create a Cultural Calendar:** Develop a cultural calendar that includes important dates and events for Native American and Alaska Native communities. Integrate these into your school's calendar.

5. **Data Analysis:** Analyze academic and behavioral data of Native American and Alaska Native students in your school. Identify trends and develop action plans to address disparities.

Section 2: Best Practices to Improve Educational Outcomes for American Indian Youth

According to the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) (2022), a comprehensive review of academic literature and emerging research identifies several key factors that contribute to the academic success and overall wellness of K-12 American Indian students. These factors include:

- **Cultural Engagement:** Active participation in traditional activities, a strong cultural identity, and engagement with traditional spirituality are crucial for students' well-being and academic performance.

- **Goals and Aspirations:** Having clear goals and a sense of self-efficacy fosters motivation and academic success.

- **Positive Activities:** Participation in extracurricular activities, such as sports teams and clubs, provides students with constructive outlets and a sense of community.

- **Positive Role Models:** Access to positive American Indian role models can inspire and guide students, contributing to their success and well-being.

- **Positive Self-Identity:** Maintaining a positive self-image is vital for students' mental health and academic achievement.

- **Supportive Relationships:** Supportive relationships, both within the family (broadly defined to include kinship networks) and with non-familial individuals, are essential for students' success and well-being.

- **Welcoming Spaces:** School environments that prominently display indigenous culture create a sense of belonging and support students' cultural identity.

To effectively address these success factors, this section will explore schoolwide and classroom best practices designed to support American Indian students holistically. These practices include implementing effective school models and improving school climate, integrating culturally responsive teaching methods, and fostering strong, supportive relationships between students, families, and school staff. This section concludes by examining a case study of a school that has been successful in implementing culturally responsive teaching. By implementing these best practices and using experienced schools as an example, educators can create a nurturing and empowering environment that promotes the academic success and overall well-being of American Indian students.

Effective School Models and School Climate

Improving the school and classroom climate is one of the most effective ways to enhance outcomes for all students, including Native American students (Balow, 2022). This can help reduce absenteeism, improve behavior, and increase academic achievement. A particularly effective approach is the "Authoritative Climate Model," which has shown significant positive impacts on student engagement and academic performance (Balow).

Authoritative Climate Model

The Authoritative Climate Model emphasizes two key components: high structure (high expectations) and student support (Balow, 2022). This model has accounted for 65% of the variance in student engagement and 77% of the variance in academic achievement, demonstrating its effectiveness in fostering positive

school climates and student outcomes (Balow). For American Indian students, providing high levels of support is crucial. This support fosters positive relationships, characterized by mutual respect and trust between students and adults. Balow shares key elements of student support:

- **Deep and Reflective Listening:** Educators should actively listen to students, understanding their perspectives and concerns.

- **Teaching SEL and Non-Cognitive Skills:** Social and emotional learning (SEL) and non-cognitive skills are essential for student development and engagement.

- **Promoting Student Agency:** Encouraging students to take ownership of their learning and decisions fosters a sense of responsibility and motivation.

- **Providing Learning Scaffolds:** Offering support structures that help students progress in their learning journey.

- **Culturally Relevant Curriculum:** Integrating Native American cultural examples into the curriculum helps students feel represented and valued.

- **Personal Vulnerability:** Educators should be open and honest with students, building trust through transparency.

Studies show that schools with less violence tend to have students who are aware of school rules, believe they are fair, and have positive relationships with their teachers (Balow). These supportive authoritative practices are associated with improved academic outcomes, reduced truancy, and lower dropout rates (Balow).

High structure, the second component of the Authoritative Climate Model, involves setting clear and high expectations for both discipline and academic work ethic (Balow, 2022). This includes:

- **High Academic Expectations:** Teachers should challenge students to work hard and achieve at high levels.

- **Clear and Equitable Rules:** School rules should be well-defined, consistently applied, and fair to all students.

- **Engagement in Goal-Setting:** Staff should engage students in deep conversations about their academic and behavioral goals, allowing students to explain their actions when necessary.

Authoritative school climates distinguish themselves from "zero tolerance" models by focusing on support rather than harsh punishment (Balow). These schools typically have lower suspension rates and are better positioned to reduce disproportionate suspension rates for Native American students; a literature review indicates that authoritative school climates achieve lower suspension rates regardless of student and demographic variables, benefiting students of all racial and ethnic groups (Balow).

Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices

Culturally responsive teaching involves intentionally incorporating students' cultural experiences, knowledge, and learning processes into educational practices (as cited in Thomas, 2021). It goes beyond simply acknowledging multiculturalism; it requires educators to affirm and utilize the ways students learn within their homes and communities. This approach necessitates that teachers become aware of their students' cultural backgrounds, including the sociopolitical and historical contexts of their communities. Crucially, culturally responsive teaching recognizes that for students to engage in rigorous learning, they must feel safe socially, emotionally, and intellectually.

Culturally responsive teachers create inclusive classrooms that foster physical and emotional safety, celebrate diversity and encourage discussions about cultural differences. In these environments, cultural differences are not confined to specific months but are acknowledged and celebrated throughout the school year (Moore, 2021). Such teachers reduce the likelihood of intolerance and bullying by fostering an atmosphere of respect and understanding. Teachers who lack this cultural competence may struggle to build genuine relationships with students and parents from different cultural backgrounds, limiting their ability to positively impact their students' lives. Without cultural competence, teachers might resort to disciplinary actions for behaviors they do not understand, rather than using these moments as opportunities for teaching and learning. By cultivating cultural responsiveness, educators can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that benefits all students (Moore, 2021). This section will explore culturally responsive practices that are tailored toward American Indian youth, but also benefit all students.

Equity Pedagogy

Equity pedagogy is about ensuring that instruction supports the learning and overall academic achievement of every child. This is achieved through curriculum differentiation, which holds all students accountable to the same high standards while providing various ways to meet these standards (Elser, 2020). Differentiation strategies include extending time, offering scaffolded temporary supports, creating unique assignments tailored to individual needs, and presenting content using diverse teaching methods and styles. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an example of an equity pedagogy. This approach allows students to utilize their unique learning strategies, preferences, and strengths.

Research-Based Classroom Practices

Although research on academic supports for Native American students is limited, one prominent theme stands out: the importance of culturally relevant education (Porterfield, 2023). The findings from selected literature emphasize three key areas where culturally relevant education can make a significant impact: knowledge of culture and community, ways of learning / teaching strategies, and academic content. Below, we will explore these findings and provide practical examples drawn from the literature to illustrate how culturally responsive practices can benefit American Indian students.

Knowledge of Culture and Community

Research indicates that aligning school culture with community culture and actively engaging educators with the community can significantly impact the academic performance of American Indian students (Porterfield, 2023). In a qualitative study, Native American parents highlighted that communication and a learning environment respectful of their culture are crucial for their involvement in schools. Additionally, literature reviews suggest that teachers who are knowledgeable about Indigenous culture can positively influence the success of Native youth in educational settings. Porterfield shares some examples in practice:

- **Engagement and Communication:** To enhance engagement and communication, it is essential to foster two-way communication with families, allowing them to share feedback and experiences. This can be achieved through diverse communication methods, including in-person meetings, electronic communications, and printed materials. Additionally, schools should appoint an advocate or liaison to welcome and assist American Indian parents and children.

- **Cultural Alignment:** Cultural alignment can be promoted by developing cultural programs, activities, and resources, such as resource centers, after-

school activities, and clubs that focus on American Indian stories, crafts, language, dance, and traditions. Providing students with opportunities to participate in Native language and cultural programs supports a positive sense of identity and attitudes toward school.

- **Educator Knowledge:** Educator knowledge can be improved by encouraging school personnel to participate in community activities and spend time with community members, building respect and preventing misconceptions about the culture. Establishing culturally-based teacher training programs is also crucial to equip teachers with the skills needed to serve Indigenous youth effectively.

Ways of Learning / Teaching Strategies

Research has shown that American Indian students from traditional Indigenous contexts often learn best through methods that emphasize harmony, holistic perspectives, expressive creativity, and nonverbal communication (Porterfield, 2023). According to the Office of Indian Education (OIE) (2023), several instructional strategies have been identified as potentially enhancing academic achievement among American Indian students:

- **Modeling and Demonstration Techniques:** Teachers can use think-aloud strategies to demonstrate the logic behind answering questions, aligning with traditional teaching practices in American Indian communities. This approach involves using methods such as manipulatives in mathematics to illustrate thought processes or employing think-aloud strategies during reading to demonstrate comprehension skills. By showcasing these techniques, educators provide clear examples for students to follow, fostering deeper understanding and skill development.

- **Student-Directed Small-Group Activities:** Creating student-led small groups where students generate questions, share information with peers, or rotate through activity centers working on different mini-projects can be effective. Traditional Indigenous education valued the agency of learners and often connected learning directly to the land, utilizing methods like demonstration, observation, and practical applications of knowledge. In today's classrooms, teachers can empower students by facilitating small group activities that encourage peer information sharing and independent or collaborative learning. Centers or stations, for instance, provide structured opportunities for students to engage actively with content and each other, fostering deeper understanding and ownership of their learning process.

- **Collaborative Knowledge Uncovering:** Teachers and students can jointly research and share information, enhancing learning by solving practical, real-world problems together. Indigenous educational traditions emphasized learning in partnership with students, where knowledge was uncovered through practical applications and real-world contexts. Educators can adopt similar approaches by creating opportunities for students to apply their learning to authentic problems or scenarios. Problem-based, place-based, or project-based learning methodologies enable teachers and students to collaborate on exploring and addressing challenges relevant to their community or environment. By engaging students as active participants in their own learning journey, educators promote deeper engagement and meaningful connections to the curriculum.

- **Developing Language and Literacy Skills:** Providing student-friendly definitions for new words and using word maps to connect new vocabulary with familiar terms can improve literacy across content areas. The What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide recommends explicit vocabulary

teaching practices for English learners. Further, encouraging students to use subject-specific vocabulary to explain their thought processes in subjects like math and science helps reinforce learning.

- **Culturally-Specific Communication Styles:** Incorporating American Indian communication styles, such as expert-apprentice modeling developed in collaboration with community elders, can be particularly beneficial. Indigenous communities traditionally emphasize intentional processes and structures for sharing knowledge, often through storytelling and deep listening. These methods reflect Indigenous ways of knowing that prioritize experiential learning and connections to the land and community. Educators can leverage these cultural strengths by incorporating communication styles such as sharing circles or literature circles in the classroom. These approaches encourage collaborative learning and align with the values and learning styles of Indigenous students, promoting a more inclusive and culturally responsive educational environment.

- **Connecting Academic Content to Cultural Contexts:** Teachers can integrate academic content across various subjects by linking it to stories that resonate with local community practices, events, or notable individuals (OPI, 2022). Starting with resources like tribal newspapers or local libraries provides a solid foundation for understanding students' community contexts. Building authentic relationships with organizations such as tribal education departments, cultural experts, and parent committees enhances the relevance and authenticity of educational materials. Moreover, collaborating with families to identify local knowledge holders, such as elders, honors and integrates students' cultural strengths into instructional practices effectively.

- **Cognitively Challenging Activities:** Starting with culturally grounded activities and connecting them to rigorous academic standards can engage students in higher-level thinking. Culturally responsive teaching extends beyond engagement to include rigorous cognitive activities that challenge students to meet academic standards. Traditional Indigenous education emphasized high expectations and deep learning through practical applications. Educators can foster this approach by designing activities that require critical thinking, problem-solving, and application of knowledge. By engaging students in cognitively challenging tasks, teachers promote academic growth while honoring cultural strengths and perspectives.

- **Professional Development and Implementation Support:** Effective implementation of culturally responsive practices requires ongoing professional development and support. However, the 2019 National Indian Education Survey found that nearly half of the teachers in schools with significant American Indian populations had never participated in professional development focused on supporting these students (Rampey et al., 2021). Teachers benefit from training that emphasizes continuous improvement and reflective practice, ensuring that instructional strategies are responsive to both academic and cultural needs. School leaders play a crucial role in identifying and facilitating professional development opportunities tailored to meet the unique requirements of Native American students. Initiatives like those supported by the Office of Indian Education in Arizona aim to elevate educators' capacity to implement culturally responsive teaching effectively, fostering a supportive learning environment for all students.

By incorporating these strategies, educators can create more effective and culturally responsive learning environments for American Indian students.

Academic Content

Research indicates that incorporating Indigenous education and practices into content areas can enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. For example, a qualitative case study found that integrating Indigenous knowledge in science education significantly improved student learning, while a randomized controlled trial demonstrated that a culturally based math program led to substantial gains in understanding key mathematical concepts (Porterfield, 2023). According to the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) (2022), another study showed that two modules of a culturally based mathematics curriculum significantly enhanced the mathematics test scores of Alaska Native students. These modules incorporated modeling, inquiry-based approaches, and collaboration among Alaska Native elders, culture-bearers, teachers, and students in cultural settings. Examples in practice include the following:

- **Culturally Relevant Materials:** Using reading materials from tribal newspapers or writing story problems connected to local cultural practices helps make academic content relevant to students' lives. To effectively incorporate Indigenous knowledge into academic content, schools should include elements from students' school, home, and community life as sources of science and math knowledge (Porterfield, 2023). Curricular content should be chosen to allow students to draw on their cultural background knowledge. Educators should identify individuals in the local community who possess specific knowledge and skills, and create opportunities for them to share their expertise with students.

- **Content Integration:** Integrating academic content is crucial because the human brain thrives on meaning, connections, and immersion (OPI, 2022). It responds to multi-sensory experiences, humor, and novelty, retaining information better when presented holistically rather than in isolated

fragments. For American Indian students, this integrated approach is particularly beneficial as it allows them to see themselves reflected in the curriculum, validating their cultural identities and enhancing their sense of belonging in the educational environment. Despite educational traditions and structural barriers that compartmentalize subjects, research shows that learning is most effective when content and skills are integrated (OPI). This holistic approach not only alleviates the pressure to cover extensive material but also enhances teaching effectiveness and student engagement by making learning more relevant and meaningful. By implementing strategies like thematic organization and deep structural integration, educators can foster curiosity, intrinsic motivation, and independent learning skills among students, including American Indians.

- **Addressing Misinformation:** The process of addressing misinformation in American history textbooks involves closely examining biases present in the treatment of American Indian topics and historical events. These biases often result in misinformation or omissions that obscure American Indian perspectives and experiences. Topics such as the Bering Strait, Columbus, Thanksgiving, and more are frequently presented from a singular viewpoint, neglecting diverse perspectives. To counteract these biases, educators can engage students in critical literacy activities that involve investigating and analyzing primary and secondary sources (OPI, 2022). By supplementing textbooks with newer texts and tribal perspectives, students can develop a more comprehensive understanding of historical events.

  - Active pedagogical strategies like jigsaw activities, expert teams, and background knowledge workshops encourage students to interpret primary sources independently and explore diverse viewpoints collaboratively. These strategies not only enhance critical thinking

and reading comprehension but also empower students to rewrite historical narratives with accurate, inclusive information.

- **Tribally Specific Content:** Instead of presenting generalized information about "THE Native Americans," curricular materials should focus on specific tribal groups (OPI). This approach acknowledges the significant diversity among tribes in languages, histories, and cultures. By selecting content that is specific to a particular tribe, students can gain a deeper and more meaningful understanding of their heritage and cultural context.

- **Developmentally Appropriate Content:** When selecting content, educators should consider the developmental stage of their students. For example, while it's important to teach about the history of American Indians in the United States, topics such as the Indian Wars should be approached with sensitivity (OPI). Younger students can learn about colonization in general terms without delving into graphic details of violence. Cultural content, often intertwined with spiritual concepts, should be presented in ways that students can comprehend without oversimplifying or trivializing its significance.

- **Primary and Authentic Sources:** To provide a richer educational experience, educators should incorporate primary source materials into their teaching. Rather than relying solely on commercial textbooks, which often provide generalized narratives, students should have access to authentic historical documents such as treaties, firsthand accounts, and cultural artifacts (OPI). This approach allows students to develop their own interpretations of history and fosters critical thinking skills.

By implementing these strategies, educators can create a curriculum that respects and reflects the diversity and richness of Native American cultures. This approach not only enhances academic engagement and achievement among AI students

but also promotes cultural pride, identity affirmation, and a deeper appreciation for indigenous knowledge and history.

Successful Models

Exploring successful models of culturally responsive teaching for American Indians provides valuable insights into effective educational practices that honor and integrate indigenous cultures. These examples highlight how schools and educators can create inclusive, supportive learning environments that foster academic achievement and personal growth for American Indian students. By examining these models, we can identify key strategies and approaches that have proven successful in bridging cultural gaps, enhancing student engagement, and promoting positive educational outcomes.

Hays Lodgepole (HLP) Schools, Montana

Reyna Monteau, principal of Hays Lodgepole (HLP) Schools in Montana, understands the profound impact of a culturally relevant learning environment on her students' success. With over 93% of students identifying as Native American from the Assiniboine (Nakoda) and Gros Ventre (Aaniiih) tribes, HLP is deeply rooted in its community on the Fort Belknap Reservation (Education Northwest, 2021). Monteau, herself Assiniboine, emphasizes the importance of Indigenous culture in fostering both personal and academic growth. She believes that grounding students in their cultural heritage equips them with resilience and a sense of identity crucial for navigating the world confidently.

HLP's mission statement—to instill strength and knowledge to walk anywhere on earth and fear nothing—echoes the teachings of Assiniboine warrior White Dog, who mentored orphaned youth to become future tribal leaders (Education Northwest, 2021). Monteau has spearheaded initiatives like Native American Heritage Week, which has grown from a traditional buffalo hunt to a week-long

celebration encompassing storytelling, traditional arts and crafts, and ceremonies. These events not only educate students but also unify the community in heritage, strength, and healing. Throughout the year, HLP integrates Assiniboine and Gros Ventre culture into its curriculum. Lessons on traditional foods and medicines promote self-efficacy and healthy lifestyles, while language instruction connects students with elders, preserving vital traditions. Former HLP students, like Kenneth "Tuffy" Helgeson, continue to enrich the community by developing a comprehensive Nakoda curriculum that includes digital portraits and audio recordings of elders sharing traditional stories—a blend of tradition and modern technology to ensure cultural continuity (Education Northwest).

Monteau advocates for educators in other communities to engage with local elders and integrate community knowledge into school practices. She emphasizes humility, respect, and a willingness to learn from elders, who hold the deepest cultural insights (Education Northwest, 2021). Building strong community partnerships and centering Native culture across all aspects of education are foundational to HLP's approach. For Monteau, fostering a culturally responsive school environment begins with honoring and respecting the wisdom and traditions of the community, ensuring that every student feels supported and empowered by their heritage.

Section 2 Conclusion

This section underscores the importance of implementing best practices to enhance the educational outcomes for American Indian students. Key strategies include improving school climate and integrating culturally responsive teaching methods. Effective practices involve adopting teaching strategies that reflect cultural understanding, tailoring academic content to be more inclusive, and fostering a school environment that supports and celebrates cultural identity. By

focusing on these areas, educators can create more equitable and engaging learning experiences that address the unique needs of American Indian students, ultimately promoting their academic success and overall well-being. Section 3 will build on these concepts by exploring trauma-informed approaches specifically tailored for American Indian students, providing further insights into creating supportive and healing educational environments.

Section 2 Key Terms

Authoritative Climate Model - An educational approach emphasizing high structure (high expectations) and student support to improve student engagement and academic performance.

Background Knowledge Workshops - Workshops designed to build students' prior knowledge on a topic, aiding in comprehension and engagement.

Cognitively Challenging Activities - Tasks that promote higher-level thinking, critical analysis, and problem-solving skills in students.

Collaborative Knowledge Uncovering - A method where teachers and students work together to explore and understand information, often through practical, real-world problem-solving.

Cultural Alignment - The process of aligning school culture with the cultural practices and values of the community, enhancing student engagement and performance.

Cultural Competence - Educators' ability to understand, respect, and effectively teach students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Culturally Relevant Curriculum - Curriculum that includes Native American cultural examples and practices, making learning more relevant to students' lives.

Culturally Responsive Teaching - An educational approach that integrates students' cultural experiences, knowledge, and learning processes into teaching practices.

Deep and Reflective Listening - Actively listening to students to understand their perspectives and concerns, fostering mutual respect and trust.

Equity Pedagogy - Teaching practices that ensure all students, regardless of background, have equitable opportunities for learning and academic achievement.

Expert Teams - Groups of students or teachers with specialized knowledge who collaborate to solve problems or explore topics in depth.

Holistic Education - An approach that addresses the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual development of students.

Indigenous Ways of Knowing - Traditional knowledge systems and practices that have been developed by Indigenous cultures over time.

Jigsaw Activities - Cooperative learning strategies where students become experts on different pieces of a topic and then teach their peers.

School Climate - The overall atmosphere of a school, including how welcoming and supportive it is for students from diverse backgrounds.

Welcoming Spaces - School environments that prominently display indigenous culture, creating a sense of belonging and supporting students' cultural identities.

Section 2 Reflection Questions

1. **Effective Partnerships:** How can schools effectively partner with Native American and Alaska Native communities to support student success? Analyze the benefits and challenges of such partnerships.

2. **Culturally Responsive Teaching:** Reflect on your current understanding of culturally responsive teaching. How do you integrate students' cultural experiences and knowledge into your teaching practices?

3. **Supportive Relationships:** Examine the relationships within your school community. How do supportive relationships between students, families, and school staff contribute to student success?

4. **Academic Expectations and Support:** How does your school currently set high academic expectations while providing necessary support for American Indian students? What improvements can be made?

5. **Equity Pedagogy:** Analyze how you implement equity pedagogy in your classroom. How do you differentiate instruction to meet the diverse needs of all students?

6. **Addressing Misinformation:** Reflect on how you address misinformation about American Indian history and culture in your classroom. What strategies do you use to ensure accurate and inclusive content?

7. **Case Study Reflection:** Reflect on the case study of Hays Lodgepole Schools. What aspects of their approach could be adapted to your own school to support American Indian students more effectively?

Section 2 Activities

1. **Cultural Engagement Audit:** Conduct an audit of your classroom and school environment to evaluate how well it incorporates and reflects Indigenous culture. Create a plan to enhance cultural displays and activities.

2. **Resource Collection:** Curate a collection of culturally relevant materials and resources for your classroom, including books, media, and lesson plans that feature Native American perspectives.

3. **Community Liaison:** Reach out to local American Indian community leaders or organizations to establish a partnership. Develop a plan for regular communication and collaboration.

4. **Culturally Responsive Curriculum:** Review and revise your curriculum to include Native American cultural examples and perspectives. Create a document outlining these revisions and their rationale.

5. **Classroom Observation:** Record yourself teaching a lesson. Observe and document how your classroom environment and teaching practices support or hinder the engagement of American Indian students.

6. **Misinformation Review:** for potential biases or inaccuracies related to American Indian history and culture. Develop a list of recommended corrections or supplements.

7. **Family Feedback Mechanism:** Create a system for collecting and analyzing feedback from American Indian families about their experiences and perceptions of the school environment. Use this feedback to make actionable improvements.

Section 3: Trauma-Informed Education

This section explores the importance of adopting a trauma-informed approach, recognizing the historical trauma that impacts many American Indian communities, and creating safe and supportive learning environments. Engaging families and communities in the educational process is another critical component, as strong family-school partnerships can significantly enhance the educational experience and outcomes for American Indian students. By focusing on these areas, educators can help ensure that all students feel valued, supported, and empowered to succeed.

Reframing Trauma-Informed Approaches

The National Native Children's Trauma Center (NNCTC) highlights that about 1 in 4 U.S. children will experience a significant traumatic event by the age of 16; research indicates that Native American youth are particularly vulnerable to trauma, depression, and PTSD due to grief and exposure to violence (Tribal Youth Resource Center, 2024). The effects of trauma extend far beyond the initial event, leading to issues such as relationship problems, substance abuse, violent behavior, suicide, depression, academic struggles, and bullying. These long-term health and mental health concerns highlight the urgent need for effective support systems. Unfortunately, many existing systems meant to aid these vulnerable youth often end up re-traumatizing them. Long before trauma-informed systems became a mainstream concept in schools, tribal communities have recognized the vital connection between a supportive community environment and the well-being of their children and youth. Traditional cultural knowledge, which shapes the community support structures in each tribal setting, must play a central role in healing and fostering change.

By adopting a trauma-informed systems approach tailored to the unique experiences and cultural contexts of American Indian students, we can create environments that support their healing and growth, leveraging the strengths and wisdom inherent in their communities. This approach ensures that we not only address the immediate impacts of trauma but also build a foundation for long-term resilience and well-being. According to Thomas (2021), a culturally responsive trauma-informed practice begins with understanding the sociopolitical and historical contexts of the school community. One essential concept in this understanding is historical trauma, which examines the impact of collective and massive traumatic events that affect multiple generations, such as colonization and structural racism (Thomas). Often, discussions of trauma in schools focus on interpersonal harm, like abuse or neglect, without considering these broader, collective experiences. This oversight is significant because Native American communities have endured historical policies, such as the forced removal of Native children to government-mandated boarding schools. These policies aimed to strip Native children of their cultural identity by punishing the use of traditional languages and practices. Such experiences have left a lasting negative impact on the social, emotional, physical, and psychological well-being of Native American communities, with some associating trauma directly with schooling itself (Thomas).

Culturally Responsive Trauma-Informed Systems

A trauma-informed systems (TIS) approach seeks to recognize and respond to the effects of trauma on individuals' lives, focusing on creating environments that minimize the risk of additional harm while promoting healing and personal growth (Traumatic Stress Institute, 2024). A trauma-informed systems approach is crucial for supporting the well-being of tribal youth and communities, acknowledging the complex impacts of individual, intergenerational, and historical traumas. This

approach integrates cultural wisdom and community input to foster healing, resilience, and empowerment. Here, we explore the components of such an approach as advocated by the Tribal Youth Resource Center (TYRC) (2024).

- **Acknowledgement of Trauma:** This approach begins by recognizing the profound effects of individual, intergenerational, and historical traumas on tribal youth and communities. By acknowledging these traumas, educators and support systems can better understand the challenges faced by youth and work toward meaningful solutions.

- **Support for Healing and Resilience:** It prioritizes both individual and community healing from the impacts of traumatic stress. By promoting resilience-building practices, the approach empowers youth and communities to recover and thrive despite past traumas, fostering a sense of hope and strength.

- **Risk Reduction for Re-Traumatization:** One of its core goals is to minimize the risk of re-traumatization. This involves creating safe and supportive environments where interventions and support services do not inadvertently cause further harm, ensuring that youth feel secure and respected in their healing journey.

- **Incorporation of Community, Family, and Youth Input:** It actively involves community members, families, and individual youth in decision-making processes. This inclusive approach ensures that strategies and practices are culturally relevant and responsive to the specific needs and preferences of tribal communities, enhancing the effectiveness of support initiatives.

- **Integration of Cultural Wisdom:** cultural knowledge and traditions into services and practices. By respecting and leveraging cultural wisdom, the

approach not only preserves heritage but also enhances the authenticity and effectiveness of interventions, promoting a holistic approach to healing.

This culturally responsive TIS approach advocated by the Tribal Youth Resource Center (TYRC) aims to create a supportive framework that respects the unique experiences and strengths of tribal youth and communities, fostering environments where all individuals can thrive and build resilience against adversity. By acknowledging the impact of trauma, supporting resilience, reducing re-traumatization, incorporating community and family input, and integrating cultural wisdom, the TYRC's model ensures a holistic and effective approach to supporting the well-being of tribal youth.

Adopting a Strengths-Based Approach

A strengths-based approach is a vital component of a trauma-informed approach for supporting American Indian students in schools. As Thomas (2021) highlights, it's common to hear statements in schools such as, "This place might be the only time they get positive attention" or "For those kids, you are the only caring adult in their lives." These statements reflect a deficit mindset, viewing students and their families as lacking resources and support. Such views overlook the culturally specific strategies that students, families, and communities have historically used to sustain their well-being. These strategies have often been excluded from schools due to historical injustices like the boarding school policy.

Thomas (2021) advocates for a shift to a **strengths-based approach**, which values the rich knowledge and experiences students bring into the classroom, rather than seeing these as sources of trauma. In a trauma-informed context, this involves honoring and incorporating students' and families' cultural and community-specific coping mechanisms and wellness strategies, which aligns with TYRC's principles as well. Teachers can facilitate this by creating opportunities for students to share and practice these strategies in authentic settings and by

involving families in trauma-informed policies and practices through two-way communication channels like office hours, surveys, and community event participation.

Understanding the wellness strategies already in place in students' home lives is crucial. For many Native American communities, ceremonies play a pivotal role in maintaining overall well-being (Thomas, 2021). However, urban Indigenous students may have different experiences and may engage less frequently in these formative ceremonies. Educators need to adopt an inquiry-based approach, recognizing students and families as the experts in their own well-being. It's essential to resist one-size-fits-all approaches that misunderstand the origins of trauma and position students and families as damaged. Instead, educators must consider how to make trauma-informed teaching more culturally responsive to the students and communities they serve. By learning about the socioeconomic and historical backgrounds of their students and leveraging their cultural strengths and knowledge, schools can become spaces for healing from trauma (Thomas, 2021).

Keeping Trauma-Informed Education Universal and Inclusive

In her analysis of trauma-informed practices, author Venet underscores the limitations of relying on narrow metrics such as ACE scores and the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) (Gonzalez, 2023). She critiques these approaches for potentially overlooking students whose traumatic experiences, like racism or historical trauma, are not captured by standardized checklists. As such, categorizing students based on these frameworks can inadvertently stigmatize them and reinforce deficit-focused labels, such as "Tier 3 student" or "trauma kid" (Gonzalez). Such concerns resonate particularly strongly in the context of American Indian children, who often face complex and historical traumas that are not adequately reflected in mainstream trauma assessment tools. Historical

trauma, intergenerational effects of colonization, and ongoing systemic injustices impact many Native American communities, yet these experiences may not align neatly with conventional trauma frameworks.

Instead, Venet advocates instead for a universal approach where all students have access to support as needed, without the need for formal assessment or adherence to predefined norms (Gonzalez, 2023). Venet argues that empowering students to recognize and seek support for their own needs fosters a more inclusive and responsive educational environment, where all students feel valued and supported regardless of their specific experiences or backgrounds. This universal approach, she suggests, is essential for creating a truly trauma-informed educational system that meets the diverse needs of all students effectively.

Section 3 Conclusion

This section has explored the importance of adopting trauma-informed approaches to address historical and ongoing trauma and create safe learning environments. Engaging families and communities in the educational process is also essential, as strong partnerships significantly enhance educational experiences and outcomes. The need for effective support systems is underscored by research indicating that many Native American youth are at heightened risk of trauma-related issues due to exposure to violence and historical grief. Traditional systems intended to support these vulnerable youth often fall short, sometimes even re-traumatizing them. By adopting a trauma-informed systems approach, as advocated by the Tribal Youth Resource Center (TYRC) (2024), educators and support systems can address these challenges more effectively. This approach recognizes the complex impacts of trauma and integrates cultural wisdom, community input, and resilience-building practices to support healing and empowerment.

Section 3 Key Terms

Culturally Responsive Trauma-Informed Practice - An approach that incorporates the sociopolitical and historical contexts of the community, integrating cultural knowledge and traditions into trauma-informed practices.

Strengths-Based Approach - A perspective that values and builds on the existing strengths, knowledge, and experiences of students and families rather than focusing on deficits.

Trauma-Informed Systems (TIS) Approach - A framework that recognizes and responds to the effects of trauma, focusing on creating environments that support healing, resilience, and empowerment.

Universal Support Approach - Providing access to support for all students as needed, regardless of specific experiences or backgrounds, without relying solely on formal assessments or predefined norms.

Section 3 Reflection Questions

1. **Historical Trauma Awareness:** How familiar are you with the historical trauma experienced by Native American communities? In what ways can your understanding of this historical context influence your approach to supporting Native American students?

2. **Trauma-Informed Approach Implementation:** Reflect on how your school currently addresses trauma-informed practices. How effectively do these practices support Native American students specifically?

3. **Community and Family Engagement:** How does your school involve families and community members in supporting students? What additional

strategies could be implemented to better engage Native American families and communities?

4. **Addressing Re-Traumatization:** Consider the potential for re-traumatization in your school's current practices. What steps can you take to ensure that support systems are designed to minimize this risk for Native American students?

5. **Expanding Support Beyond Standard Metrics:** How does your school's approach to trauma-informed education go beyond traditional metrics like ACE scores and MTSS? What alternative methods or frameworks could be explored to better support Native American students?

Section 3 Activities

1. **Trauma-Informed Practices Audit:** Review your school's current trauma-informed practices. Identify gaps in addressing the needs of Native American students and propose actionable improvements.

2. **Classroom Environment Assessment:** Observe and assess your classroom environment to determine if it is supportive and safe for Native American students. Identify changes that could reduce the risk of re-traumatization.

3. **Community Resource Directory:** Compile a directory of local and online resources that support Native American students and families. Ensure it includes culturally relevant support services and organizations.

4. **Student Wellness Strategies Collection:** Gather and document cultural and community-specific wellness strategies from Native American students and their families. Develop classroom activities that incorporate these strategies.

5. **Cultural Competency Self-Assessment:** Find a cultural competency self-assessment from a reputable source. Complete the self-assessment, identify areas for growth and create a plan to address them.

Conclusion

"Meeting the Needs of American Indian School-Aged Children" has provided an in-depth exploration of the unique challenges and opportunities present in supporting Native American youth within the educational system. From understanding the social and emotional hurdles these students face, to implementing culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices, the course has highlighted the essential strategies for fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment. In Section 1, we established the importance of recognizing and addressing the specific needs of American Indian students. By appreciating their rich heritage and acknowledging the impact of historical trauma, educators can better support students in overcoming cultural disconnection and identity-related challenges.

Section 2 offered practical insights into best practices for creating culturally competent schools. By integrating traditional knowledge, promoting cultural diversity, and employing effective teaching strategies, educators can enhance their understanding and support of Native American students. The case study demonstrated how culturally responsive programs can be effectively implemented, providing valuable lessons for real-world application. Section 3 emphasized the significance of trauma-informed approaches, focusing on the need to create safe, supportive environments that acknowledge the historical and ongoing trauma faced by American Indian communities. By nurturing cultural pride and engaging families and communities, educators can build strong partnerships that enrich the educational experience for Native American students.

As the course concludes, educators are encouraged to apply the knowledge gained to develop and implement strategies that address the unique needs of American Indian students. The final classroom example provides an opportunity to synthesize and apply best practices, ensuring that all students have the support they need to thrive. By embracing these approaches, educators can contribute to a more equitable and culturally responsive educational system that honors and supports the diverse experiences of American Indian youth.

Classroom Example

Mr. Breve, a middle school teacher in a rural district with a significant population of Native American students, has been facing considerable challenges in his classroom. The school, located near a reservation, serves a diverse student body, many of whom are American Indian. Despite his dedication and enthusiasm, Mr. Breve has observed persistent issues such as low academic engagement, behavioral problems, and a lack of cultural connection among his Native American students.

Challenges

1. **Cultural Disconnection:** Many Native American students in Mr. Breve's class struggle with a sense of cultural disconnection. They often feel that their heritage is not represented or valued in the curriculum, leading to disengagement and a diminished sense of identity.

2. **Trauma and Behavioral Issues:** Several students exhibit signs of trauma-related distress, including difficulty with focus, frequent absences, and conflicts with peers. The historical trauma experienced by their families seems to be impacting their school performance and behavior.

3. **Lack of Family Engagement:** Mr. Breve has found it challenging to engage with the families of his Native American students. This lack of communication has made it difficult to address individual student needs and create a supportive network that bridges home and school.

Despite his unwavering dedication and enthusiasm, Mr. Breve finds himself navigating uncharted territory in addressing the unique needs of his Native American students. As a non-Native teacher, he feels a profound responsibility to make a meaningful impact but is unsure where to start. The challenges of cultural disconnection, trauma-related issues, and family engagement are complex and deeply rooted, and Mr. Breve recognizes the need for specialized knowledge and support to address them effectively.
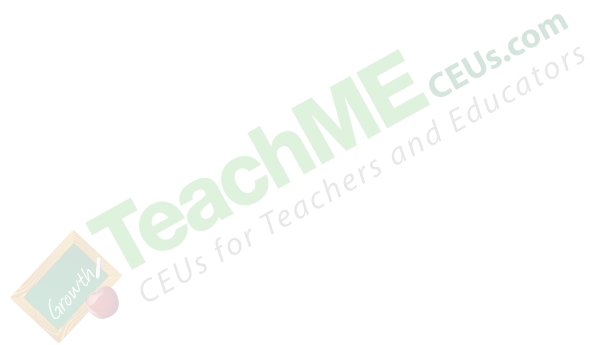
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