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## Public Education and Teacher Understanding of Dakota and Lakota Culture

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Public Education and Teacher Understanding of Dakota and Lakota Culture  
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## Abstract

This project was designed to collect and to share information in order to better prepare teachers of Native students. This study involved five in-depth, in-person interviews with Dakota and Lakota elders between 40 and 70 years old. Elders provided reflections on experiences of past generations, on their own educational experiences, on the preferred learning methods of Native students, and on their visions for teachers' practices and influences on Native children. Through grounded theory, data analysis was conducted to identify themes. Stories and comments from elders were organized around those themes. Future studies might include use of the videotaped interviews in MSU courses for future teachers and evaluating attitude shifts among the viewers.

## Introduction

This project was designed to collect and to share information in order to better prepare teachers of Native students. The project gave Native elders an opportunity to record their education experiences in their own words. This study involved five in-depth, in-person interviews with Dakota and Lakota elders between 40 and 70 years old. Elders provided reflections on experiences of past generations, on their own educational experiences, on the preferred learning methods of Native students, and on their visions for teachers' practices and influences on Native children. Data analysis was conducted to identify themes. Stories and comments from elders were organized around those themes.

## Project Goals

Goals of the project included:

To learn more about Native American culture.

To prepare better teachers of Native students.

To give Native elders an opportunity to record their education experiences in their own words.

## Research Questions

This study involved two research questions:

a. Why do Native students and families find it difficult to communicate with and to trust public school administrators and teachers?

b. What do teachers need to know about past events related to Native students and their continuing impact in order to improve the experience of Native students and families in public schools?

## Significance of the Project

Various researchers and reporters have documented the array of experiences that native students had in educational settings between 1879 and the 1930s (Child, 2000; Coleman, 1993; Reyhner, 1992; Spack, 2002; and Wallace-Adams, 1995). Many boarding schools, including the Carlisle Indian Industrial School (in Pennsylvania), were established and youngsters were forced off the reservations. In the 1930s, most boarding schools were closed.

Boarding schools were an important part of the American Indian experience. They still are a critical factor in why some American Indian parents find it difficult to communicate with public school system administrators and teachers – and even more difficult to trust them... In order to undo the boarding school legacy, it is important for every teacher with American Indian students in the classroom to have an awareness of past events and their continuing impact (*American Indian contributions to the world*, Retrieved November 3, 2009 from <http://www.kporterfield.com/aicttw/articles/boardingschool.html>).

Although a great deal of writing exists about the history of education of Native students, no recent study incorporated personal experiences of Dakota people in southern Minnesota. David Larsen, Director of American Indian Affairs at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and former chairman of the Lower Sioux Community, reported that movies and textbooks have not accurately presented the Dakota traditional beliefs and experiences with educational organizations (Larsen, 2010).

This project was intended to help correct the lack of knowledge among future classroom teachers so that they are prepared to be better teachers of Native students. The project gave Native elders an opportunity to record their education experiences in their own words.

This study used grounded theory that allows researchers to review qualitative data and to use inductive reasoning to support conclusions from that data (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2000). These ideas were then used to draw conclusions and to form the findings section in this paper.

### Research Design and Methodology

This study involved five in-depth, in-person interviews with Dakota and Lakota participants between 40 and 70 years old. The principle and student investigators located available respondents for this project based on convenience samples. Participants in this research included Native elders identified by professors and staff members at MSU, Mankato. Respondents were of Dakota or Lakota membership.

Respondent	Sex	Nation	Location
One	M	Lakota	Agency Village, South Dakota
Two	F	Dakota	Agency Village, South Dakota
Three	F	Dakota	Mankato, Minnesota
Four	M	Dakota	Mankato, Minnesota
Five	M	Dakota	Mankato, Minnesota

Interviews were conducted in-person. At least two of the three investigators were involved in each interview. The investigators asked questions about the respondents' personal experiences relating to education as a child and the education of children and grandchildren. Dakota participants provided reflections on experiences of past generations, on their own

educational experiences, on the preferred learning methods of Native students, and on their visions for teachers' practices and influences on Native children.

First, each interview was transcribed. Then it went through a special process of categorizing the data. This process is called "coding," whereby "[r]esearchers create a conceptual interpretation of the data, impose an order on it, explicate the relationships between categories, and organize those relationships to communicate their ideas to audiences" (Charmaz, 1990). After coding a document one or more times, it was then analyzed further through the use of memos. Memos were used for "...clarifying basic codes and revisiting and fine-tuning methodological issues and procedures" in this research", as well as to layout specific ideas using evidence from the interviews to draw conclusions about what was being said (Loftland and others, 2006). By looking at and committing these "ideas, hunches, questions, and elaborated categories [I] define[d] what is implicit and what is explicit in the data," so that important aspects could be cut out from the less important (Charmaz, 1990).

Table 2: Interview Questions
Are you age 18 years or older?
What is your name in English and in Dakota/Lakota?
What is your tribal membership?
Who raised you (parents, grandparents, aunts/uncles, boarding school)?
Where did you go to school? What was your experience of school?
How did you raise your own children? Did you include any Native traditions and culture?
What traditions in general do you see being passed on to Native children?
Who guides the young children today? (relatives, daycare in tribal communities)
How did your teachers respond to Native children? (inclusion, racism, discrimination, ignorance)
How do teachers today seem to respond to Native children? (inclusion, racism, discrimination, ignorance)
How do families interact with infants and toddlers? Are there Native traditions about welcoming infants into the family? About caring for infants and toddlers?
What do you want teachers these days to know about Dakota and Lakota children and families?

## Results



Elders provided reflections on experiences of past generations, on their own educational experiences, on the preferred learning methods of Native students, and on their visions for teachers' practices and influences on Native children. Data analysis was conducted to identify themes: racism, teaching values, incomplete histories, and language recovery. Stories and comments from elders were organized around those themes.

### Past Generations

### Personal Educational Experiences

All five of the interviewees provided examples of negative educational experiences that they attributed to being Dakota. For example, Gwen told about her childhood experiences when teachers would not correct or reprimand students who called her bad names and denigrated her skin color and hair color.

### Preferred Learning Methods

### Visions for Practice

One of the elders presented a set of seven principles for living true to the Dakota culture. These seven principles summarize the themes that were identified in the project interviews. They also provide some ideas about behaviors and values that teachers might incorporate into their classroom values.

#### 1. Woinina (silence)

2. Wowacinya (knowledge)
3. Wowahoda (respect)
4. Wowakiya (helpful)
5. Wowansida (compassion)
6. Wobhediciya (positive)
7. Wowaditika (bravery)

### Conclusion

This study involved five in-depth, in-person interviews with Dakota and Lakota elders between 40 and 70 years old. Elders provided reflections on experiences of past generations, on their own educational experiences, on the preferred learning methods of Native students, and on their visions for teachers' practices and influences on Native children. Data analysis was conducted to identify themes. Future studies might include use of the videotaped interviews in MSU courses for future teachers and evaluating attitude shifts among the viewers.

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