Who says I don't want to come to school? School policies disenfranchise American Indian youth's educational vision

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> In 1948, all traditional Hopi spiritual leaders met and spoke of things I felt strongly were of great importance to all people. They selected four interpreters to carry their message of which I am the only one still living today.
>   Thomas Banyacya, Hopi tribal elder from Kykotsmovi, Arizona (1992)

Thomas Banyacya embodied a mission of affirming and expanding upon the wellbeing of all living beings and nature. When he gave a keynote address at a United Nations conference in 1992, he warned us about the consequences of living out of balance with nature and spirit. At the time he explained that he was the last of the traditional Hopi interpreters assigned to carry the message forward. He persevered in his mission to transform people's lives by sharing his message until his passing in 1999.

As we reflect on the life efforts of those like Banyacya ten years into the new century, we continue to question whether the up and coming generation of American Indians are being well prepared by educational institutions to embrace their own future. Banyacya's life experiences are one of many that describe a historical pattern of enduring racism and assimilationist practices common amongst indigenous peoples including American Indians. For example, he was forced to change his name during the period in which the Bureau of Indian Affairs enforced name westernization; he attended a college that despite being created for American Indians, did not include Native American cultural studies; and he was imprisoned when resisting registering for the draft (McCloud, 1998). By publicly vocalizing and actively contesting these government issued requirements, he demonstrated how he resisted assimilation movements intended to erase identity and culture.

The purpose of this article is to focus on the importance of affirming youth's epistemologies and axiologies in schools. Doing so will foster a critical social and political consciousness among youth that will transcend in transformative resistance behaviours. In so doing, it is anticipated that youth will develop and engage in the complex cultural dynamics of society as talented, motivated, and critically engaged adults. We problematize how school policies created to retain students and establish order in school settings are in effect serving to disengage students from the learning process. Therefore, in this article, we aim to focus on the importance of contextualizing school policies by illuminating how one school rule, In-School-Suspension (ISS) disengages students from the learning process.

Research reports 61.8 percent of all American Indian youth graduated from U.S.A's high schools in the 2005-06 academic year, evidencing how 39.2 percent do not complete a high school education (United States Department of Education, 2009). These alarming statistics illuminate the urgency of this paper.

At one of the high school sites observed (approximately 200 students), the ISS rule was established to deter tardiness and absenteeism from the school. If students arrived after the second bell teachers were required to lock the classroom door. Students were conscious of this rule and rarely attempted to negotiate entrance to their classroom. Rather, students went directly to the cafeteria, which is where the ISS room was housed. The average number of students in ISS oftentimes exceeded the average number of students in academic classrooms. For example, there were several days where the number of ISS students was close to thirty students, which was approximately 15 percent of the student body.

Data for this article is part of a larger corpus of data that was collected over the course of a year at a public high school that serves a majority of American Indian students in the Southwestern part of the U.S.A. Using a Tribal critical Race (TribalCrit) lens, this study employs qualitative narratives from semi-structured interviews and focus groups. We see these students' experiences in schools in the U.S.A. as informing the experiences of native students in other areas as they prepare to complete secondary school.

Rationale for the Examination of Transformative Resistance among American Indian Youth

One of the accomplishments tribal elders like Banyacya left as a legacy to new generations included resistance to disengaged attitudes toward moral and spiritual principles. He cautioned

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One of the accomplishments tribal elders like Banyacya left as a legacy to new generations included resistance to disengaged attitudes toward moral and spiritual principles. He cautioned

that in general, "humans turned away from moral and spiritual principles," and "they misused their spiritual powers for selfish purposes" (Banyacya, 1992, para. 7). Indeed, in the U.S.A., there is a concern that school age children, and most specifically, high school age youth are becoming increasingly disengaged (Mc Dowell, 2000). McDowell perceives that "kids today are disconnected from most adults and lack a sense of personal identity and purpose" (p. 8). While we believe there is a disconnection between adults and youth, we contend that youth do have a sense of personal identity and purpose. In fact, we believe adult – youth relationships should be reciprocal. Of concern is how adults treat youth as children by not granting youth agency and discounting their identities and way of engaging in the world.

While summarizing the literature on improving the academic performance among American Indian students, Demmert (2001) noted successful examples related to internal and external influences. Internal influences relate to developing a strong sense of identity, self and motivation. External influences contributing to improving the academic support for American Indians included family support, early intervention, and mentors or role models. He concluded that "if parents and educators have an interest in promoting the development of smart, healthy, well adjusted children, we must provide a safe, challenging, and enriched environment early in the life of a child" (p. 42). However, he also noticed that the effect of the relationship between teachers and students in the research literature was scattered and inconclusive. This fact is especially troubling, particularly when students spend most of their day with teachers in schools.

In fact, scholars who study self-determination in students are concerned. Twenge, Zhang, and Im (2004), for example, were alarmed that a lack of internal and external locus of control is evident in teenagers entering college; they defined these students as part of a "generation whatever" (2004). These scholars concluded that "30 percent more young Americans now believe their lives are controlled by outside forces rather than by their own achievements" (p. 315), compared to the beliefs of young people in the 1960s and 1970s. Children as young as 9 years old confirmed feeling that their lives are controlled by outside forces. Moreover, the scholars identified the alienation model as affecting these students: individualism, self-serving biases and cynicism. In essence, dominant structural forces impede upon the individual's personal actions and contribute to the alienation children are feeling today which manifests in low school achievement, depression and decreased self-control (Twenge et al, 2004).

We strongly relate to students that feel disengaged in schools due to the current sociopolitical climate; however, we contend that school structures contribute to such disengagement. When schools are unresponsive to the students' needs, reinforce standardized, one-size-fits-all policies, it becomes very challenging for students to maintain their enthusiasm and engagement in the classroom. Policies and regulations that are not sensitive to the students' needs push them to lose hope and focus on their own academic formation. Previous scholars have demonstrated how standardized curriculum and pedagogies are not serving the needs of students (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002) especially since very little flexibility is permitted with these policies.

We center our concern with the increasing disengagement of American Indian youth in school settings. American Indian children and youth who reside on reservations experience high degrees of adaptation in order to live in a society that continues to advocate for individualism and assert assimiliationist policies that discount indigenous epistemologies. Individualism was identified as a problem in the early 18th century, with Dewey explaining that individualism only emerges through the destruction of the community that raised these same individuals, or "independent self-identity is possible only through resistance of the very social system which made possible the survival of the individual in the first place" (Dewey as in Karler, 1992, p. 288).

By placing the burden of responsibility on the student, schools are reinforcing a dominant epistemology that does not affirm and foster student's identity, engage the student in the learning process as an active contributing individual, and perpetuate an educational system that is authoritarian in nature. This pushes students to believe that schools are academic communities that will not help them in their growth and preparation for the future. Similarly to pedagogical adaptations, there is a need to examine school structures and policies that are not conducive to learning. In order to understand the needs of Indigenous communities and youth, we examined the framework of tribal critical race theory and theories of transformative resistance.

Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit)

TribalCrit provides a framework to understand the epistemologies and values of Indigenous communities and in particular American Indian youth. TribalCrit emerges out of Critical Race

theory in Education (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker, Deyhle, Villenas & Nebeker, 1998; Solórzano, 1997; Yosso, 2005).

There are nine elements that guide TribalCrit (see Brayboy, 2005). The overarching tenant emphasizes that notions of colonization and racism are endemic to society (Brayboy, 2005). Of the nine tenants, three tenants are central to this paper. The first advocates how "concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429). A second tenet that contributes equally to our analysis is how "government policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429). The third and final tenant states, "Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups" (Brayboy, 2005 p. 429).

TribalCrit provides an analytic framework that validates Indigenous epistemologies in school learning. Employing a TribalCrit framework problematizes frameworks that assert students of color and in this case American Indian youth enter schools with cultural deficiencies. Scholars have often emphasized how the academic gap and academic deficiencies of American Indian youth is a result of the students and/or families' lack of 'cultural' knowledge and skills. Such analysis places a higher value on the cultural knowledge of the school. When the students cultural knowledge is not in sync with the schools knowledge it is considered deficient. By not validating the knowledge Indigenous youth bring to school settings; schools are simultaneously rejecting their lived experiences.

Transformative Resistance

American Indians who succeeded in secondary schools, according to Bergstrom, Cleary, and Peacock (2003), were those who demonstrated resilience. The authors defined resilience as "a quality that enables children and adults not to give up despite the failures that school and society lay out for them" (p. 64). Resilience, according to the authors, is demonstrated by those who bounce back despite numerous setbacks and difficulties. We expand the authors' observation on resilience arguing that in order to develop resilience individuals need to *resist*, and transform these setbacks into stepping-stones to emerge stronger.

Transformative resistance, according to scholars like Solórzano and Bernal (2001), is "motivated by a desire to create more just and equitable environments" (p. 309). With this finding, Solórzano and Bernal present a different form of resistance that social scientists largely have ignored. Most of the literature on school resistance has focused on working-class males and self-defeating resistance such as that found in the seminal work of Willis (1977) and MacLeod (1987). However, self-defeating resistance does not change oppressive conditions; instead, it perpetuates oppressive structures.

To break away from oppressive structures, García and Guerra (2004) suggested that we closely examine the deficit-thinking that permeates U.S.A's society. García and Guerra call our attention to schools and educators that may mirror such deficit-thinking. They argued that this reality necessitates people who challenge the individual race, gender, and class prejudices expressed by educators, as well as critically examining "systemic factors that perpetuate deficit thinking and reproduce educational inequities for students from non-dominant sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds" (p. 55). Patricia Quijada, the first author of this article, journaled her visit with a group of American Indian youth in one of the schools. Her example shows the importance of engagement and transformative resistance demonstrated by students as they persist through school—despite oppressive structures and policies:

> As I begin my ten-minute commute to the small rural public high school I admire the natural beauty from the earth and embrace the morning sun, which is beaming onto the beautiful red rock. The red rocks are beautifully visible and empower me as I travel to the school site located in the southwestern part of the United States. My admiration and respect for our mother earth is fueled by a consciousness that that I am on sacred native land. I recognize that my Cupeño and Mexican ancestry position me as a visitor on this land, an acknowledgement I consciously make on a daily basis.

> As I drive to the small rural high school, whose campus enrollment never exceeds 200 students, my thoughts center on the youth I am about to meet. Have our paths crossed before this meeting? The probability of knowing them is high since I have been in the community for several years. Perhaps I have met many of their parents while attending informal and formal community gatherings. Of interest to me is how the youth will speak about their experiences in school? How will their stories and vision for their future align with how the media positions youth? Will their narratives perpetuate or disrupt the dominant discourse that currently positions youth as undergoing an identity crisis, troubled, and oftentimes-lacking vision?

These questions spin in her head especially when acknowledging the alarming dropout statistics among American Indians in this school. Once there, she meets with Katrina, Shauna, William, and Joshua, 17 year olds who are enrolled in the 11th grade. Katrina says:

> Some of the rules just don't make any sense. I get really upset when I think of some the school rules. They just don't make any sense. Like the In-School-Suspension rule…You see before school, I have to get my brother ready for school and I have to take him to school. Since my brother sometimes runs late I am late too. I am always late for algebra. When I get to school I go straight to the In- School Suspension room which is our cafeteria. I don't bother to explain why I am late and how I have to get my brother ready for school because I tried once and they didn't want to hear what I had to say.

Katrina shares her frustration with the In-School-Suspension-policy. Central to Katrina's concerns is how her responsibility to school and family are equally important priorities in her life. Getting her younger siblings ready for school is a responsibility Katrina and many other youth share. In her case, her parents work off the reservation and have to leave early in the morning to make it to work by 8:00am. In this instance, it would be easy for Katrina to miss her first class period, yet her dedication and responsibility to her education pushes her to arrive during first period, even if she is late. Later in the focus group she shared how she often hopes her teacher will allow her into class despite her being late.

Another student shares her perspective on the In-School-Suspension Room. William shares the following:

> Yeah I just don't understand why we have this rule…I mean it doesn't make sense. In the morning many of us are late because we have a number of things that come up and we can't get here in time. We have our own responsibilities at home that we can't get here on time. I don't even explain anymore because our teachers don't seem to care. They just think we are lazy and don't realize we have responsibilities that we have to get done before we get to school …

The school policy of having students report to the In-School-Suspension room if tardy for class mirrors a policy often found in urban schools. How do such policies impact students in our classrooms especially rural communities? Katrina and William illuminate how youth are responsible and resist school policies that are trying to 'push' them out of school by continuously coming to school despite arriving late. In fact, Katrina and William both demonstrate a dedication to their education and the vision they have for their future by

persisting through school and seeking to graduate from high school. In fact, Katrina and William's narrative reveals the realities of students who are grappling with two equally compelling responsibilities--school and family. For Katrina and William familial responsibilities are central to their lives. Katrina and William's dedication to ensuring their younger siblings are dressed, fed, and arrive on time to school indicates their understanding of responsibilities and their role in the family.

Embedded within the narratives of these youth and the others who participated in the project is a desire for school teachers and other adults to understand and validate them. In fact, repeatedly, students illuminated how teachers and adults at the school site did not validate them. Shauna shares the following:

> I wish our teachers would understand more about what it is like to be teenager nowadays. I feel like if they [teachers] did, they would understand that we have problems, we have feelings, we have ideas and we have dreams. Sometimes I feel as if we are treated as kids but we have real problems, real issues…I sometimes wished they would listen to me and I could talk to them and get their advice.

Shauna problematizes how adults in her school setting position her as a teenager who is emotionless and not impacted by the "adult-like" challenges and responsibilities she grapples with and negotiates on a daily basis. Despite these policies Shauna and the others shared a concerted concern over how to deal with these policies. Joshua shared the following:

> For me, sometimes I have to remind myself that I want to graduate from high school and go on to college. I don't want to be a burger flipper. So I still come to school. I get frustrated with these school rules because I feel like sometimes my teachers don't want me here, but I still come to school.

Joshua demonstrates how his vision of his future pushes him to persist through school despite how he is treated by his teachers. Later in the interview Joshua shares how his teachers make him sit in ISS and work through his math problems without their assistance. "It just doesn't make sense why I can't sit in math class and learn from my teacher."

Based on these narratives we advocate that teachers and policy makers must recognize the potential youth bring to the school by affirming their identities and epistemologies and believing they have the agency to engage in self-defeating resistance such as *not* dropping out

of school. By persisting through school, these youth are demonstrating their awareness of how schooling will bring them better career opportunities.

Conclusions: Validating the Vision of American Indian Youth

Transformative resistance is shown by the students' ability to resist, transforming school setbacks into stepping-stones to emerge stronger. In this short article we sought to bring to light the important issue of strengthening the students' balance between schooling and life, their nature and spirit. At the local level or school level, the students' narratives illuminate how the establishment of school policies must be re-examined and problematized in the specific context. At this school site, the In-School-Suspension was working against responsible and family-oriented students. In fact, Katrina illuminates how youth are responsible and resist school policies that are trying to 'push' them out of school rather than retaining them in school. These students demonstrated that they and their families have important contributions to make.

At this school site it was common for the In-School-Suspension room to have a higher student-teacher ratio than the "regular" classrooms illuminating that the policy needed to be re-examined, especially for responsible and committed students. In this school this policy may need to be adapted and modified given the number of family responsibilities youth grapple with prior to school.

In fact, embracing indigenous cultural ways of being and knowing, especially with respectful regards to American Indian life, includes recognizing youth and elders contributions. Preparing to be part of society means building upon the knowledge from a cultural past and investing in the cultural future (Benham & Mann, 2003). Depriving these cultural epistemologies from students steals from tribal cultural property (Strom, 2008). Hence, we advocate that establishing a collaborative governance and leadership between the school and community would be an important step for the school to make, including the consideration of the needs of students as part of leadership decisions. Doing so, schools would validate the students' educational visions, demonstrate respect for the students' respective families, and prepare students to become future leaders in their communities.

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