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A Study of State Social Studies Standards for American Indian Education

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Abstract

This study surveyed social studies standards from fourteen US states seeking to answer: a) what social studies knowledge about American Indians is deemed essential by those states mandating the development of American Indian Education curricula for all public K-12 students? and b) at what grade levels is this social studies content knowledge mandated in public K-12 schools? Document analysis, open-coding, and constant comparison revealed that the knowledge states' standards require can be organized into six themes: identification/classification of tribes, distinct tribal cultures, contributions to mainstream U.S. culture, tribal government, connection to environment, and economics/occupations. The findings also revealed that the majority of standards relating to American Indians are directed to elementary grade levels. Standards in only two states, Maine and Montana, cover a breadth of curricular content and require that content coverage continue K-12.

A Study of State Social Studies Standards for American Indian Education

She doesn't look like an Indian—this is a common response when I (the author) tell new acquaintances that my wife is a citizen of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians. Such a statement is, of course, untrue. My wife “looks” exactly like an Indian; she *is* an Indian, which is a complex social, political, cultural, and ethnic identity (Haynes Writer, 2001; Markstrom, 2011). What statements like this one really mean is that my wife does not conform to the ethnic phenotype that forms the stereotypical image of American Indians held by most non-Indigenous U.S. citizens (Davies & Iverson, 1995; Fleming, 2006; Haynes Writer, 2001; Pewewardy, 2000).

Lacking knowledge about and experiences with the widely differing, tribally-specific cultures and experiences of American Indian communities, most U.S. citizens draw on stereotypes widely circulating in the mainstream imagination, to significant social and educational effect (Carjuzaa & Hunts, 2013; Mihesuah, 1996; Reese, 1996). This is a major reason that schools must ensure that curricula include diverse representations of American Indian experiences (Anderson, 2012; Haynes Writer & Chávez, 2002; Haynes Writer, 2001; Lee, 2011; Moore & Hirschfelder, 1999). Oftentimes, however, schools have been part of the problem, serving as vehicles of assimilation and deculturalization (Executive Office of the President, 2014; Haynes Writer, 2001; Loring, 2009; Pewewardy, 2000; Spring, 2009). This study critically examines state social studies standards with the goals of better understanding a) what social studies knowledge about living American Indians is deemed essential by those states mandating the development of American Indian Education curricula for all K-12 students; and b) at what grade levels is this social studies content knowledge mandated.

But first I provided a clarification of terminology. No unified consensus exists as to the proper term to refer to the totality and multiplicity of Indigenous inhabitants of what is presently identified as the United States (Haynes Writer, 2001; Pewewardy, 2000). All of the commonly used terms are in one way or another limited (Pewewardy, 1998). Thus whenever possible, tribal designations such as *Sault Ste. Marie Chippewa* rather than broader terms like *American Indian* are preferable (Fleming, 2006; Haynes Writer & Chávez, 2002; Haynes Writer, 2001; Hirschfelder, 1999; Pewewardy, 2000). Sometimes, however, a broader term is necessary when the issue being discussed deals with a population larger than a single tribe. Within this article, I use the terms *American Indian* and *Indian* for this purpose. Though I acknowledge the colonial origin of these terms, this article is, at root, an analysis of educational policy in the form of content standards, and *American Indian* and *Indian* are the codified legal terms used to refer to the Indigenous peoples of the United States (Executive Office of the President, 2014; Indians, 2011; Johnson & Eck, 1995; Pewewardy, 2003) . Despite the imperfect nature of this choice (the term *American Indians* actually refers to hundreds of politically and culturally distinct groups), I acknowledge and ask that readers hold this term in tension as both capturing a collective experience as shaped by Settler/Colonial policies, while also risking the homogenization of the experiences of a multitude of distinct tribes (Davies & Iverson, 1995; Haynes Writer, 2001).

A brief understanding of the complexity of an “American Indian” identity is necessary if this analysis is to have utility. Haynes Writer (2001) noted that while “most non-Indians define Indians on the basis of individual biological or genetic makeup...and physical attributes...most Indian people define themselves on the basis of relationship to their specific tribal group through what...family one belongs to...and where one is from” (p. 44). Tribes themselves, as sovereign entities, determine their membership requirements, and, as such, those requirements differ

widely (Mihesuah, 1996). This means that, as with any other identity, American Indian identity is a highly contested and individualized concept. No single Indian identity exists (Davies & Iverson, 1995; Haynes Writer, 2001; Markstrom, 2011)

Review of Literature

Debunking stereotypes is an essential reason to include accurate representations of living American Indians in state social studies standards. Much of what people think they know about American Indians is drawn from a wide variety of cultural stereotypes (Davies & Iverson, 1995; Fleming, 2006; Ganje, 2011; Johnson & Eck, 1995; Lee, 2011; Pewewardy, 1998; Reese, 1996). Given that many of these stereotypes are negative, some researchers link general acceptance of American Indian stereotypes to a wide variety of social difficulties for American Indian individuals (Johnson & Eck, 1995; Lee, 2011; Mihesuah, 1996; Pewewardy, 1998).

Beyond the debunking of stereotypes, important social and political reasons exist to ensure inclusion of “accurate” (meaning *multi-faceted, non-stereotypical, and varied*) representations of American Indian life. For centuries, educational policies regarding American Indians focused upon assimilation (Coleman, 2007; Executive Office of the President, 2014; Fischbacher, 1967; Fletcher, 2008; Hale, 2002; Haynes Writer, 2001; Pewewardy, 2003). From missionary efforts to federal boarding schools, educational institutions tried to “Kill the Indian...and save the man” (Adams, 1988; Loring, 2009; Pratt, 1892/1973; Roppolo & Crow, 2007). Fortunately, official policies in the last quarter of the 20th century shifted from such destruction to an official emphasis on cultural appreciation and preservation (Executive Office of the President, 2014; Hale, 2002). However, some critics argue that failure to update curricular documents to include a multitude of representations of American Indians (and in a sense, simply building on and repeating the same old representations) result in a continuation of the ideologies

that undergirded those same policies of assimilation and colonization (Garcia & Shirley, 2012; Grande, 2004; Haynes Writer, 2008; Loring, 2009; Stanton, 2014). If the only Indians that students encounter in their schooling are historical Indians, the implication is that assimilation was accomplished, and that distinct cultural and political tribal communities no longer exist (Davies & Iverson, 1995; Haynes Writer, 2001; Reese, 1996). The repercussions of sending such a message are significant (Garcia & Shirley, 2012; Lee, 2011; Loring, 2009).

Though inclusion of varied representations about American Indian plurality is important for all students, it is particularly important American Indian students. A significant achievement gap exists between American Indian and other students. A number of scholars argue that a major contributor to this achievement gap is the stereotype threat experienced by American Indian students (Fryberg et al., 2010; Mousseau, 2012; Okagaki, Helling, & Bingham, 2009). *Stereotype threat* refers to the “social-psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation...for which a negative stereotype about one’s group applies. This predicament threatens one with being negatively stereotyped, with being judged and treated stereotypically, or with the prospect of conforming to the stereotype” (Steele, 1997, p. 614). The presence of stereotype threat has been shown to decrease academic achievement in a variety of marginalized groups (Shapiro & Williams, 2011; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997).

One potential strategy to minimize stereotype threat for American Indian students, and by extension to help close the achievement gap, is to ensure adequate and diverse representations of American Indian cultures within mandatory social studies standards (Meyer, 2011). According to Spring (2009), unless minority students are able to see themselves represented within the curricula, those schools will serve as deculturalizing forces, which can negatively impact those students’ achievement.. Accordingly, various scholars have recommended that schools develop

curricular materials positively and accurately representing cultural minorities, including American Indians (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Haynes Writer & Chávez, 2002; Pewewardy, 2003; Philips, 1983).

Despite changes in many curricular areas, representations of American Indians have remained largely stagnant; that is Indigenous content and Indigenous knowledge continue to be left out of the curriculum or framed as deficient or lesser (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002). As Putnam and Putnam (2011) noted, “In the all too recent past, we have found that the public school’s curriculum, books, materials, and even the environment are devoid of indigenous content and worldview -- the people and culture are invisible” (p. 5). Meyer (2011) found that “Biased and inaccurate information about Native Americans continue in children’s resources and remain in many of today’s curriculum centers” (p. 23). Journell (2009) surveyed social studies standards in nine states requiring high stakes assessments, finding that “nearly all of the states cease their coverage of American Indians after the forced relocation in the 1830s, creating an incomplete narrative” (p. 18). The little existing coverage of American Indians depicts them primarily as powerless victims.

Hawkins (2005) found similar results in his survey of representations of American Indians in seven popular US History textbooks. He noted that these textbooks followed two approaches in representing American Indians, what he called the “dead and buried,” and the “tourist” approaches. In the former, American Indians are portrayed as existing only in the past. For example, he noted that last mention of American Indians in the majority of textbooks involves the 1972 AIM movement. In the latter approach, American Indians are treated as *others* outside of mainstream society. As an example, he observed that, “Teachers still design lesson plans that have students ‘dress like an Indian’ and visit reservations on field trips. They appear to

ignore the complex culture of Native Americans, and refrain from teaching students about current issues and experiences” (p. 53). Additionally, even where older stereotypes were broken down, in many instances they were replaced with equally simplistic portrayals of American Indian life, for instance as solely concerned with gaming (Hawkins, 2002, 2005). Hawkins also noted that all of the textbooks limit their discussion of modern American Indian culture to reservation life, failing to note that approximately 65% of today’s Indians do not live on reservations (Hawkins, 2005).

Methodology

The procedures for this study were primarily those of document analysis as described by Bowen (2009). Source selection began with the list of 26 states identified by McCoy’s (2005) *Compilation of State Indian Education Laws* as having laws establishing Indian Education curricula or programs: Alaska , Arizona , California , Colorado , Connecticut , Hawaii , Idaho , Kentucky , Maine , Minnesota , Missouri , Montana , Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota , Ohio, Oklahoma , Oregon , South Dakota, Tennessee, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming (McCoy, 2005). Then the Westlaw database was consulted to discover if additional states had passed laws establishing Indian Education curricula since publication of McCoy’s (2005) report. Though no additional states have passed such laws, Washington and South Dakota did expand their Indian Education requirements (Curricula-, 2005, Curriculum and coursework in South Dakota American Indian history and culture, 2007; OSPI Indian Education Office, 2010).

Close reading of the laws in these states eliminated 11 from my inquiry. Laws in Alaska, Idaho, Missouri, New Mexico, Nevada, and New York only apply to American Indian students, not to all K-12 students (McCoy, 2005). Laws in Kentucky, Minnesota, North Carolina, and

Tennessee only require teaching of American Indian issues on specific heritage days or months, an approach generally decried as ineffective (Haynes Writer, 2008). Laws in Wyoming simply allow for the development of American Indian language curricula, but do not mandate such curricula or deal with issues beyond language (McCoy, 2005). Three states—Colorado, North Dakota, and Nebraska—do not specify any concrete information that students must learn about *living* American Indians (Colorado Department of Education, 2009; Nebraska State Board of Education, 2012; Sanstead, 2007).

I next completed close readings of the state social studies standards of the remaining 14 states, noting any content knowledge item relating to living American Indians. Using the techniques of open coding and constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994), I established emergent themes from those documents.

Findings

The following themes emerged from the contemporary knowledge required by the 12 remaining states' social studies standards.

1) Identification/classification of tribes. Knowledge items in this theme ask students to identify or classify Indian tribes. Arizona requires second graders to “recognize current Native American tribes in the United States (Diethelm et al., 2005, p. 25); Montana requires fourth graders to “identify characteristics of American Indian tribes and other cultural groups in Montana” (Juneau, 2010, p. 7); Oregon requires fourth graders to be able to “identify the 9 federally recognized Oregon tribes and their aboriginal boundaries” (OR Department of Education, 2011, p. 6); and South Dakota requires fourth graders to “Identify the locations of the nine major reservations in South Dakota” (South Dakota Department of Education, 2007, p. 29).

2) Knowledge of distinct tribal cultures. The most common knowledge item required by states involves students understanding elements of distinct tribal cultures. An example of this is Connecticut's standard for first graders requiring students to "Examine Native American culture through books and art" (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2011, p. 14). Another example, for twelfth graders in WI, mandates that students "analyze the history, culture, tribal sovereignty, and current status of the American Indian tribes and bands in Wisconsin" (Evers, 2013). Maine, Montana, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, and Washington also include standards that fall under this theme (Maine Department of Education, 2007; Juneau, 2010; Ohio Department of Education, 2012; Barresi, 2013; Oregon Department of Education, 2011; South Dakota Department of Education, 2007; Bergeson, 2009).

3) Contributions to mainstream US culture. Along with requiring students to understand elements of distinct American Indian cultures, a handful of states also mandate that schools teach about the contributions of Indians to mainstream US culture. Social studies standards from California, Maine, Ohio and Oklahoma contain elements of this theme (Maine Department of Education, 2007; Barresi, 2013).

4) Tribal governments/sovereignty. Another commonly included theme involves knowledge relating to tribal governments and sovereignty. Upon graduation from high school, Montana requires students to be able to "Analyze and illustrate the major issues concerning history, culture, tribal sovereignty, and current status of the American Indian tribes" (Juneau, 2010, p. 5). Likewise, Oklahoma requires fourth graders be able to "Describe the purpose of local, state, tribal, and national governments in meeting the needs of American citizens" (Barresi, 2013, p. 32). Washington has perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of tribal sovereignty, having developed an interactive curriculum guide for integrating instruction in sovereignty

across a variety of subject areas and throughout elementary, middle, and high school (OSPI Indian Education Office, 2010). California, Maine, Oregon, South Dakota, and Wisconsin also require students to understand content related to this theme (Larsen & Eastin, 2009; Maine Department of Education, 2007; Oregon Department of Education, 2011; South Dakota Department of Education, 2007; Evers, 2013).

5) Connections to environment. This theme represents the common stereotype of American Indians as environmental stewards (Rosser, 2010). Though this is a positive stereotype, it can be damaging nonetheless, and so, as with all essentializations, it should be avoided (Mihe-suah, 1996; Moore & Hirschfelder, 1999; Reese, 1996). Unfortunately, those states that address this topic within their standards do not provide sophisticated guidance. Hawaii requires fifth graders to “Compare the views of Native Americans and Europeans regarding the relationship between humans and the land” (Office of Curriculum Instruction and Student Support, 2005, p. 60), and Connecticut requires that fourth graders be able to “Explain the relationship between the environment and Native Americans’ way of life in Connecticut” (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2011, p. 27). Social studies standards from ARIZONA, Maine, Montana, South Dakota, and Washington also fit into this theme (Diethelm et al., 2005; Maine Department of Education, 2007; Juneau, 2010; South Dakota Department of Education, 2007; Bergeson, 2009).

6) Economics/occupations. The last theme involves knowledge items relating to economics and occupations. Along with the more positive image of American Indians as environmental stewards, a stereotype present is of American Indians as often unemployed and living on government subsidies (Hawkins, 2005; Johnson & Eck, 1995). Unfortunately, however, only four states specifically address this issue within their state social studies standards. Maine

requires that graduating students be able to “understand economic aspects of unity and diversity in Maine, the United States, and the world, including Maine Native American communities” (Maine Department of Education, 2007, p. 12). Oklahoma’s and Montana’s social studies standards also include knowledge items relating to this theme, focusing on Indian gaming (Juneau, 2010; Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2013). Washington’s state standards offer a sophisticated perspective on this theme, mandating discussions of tribal agriculture, investment, commercial fishing, and gaming (Bergeson, 2009).

Grade Level Distribution

In a few states, distribution of knowledge items follows the same pattern that Brophy (1999) found in his research—American Indians are represented through upper elementary, then they disappear until high school history classes. For example, in South Dakota upper elementary schools, students are required to identify the tribes of South Dakota, understand their distinct cultural features, and “Identify water issues, farming and ranching issues, and Native American and non-Native American relationships” (South Dakota Department of Education, 2007, 4.US.1.2). They then do not need to learn anything about living Indians until their high school government course, where they learn about tribal governments and military volunteerism among American Indians (South Dakota Department of Education, 2007, 9-12.C.1.3, 9-12.C.1.5). In Arizona, living American Indians are part of second and eighth grades, and in California, Connecticut, Hawaii, and Ohio, living American Indians disappear from the standards after upper elementary, and never reappear. Only four states—Maine, Montana, Washington, and Wisconsin—require knowledge items relating to living American Indians throughout elementary, middle, and high school.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Though this study provides a systematic overview of depictions of American Indians within the social studies standards of states identified as having laws requiring Indian education curricula, it remains a preliminary overview of representations of American Indians within K-12 schools. Certainly many, if not most, states which have not passed specific laws requiring the teaching of American Indian curricula likely do still teach information about American Indians. What is actually taught to students depends not just upon educational policy in the form of content standards, but also upon the state mandated assessments of those standards, the curriculum guides and resources developed at the state and local levels, and the personal knowledge and competency of classroom teachers. While standards have significant influence upon curricula, they are not the only influences; as such, future researchers may consider analyses of district, school, and classroom curricula in order to develop a broader understanding of what K-12 students are learning about living American Indians. State mandated social studies assessments could also be analyzed to reveal if schools are being held accountable for even the limited knowledge of American Indian cultural diversity that is currently included in state social studies standards. Lastly, researchers may consider surveying tribal leaders, elders, and community members to determine what kinds of knowledge they believe students should know about American Indian cultures and compare those recommendations to what is currently mandated.

Conclusion

Since Brophy's (1999) study, much has changed in the realm of educational curricula. The increased push for educational accountability based upon high stakes testing and the rise in importance of state educational content standards have reshaped the US educational landscape (Journell, 2009). The Common Core state standards have placed increased emphasis on "critical

reading and historical thinking” using primary documents, but this has not translated into broader inclusion of American Indian perspectives within textbooks or curriculum (Stanton, 2014, p. 664). As this study shows, American Indian cultural plurality is still under-represented in state standards as well, which must change because,

As long as citizens of the United States are conditioned *not* to see Native people as human beings with human aspirations, national interests, and cultural integrity, with a long history of struggle to maintain their treaty rights guaranteed by the U.S. constitution and by international law—then the citizenry of today, like the citizenry of 100 years ago and 200 years ago, will passively condone or actively support continued aggression by the U.S. against Native peoples. (Moore & Hirschfelder, 1999, p. 76)

In order to make this happen, states need to ensure that their social studies content standards include a diversity of representations about American Indian cultural plurality. As this study shows, they have generally failed at that. So too have textbook companies (Hawkins, 2005; Stanton, 2014).

That leaves the burden, as with so much in education, upon classroom teachers. As Haynes Writer & Chávez (2002) argued, “the teacher is still ultimately responsible for including American Indians in the curriculum. It is also the teacher’s responsibility to make sure the information that is taught is current, accurate, and appropriate” (p. 4). Lacking state mandates and state supports, teachers will need to take it upon themselves to keep American Indians from vanishing after the end of the 19th century and represent them as vibrant and important part of contemporary US culture.

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