

## **The Imprisonment of Indigenous Student Identities Within Educational Organizations: A Personal Journey**

Carrie Withlow

### **Abstract**

In this article, I analyze my experience as an Indigenous student in an all-white public school system to a Tribal College and University (TCU), specifically exploring the transition period from a senior in high school to a freshman in college.

*Keywords:* Indigenous Autoethnography, Tribal Critical Theory (TribalCrit), Tribal College and University (TCU)

### **Introduction**

Castagno and Brayboy (2008) affirm that whiteness dominates most U.S. schools, and it is manifested in the educational faculty, social relations, the norms and expectations, and access to resources for a quality education. When an Indigenous student adheres to a settler-colonial system, behaviors are adopted consciously while the Native identity is repressed. I want to share my narrative so others can understand the social, cultural, and political structure in place that often oppresses American Indian/Alaska Native student experience (Kelly, 2014). My personal experiences within settler-colonial educational systems and society at large will be compared to a tribal college and university (TCU).

A key component in sharing my story is establishing an understanding for the values, norms, and expectations that public-school systems follow, which encompass a Eurocentric perspective that can be harmful to a student's identity (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008) and acceptance. My intention is to also answer the questions I have asked myself numerous times: What does it mean to be Indian? Why is it important to tell my story? How will the research affect or represent my community and tribe? As Brayboy (2006) stated, scholars who embrace this thinking "must expose structural inequalities and assimilatory processes and work toward debunking and deconstructing them" (p. 440). Brayboy reminds me that every story has a purpose and intent.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to a tenet within TribalCrit, identity is important to maintain cultural integrity and school experiences should not come at the expense of Indigenous identity (Brayboy, 2006). TribalCrit has roots in Critical Race Theory, anthropology, political/legal Theory, political science, American Indian literatures, education, and American Indian studies. TribalCrit is a critical framework for Indigenous scholars to take assert Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies. The tenet of TribalCrit this paper will focus on shared by Brayboy (2006), "Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities. Settler-colonial public-school systems still asserts educational policies that are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation (Brayboy, 2006).

### **Methodology**

Indigenous Autoethnography as a research method seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience to understand cultural experiences. Although this form of research is largely based on writing and reflection on personal experience, it is a form of qualitative research used to gain understanding or make meaning of a particular experience (Kelly, 2014). Autoethnographic researchers recognize that people possess different assumptions about the world and these differences are mostly cultural. This method of research allows Indigenous

scholars and researchers to share their stories and lived experiences. It is best explained by Pewewardy (Minthorn & Chavez, 2015) who shares “we recognize the power of Indigenous people’s sharing their narrative in what becomes an act of reflection and telling their story and experience to benefit future Indigenous and other leaders” (p. 5). This reaffirms there is value to an Indigenous perspective of autoethnography. This form of research also allows scholars to be authentic and vulnerable while creating a connection to share with others (Kelly, 2014). Through critical self-reflection it has changed the trajectory of my career and personal development, as I was able to reclaim my Native identity.

### **Educational Systems as Organizations**

In Morgan’s (2006) book *Images of Organizations* he invites the readers to learn how organizations and systems operate. Using metaphors, he offers a way of thinking over how we view and understand organizations. It is an unconscious process for an individual to adapt and change to the environment and educational system in which a student grows and evolves. The importance of stating what an organization means and its expectations are crucial to the research of this article. Morgan introduces critical ways of thinking about how organizations operate as brains as “learning organizations” and within the guidelines, most crucial for this research are to, “develop an ability to questions, challenge, and change operating norms and assumptions” (Morgan, 2006, p. 87). An organization includes educational institutions that are responsible for values, structural roles, and norms that ultimately define human destinies in modern societies. An example of an organization is the community in which we are raised, with sub-organizations being our family, schools, churches, and friends.

### **Conclusion**

Public school educational systems are still based on settler-colonial values, beliefs, and perspectives and push the assimilation narrative; these organizations are the norm in rural western Oklahoma. It is imperative for educators to understand Indigenous identity: how we claim our identity, what it means to be a citizen or descendant, and how Indigenous identity can be both racial and political (Sabzalian, 2019). As an Indigenous student in predominantly all-white K-12 institutions I never saw myself reflected in the curriculum, teachers, administrators, or the student body which had a direct effect on my identity, which resulted in my need to conform to the system. TribalCrit tells us the need to maintain a strong sense of our Indigenous identities is vital to be successful as an academic. Also key, our school experiences should not come at the expense of cultural integrity (Brayboy, 2006). As my educational journey and experience demonstrates, we must continue to reject the idea of assimilation for the betterment of our tribal students.

### **References**

- Brayboy, B. (2006). Toward a tribal critical race theory in education. *The Urban Review*, 37(4), 425-446.
- Castagno A. & Brayboy B. (2008). Culturally responsive schooling for indigenous youth: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 941-993.
- Kelly, A. (2014). Layers of unconsciousness: An autoethnographic study of the comprehensive exam process. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 9, 347-390.  
<http://ijds.org/Volume9/IJDSv9p347-360Kelley0588.pdf> .
- Minthorn, R.S. & Chavez, A. F. (2015). *Indigenous leadership in higher education*. Routledge.
- Morgan, G. (2006). *Images of organization*. Sage Publications Inc.
- Sabzalian, L. (2019). *Indigenous children’s survivance in public schools*. Routledge.