

The Dakota Access Pipeline Educational Experience: Embracing Visionary Pragmatism

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Abstract

This paper explores representations and realities of background research integrated with personal narrative-based experiences as a participant-observer relative to the Oceti Sakowin protest camp, near the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), from August 2016 to late February 2017 (Ellis & Bochner, 2011; Hubbard & Power, 2003; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 1995). An example of foundational background research is Fuller's (2005) and Guattari's (2005) work centered on "ecological thinking" and "epistemological system" purported by Taffel (2008), as a way of understanding and drawing importance to protest camps in general as a "movement innovation, non-linear exchanges of knowledge and practice, and the complexity of enmeshed human and non-human networks, that are far more than a concern for the environment, but in fact evolves to an epistemological system." This paper further explores Feignbaum, Frenzel and McCurdy's (2013) focus on infrastructures and practices of protest camping as "ephemeral structures for ongoing protest and daily living with spaces for well-being... [i.e.] prayer, meditation, entertainment, socializing, education, and cultural exchange" (p. 41-42). Finally, this paper intends to address Feignbaum, Frenzel and McCurdy's (2013) characterization of protest camps as a rich, and largely unchartered, area of empirical study, by exploring ways culturally relevant pedagogical approaches with visionary pragmatism can perpetuate the spirit of DAPL, in terms of closing the cultural divide (Sleeter & Carmona, 2017; Nieto, 2013; Treuer, 2012; Collins, 1998).

Keywords: ecological thinking, epistemological system, culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy, protest camps, achievement/opportunity gap, historical trauma, visionary pragmatism.

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Introduction

The summer of 2016, in the dry heat of Bismarck, North Dakota, began as any other summer on the northern U.S. prairie. As teepees were erected at the North Dakota State Capitol grounds to draw attention to the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), local residents – and observers from around the world – gradually realized that in a few short weeks the near-legendary normalcy of the area’s Midwestern mores would erupt into an internationally known struggle over water, oil, and indigenous rights.

Once this struggle extended into the early fall, with figurative and literal lines drawn by military blockades and the development of what Feignbaum, Frenzel & McCurdy (2013) define as “protest camps” near the Standing Rock Reservation, tens of thousands came – from across the country and around the world. A handful of scholars associated with local academic institutions chose to see the situation for themselves, with the idea that their academic training, and the “good zeal” of their students (as Saint Benedict would call it), might be able to contribute to dialogue and social engagement – not only in the direct area of DAPL, but also in our immediate area of Bismarck, North Dakota.

This paper emanates from personal experiences as a “participant-observer” (Hubbard & Power, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 1995) affiliated with North Dakota’s only Catholic, Benedictine university. The structure is guided primarily by “personal narrative” (Ellis & Bochner, 2011; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as a way to explore the tapestry of experiences related to the Standing Rock experience and the anti-DAPL struggle. This particular personal narrative draws from disciplinary resources primarily rooted in education, and it reflects on the historic “water protector” (Treuer 2012; Singleton 2014) movement and the continuing implications of the dramatic exposure of structural racism and historical trauma.

Housing most of my theoretical underpinnings in constructivism and cultural relevant approaches to teaching and learning, I intend to share experiential insights regarding the vast network of educational opportunities – particularly as they relate to the prominent protest camp Oceti Sakowin (Sleeter & Carmona 2017; Nieto, 2013; Treuer 2012; Collins, 1998; Vygotsky, 1987).

Participant-Observer Background

Prior to fully engaging all the fruits of personal narrative relative to the historic developments and implications of the Standing Rock experience, a foundational understanding of my role as a participant-observer, as well as my rationale relative to protest camps, is necessary.

First, in terms of my role as a participant-observer, this took place from early September 2016 to late February 2017 and occurred primarily at the Oceti Sakowin Camp. It is noteworthy to point out that additional observations did take place in the general area of Bismarck, North Dakota, the Standing Rock Reservation, Morton County Courthouse in Mandan, North Dakota, and the Prairie Knights Casino near Cannonball, North Dakota. These experiences were captured by taking journaled, field notes at the time of or shortly after each instance, either directly or on-site. Furthermore, pictures were taken with my

phone to highlight various documents, events, and education-related activities occurring at or in relation to the protest camp.

Artifacts also have been gathered to highlight this experience. Articles, primarily from the *Bismarck Tribune* newspaper, helped not only chronicle and frame events as they transpired, but also give a localized context in terms of how this area of North Dakota conceptualized the Standing Rock experience.

Finally, literature has been woven in with the previously highlighted “data” in a process called triangulation. Crystallization is another process through which triangulated data is used to identify emerging themes, which then are confirmed or disconfirmed. Overall, the aim of this process of data collection, analysis, findings, and recommendations is to generate what Hubbard and Power (2003) call “alternative points of view” by shaping an “inquisitive stance” to hinder defensiveness, and ultimately discover “disconfirming evidence”, avoiding the “delusionally anecdotal” (p. 7). Overall, throughout the past several years, this process has been overwhelmingly successful, with K-12 classroom teachers enrolled in graduate school. I personally have witnessed transformational experiences involving such students engaged in specifically what is called action research. Ironically, it was not until later in my experience of learning and teaching with graduate students, as I embarked on my own action research (like my venture as a doctoral student), that I began to realize the critical context of the researcher.

Knowing what I now know, as an autoethnographer, based on my own doctoral research (*An Autoethnographic Journey to the Self*), I invite all students (undergraduate, graduate and doctoral) into a highly autobiographical process informed eventually by course content (Taylor, 2012). Based on this seminal discovery during my academic career, it seems appropriate to step back and explicate my own stance as a participant observer - particularly as it relates to the recent DAPL experience.

Context of the Participant-Observer

Personal encounter with theoretical conception has been my recipe as an academic when trying to understand the stress and strain education endures while trying to meet the rapidly advancing and expanding learning needs, particularly, as Nieto (2012) would argue, in the area of culturally-responsive and social justice practices in U.S. classrooms. When I arrived in Bismarck North Dakota, I became immediately cognizant of the fact that my surroundings not only had changed, due the lack of Wisconsin timber, but also of what the Plains landscape presented in terms of historically traumatic whispers of the past, present, and future.

Soon after the typical unpacking and settling with my family into a new community, I settled into my new academic community as an Associate Professor of Education at the University of Mary’s Liffrig Family School of Education and Behavioral Sciences. Immediately, jockeying for various courses and titles began in this vibrant corner of the campus community. Due to my primary experiences in K-12 private and public education, as well as adjunct teaching, I was a little naïve to the importance of aggressively jockeying for various undergraduate, master’s, and doctorate courses. As the dust settled on this process, I realized some course offerings I would teach were particular to my interest and

experience, while other courses, although intriguing, were not as germane to such credentials, including my personal cultural background.

As someone raised in predominantly segregated neighborhoods in the metropolitan areas of Pontiac and Detroit, Michigan – and then in a more rural setting in northeast Wisconsin, as a married father of four – most of my life had been with “my own kind” (white upper-middle class). I not only lived the stereotyped, idealistic American Dream, but I also came to realize I had accessed this dream due to what I now understand as White privilege (Singleton, 2014) – a privilege granted to fewer than I had imagined previously.

I don’t have a story of struggle or strife growing up (or even into most of my adulthood) until joining millions of others at the mercy of financial ruin during the Great Recession of 2008. Once I was faced with the pressures of foreclosure and a family of four with growing needs, while trying to complete my doctoral studies with a meager combined income while my wife taught at a local Catholic elementary, many theoretical propositions that previously had seemed distant suddenly started to speak to me in the same way athletic and political heroes of the past did. Terms like assimilation, disenfranchisement, White privilege, racism, socio-economic status (SES), and achievement/opportunity gap no longer existed conceptually in a purely academic vacuum; rather, they became completely real to me – because my family and I were on the outside of the American Dream, looking in. I noticed, primarily when completing my doctoral dissertation, that the company I now shared had been nearly invisible to me in the past (Taylor, 2012).

As my wife and I worked various jobs (window washer, hotel maid, adjunct professor, football coach, private school teacher and athletic director, and teacher’s aide – with a PhD, no less) to try to survive, somehow, I realized that I shared this experience with a plethora of others working multiple jobs to survive. What was most sobering for me was the realization that it didn’t matter what credentials I held as a White, male academic who once held the brass ring. I shared the same plight as others due to this particular economic collapse, but there were common forces that seemed always to turn the table on them. Furthermore, I realized I had joined those who had been invisible to me as I traversed my own community for 20 years. Little did I know these experiences (and those to come at the Dakota Access Pipeline and with Native Scholars, like Anton Treuer) would add to a recipe for understanding Treuer’s (2012) opening to his book, *Everything You Wanted to Know about Indians but Were Afraid to Ask*. He said, “INDIANS. They are so often imagined, but so infrequently well understood” (p. 1).

The question may be what pulled me out of (or at least through) this abyss that is all too familiar to others? The answer wasn’t quite as clear as other struggles I had experienced in the past. To this day, I can’t provide complete clarity – other than that education was a lifeline for me – which I finally understood as I began to interview across the country at various universities. I had never thought Bismarck, North Dakota would be that educational lifeline for me and my family. In reality, it *initially* offered a lifeline solely by providing a salary and benefits. Actually, in retrospect, it was anonymous and “imagined others” (Treuer, 2012) that were the strongest element of that lifeline and now reflect the most earnest learning curve in my lifetime to date.

My initial hunch was that the university life and its direct community was the culture that would broaden my family and me in a way we could embrace and through which we could continue to understand the cultural challenges that seemed to abound. In looking at it now, it has been a combination of the life I envisioned *and*, even more so, direct experiences with a compliment of cultures (e.g., Native American, Haitian, and Irish) that has tugged me toward a fuller humanity – less imagined and more understood.

My instincts as an educator always have brought me into “the field” to allow more understanding for students and myself. Education always seemed most relevant when we could interact with the particular phenomenon. When viewing the courses I would teach my first semester, my instincts to enhance my understanding of cultural diversity took me on a search for a deeper understanding of Native American culture – for two primary reasons.

First, I thought it was unreasonable for students and myself to learn about the world’s cultures in the span of 15 weeks; second, the State of North Dakota required course work in the area of Native American studies for teachers. It also was a School of Education requirement where I teach and was incorporated into my course syllabus for EDU 367: Cultural Diversity and Human Relations. The description includes the following statement: “This course is a required course for students seeking teacher licensure in the state of North Dakota” (North Dakota Century Code section t15 – 1c15; Fall 2017 EDU 367 syllabus).

Due to the immediate access to Native American culture, we thought that immersing ourselves into a particular culture mostly different from our own would help us begin to build the necessary skills to understand other rapidly-expanding cultures in the United States – particularly in classrooms where students would be teaching soon. Along with collaborating with Native scholars, I thought the best place to take our emerging understanding would a place that represented all possibilities outlined in the undergraduate and graduate courses. The Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) seemed like a perfect fit.

Background & Context: Understanding “Protest Camping” as an Epistemological System

Following multiple personal trips in August to the DAPL (and on Labor Day weekend with my family), and after subsequent deliberation with various levels of administration at the University of Mary (UM), with liability waivers in hand, I ventured forth with my first group of volunteer, undergraduate students. Some students had taken or were taking one or more of my undergraduate or graduate courses; others heard about the weekly trip and asked to participate.

Early September was an extremely vibrant time at the camp near the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) construction. It is important to note that while headlines captured the emerging escalation of conflict between those opposing the construction of DAPL and area law enforcement, as well as the recently activated National Guard, a plethora of other activities were happening elsewhere. For example, large marches and demonstrations were occurring near and on the State Capitol grounds in Bismarck, and the annual Tribal Summit was occurring at the Bismarck Event Center, along with the United Tribes International Powwow. Though many of these events (excluding the demonstrations and marches near

and at the Capitol grounds) had occurred on a regular basis, due to heightened tensions near DAPL, citizens and politicians began to project more fear – instead of understanding events that had been percolating as part of the social fabric for decades.

With the latter context in mind, Oceti Sakowin Camp was almost like a refuge from the fear and tension expressed by many in the Bismarck community in which I lived. In fact, Fuller (2005) and Guattari (2005) both centered their work centered on “ecological thinking” and “epistemological system” emphasized by Taffel (2008). This focus was helpful in understanding the dichotomy between the life spent in my immediate community and my time in the “protest camp” community I came to view like no other in my life. The authors’ theoretical, conceptual understanding of protest camps in general as a “movement innovation, non-linear exchanges of knowledge and practice, and the complexity of enmeshed human and non-human networks, that are far more than a concern for the environment, but in fact evolves to an epistemological system” was constructive in trying to navigate two communities on a weekly basis for several months.

In fact, as I dove deeper into the literature on protest camps as a way to understand the places in which I was immersed during this time period, I found Feignbaum, Frenzel and McCurdy’s (2013) work *Protest Camps*. This not only gave me further language through which to understand this phenomenon but also understanding concerning protest camp distinctions and threads globally. Distinctively, the very name of the primary protest camp (Oceti Sakowin) carved out its place in history due to the unique gathering of seven major elements or “council fires” of the Dakota, each with a unique but common culture. The historic garnering of these distinctive groups came to be known as “the Sioux”, the “Great Sioux Nation”, or “Oceti Sakowin, the Seven Councils Fire” – geographically made up of the Upper and Great Plains, portions of the Upper Midwest, and areas of Canada (Westerman & White, 2012). Examples of the threads I observed in general were what the authors define as infrastructures and practices of protest camping: “ephemeral structures for ongoing protest and daily living with spaces for well-being... [i.e.] prayer, meditation, entertainment, socializing, education, and cultural exchange” (Feignbaum, Frenzel and McCurdy, 2013, p. 41-42).

For the sake of this paper, I am going to focus on the ephemeral structure of education – realizing full well that it works within the epistemological system pointed out earlier. Though there were many temptations and inclinations to engage the “protesting camping” experience beyond my area and expertise of education, I felt I could serve students, faculty, and others who ventured with me weekly more constructively in an area to which I have dedicated my whole adult life: education. It seemed that, although the experience was unique in many ways, learning had the potential to contribute to cultural exchange. In fact, that is what I experienced and will highlight, with the aid of “clippings” from various area newspaper articles covering the education of children at the Oceti Sakowin Camp.

Newspaper Clipping: *School Continues for Kids at Protest Camp*

Each week I visited the camp (sometimes with a composite of students and faculty, and other times alone due to spikes in availability conflicts), there always was an ongoing curriculum embracing the raw culture experiences offered by a camp that by the year’s end

had swelled in excess of 10,000 people. Often, when visiting and assisting with anything needed in a given week, I saw the school formally known as the Defender of Waters School start in the same manner described in the following quote:

...a session on the Lakota language and continues with anything from teaching about traditional foods, the history of one of the many Native tribes from all over the country and world sharing the camp leadership, treaty politics, government and history, and arts and crafts... Each day includes a walk to the nearby water, where children pray for the water flowing by the camp [Cannonball River out to Lake Oahe – Missouri River]. (Emerson, 2016).

Sometimes, our university students and I would assist directly with some of the aforementioned curricular areas, while other times we just would learn with “by some estimates up to 70 students ranging in age from preschool to 16, as they embarked on incredibly cross cultural and curricular projects (Emerson, 2016).” As teachers highlighted in another newspaper clipping, and supported by my person journaled account:

They are learning the Lakota language, we have artists who teach them how to work with river clay, we have had an ethnobotanist...people talk to them about art and history... Some students stay late into the afternoon working on writing projects, mostly with paper and pencil since the lack of electricity means the kids are not often using laptops or other electronic devices... (Donovan & Emerson 2016; Personal Journaled Observation, September/October, 2016).

Parents also played an active role in the functioning of the school, and, based on direct accounts from parents, school staff, and newspapers, most parents were well-informed of educational options for their children beyond the camp in terms of area public and private schools. Interesting to note, a significant number of parents had enrolled their children in home schooling or were working with camp school and legal staff to enroll officially. Overall, parents, who often were involved actively while we were at the school, expressed a positive sentiment – like the mother who told a local newspaper reporter: “The school is good for her daughter and so is the camp itself, with the exposure to the language and culture of so many other tribes” (Donovan & Emerson 2016; Personal Journaled Observation, September/October, 2016).

If the children, the parents, and their respective learning experiences were not enough to draw myself and others to the camp on a weekly basis, the inspired core element of experienced teachers and guests made the experience even more enlightening. For any educational effort there always are those charged with an administrative role, and, genuine to the overall youthful and historical nature of the camp, the school was no different. It was led by Alayna Eagle Shield, a “young language specialist with the Standing Rock Language and Culture Institute and Defenders of the Water School coordinator.” Her words quoted by the newspaper encapsulate further passion and dedication embraced by those teachers for whom she was responsible: “They [students] are taught we fight with our prayers and that prayers are way stronger than angry words or putting bodies in harm’s way” (Emerson, 2016).

Many guests with a variety of teaching and learning skills (like Ric Kenney, of western Washington) embraced the zeal of Eagle Shield's spiritual call to educational arms. Kenney "taught math with no textbooks and limited supplies – taught with a large writing pad, children following along, shaded by the tent from the hot sun with the council fire smoke always in the air." What later would be classified as workshops by the core school staff added another dimension that heightened the learning experience even further. Journalled recollections and newspaper stories explicate a plethora of Native American tribes from all corners of the U.S. and Canada, along with aboriginals from New Zealand, and

...a special performance by Dave Matthews, lead vocalist for the Dave Matthews Band, and had art demonstration by Steven Tamayo, winner of the 2014 Governor's Heritage Award in Nebraska (also did the external design work for rock legend Neil Young's teepee). (Donovon, 2016; Personal Journalled Observations September & October, 2016).

As I came to discover (reaffirmed by other educational experiences spanning a career entering its third decade), behind the heavy lifting of learning were those teachers who showed up day in and day out to teach the children. Four teachers from various cultural and educational backgrounds were with the camp school consistently from late August 2016 to near the camp eviction early in 2017. This highly-dedicated and passionate core group consisted of: Teresa Drziewlewicz, a graduate student with an education background from Saint Louis, MO; Blaze Starkey, a member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe with a bachelor's degree in Language Arts; Savannah Begay, from Arizona, with an associate's degree in Elementary Education and a bachelor's degree in Secondary Mathematics; and Jose Zhagnay, from New York, with a bachelor's degree in Biology with a specialty in Neuroscience. Beyond the "typical grind" of teaching with endless preparation and execution of lessons, those of us aiding in this learning endeavor were also struck by how each of the core teachers dedicated their time far beyond the highly-dynamic and culturally-responsive curriculum.

Often, it was evident that children had spent more time at, if not slept at, a variety of army tents and teepees, especially when "actions" occurred at the "front lines" near the Dakota Access Pipeline construction. In fact, I recall one incident late in October when elements of an encampment nearest the pipeline were swept by law enforcement and military personnel. While I did not experience this conflict directly, I was present for the initial start to the conflict – as I and others looked for an escape route, while trapped between both protesters (aka protectors) and law enforcement and military blockades. We were fortunate to leave prior to one of the more violent engagements over DAPL. Upon returning the next day to the school, it was evident that the impact of the engagement also had been absorbed by the school children who had to take refuge beyond their regular places, like the school or their own dwellings at the camp.

Based on accounts from camp school staff and other children, we brought children to the far southern reaches of the camp (extending over the Cannonball River the previous evening), because those in the camp were not sure if the engagement taking place just north of the camp would end there or continue to the main camp. As a result of this experience, trauma took on a new concept for me. I had seen trauma before in Northern Ireland during

the Troubles, and in some isolated cases as a school principal and/or teacher, but I had not witnessed an entire community impacted by such a violent engagement near my home and family – especially people I was beginning to embrace as my family, as well. The next day there was no school, but students still came – and learning took on another tone, which continued for the balance of our time visiting the camp. While the previous time had been reminiscent of earlier fall workshops hosted by people from all over the world, famous and not, along with dynamic, culturally-relevant lessons, it now seemed the dull ache of trauma had set in on the camp, along with political forces from the federal and state government that began to congeal around the notion that the efforts of protest camp in general were illegitimate if not illegal (Emerson & Donovan, 2016; Personal Journal Observations October – January, 2016 - 2017).

Newspaper Clippings: *School Raises Concerns - Camp Teachers Defend Program*

If the ever more intense skirmishes over the validity of the pipeline were not enough near and far from the camp school, political forces also intensified. As innocent and often exempt from politics education can be, it is incredible how emotionally-charged education becomes once politicians and bureaucrats intervene from a distance.

An incident highlighting such intervention was when North Dakota State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Kirsten Baesler, raised concerns about the school, which, in her view, had been operating without state approval. Baesler sent a letter to the tribal council stating the school needed approval and, in the meantime, requesting students enroll in an approved school nearby. “If parents want to home educate their child they need to follow North Dakota’s home education law which is very clear...you may home school a child but parents must be the one doing it.” Baesler did tell the tribal council that the school could serve as an enrichment center, but she insisted that students should be enrolled in an approved school. (Emerson & Donovan, 2016; Personal Journal Observations, October 2016).

The question hashed out for weeks among camp officials and state and local school districts leaders was: Does the parent have to provide some education? According to a staff attorney with the Home School Legal Defense Association, North Dakota’s law isn’t exactly precise about who must provide the education. “North Dakota state statute doesn’t put any limitation on the parent utilizing other resources.” The attorney went on further to opine that the situation of the school at the protest camp was unheard of relative to the 13 other states for which the organization handled legal cases. “This could certainly be an educational opportunity for the children.” (Emerson & Donovan, 2016; Personal Journal Observations October & November 2016).

As this war of words volleyed back and forth between North Dakota state and local officials and camp and tribal leaders interpreting the legal status of the school, as often happens when teachers feel students are suffering as result, the teachers sought to protect and defend their students. At least two teachers (Drziewlewicz & Starkey) vocalized their concerns in the media, even taking on the top government official with questions about the validity of the DPI State Superintendent Baesler:

We understand there are pressures [on Baesler], but the amount of knowledge in this camp is so much more than any public school could expect...Kids here long term and parents have filed home-school paperwork...We're here to support what they need to do for their home districts, but the verification and policing is not up to us. [We] provide parents with information about public school options nearby – also instill skills needed to excel in home school or any school. We want them to think critically about those systems...to advocate for themselves and tell their story... (Emerson & Donovan, 2016).

Though there never was a formal resolution to the matter of the legal status of the school, due to misaligned calendars between government, camp and tribal officials, language did eventually soften as 2017 began. This was most evident when Baesler shared in a newspaper account that she planned “a trip to the Standing Rock Reservation to learn more about the makeshift “resource school” for parents’ homeschooling. I just hope to learn more on January 17th.” It’s not entirely clear whether calendars were resolved and any meetings occurred, at least in the minds of those most invested in the camp’s educational endeavor – the students, parents and teachers. What is evident to the teacher spokespersons is that, without formal, consistent involvement by any local, state or federal government officials, a feeling of disappointment, wrapped in history’s lessons, seemed to resonate in their words shared in newspaper accounts (Emerson & Donovan, 2016, 2017; Personal Journalled Observations September – January):

It feels like there’s no value or support for these kids to get a beautiful education. They say we’re not qualified, or that the best thing we could do is go back into the (Indian) boarding school environment when that’s proven to not serve native students (Emerson & Donovan, 2016).

Embracing the Spirit of DAPL Experiences with a Visionary Pragmatism

When I consider the implications of this experience for several months at the Defenders of the Water School located at the Oceti Sakowin Camp near DAPL, I can’t seem to shake from my mind the faces of parents, children, public advocates, and teachers, who set aside personal aspirations for the public good for a cause in which they believed deeply: *Mni Wiconi* or Water is Life. In particular is the haunting image of the teachers’ reference to despised boarding schools – not in a historical context but in a present day application.

Upon considering the implications of the teacher’s analogy, the author of boarding schools, Captain Richard Henry Pratt, the superintendent of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, comes to mind. He often is cited as having said, “Our goal is to kill the Indian in order to save the man.” Further, as I consider an understanding of boarding schools in terms of compulsory attendance, with no access to “homeschooling and public schools for most Indian youth in the late nineteenth century” (Treuer, 2012, p. 138), I wonder if the spirit associated with educational experiences and opportunities at Defenders of Water School can transcend realities that seem to quash such spirit? My hopeful pride seems dim as I consider Native families who face profound, long-term, multi-generational struggles due to the impact of historical trauma and “causal factors” associated with boarding schools severely damaging “a critical piece of the social fabric. Namely, of the remaining tribal languages spoken in the U.S., 160 are likely to go extinct in the next 30

years because only elders speak those languages [and a] deepened distrust of people in positions of governmental or educational power...” (Treuer, 2012, p. 140-141).

Additionally, as I consider the impact of historical trauma potentially dampening the spirit of the educational experience near DAPL, is this just too big a task for opportunities afforded by education? As an educator, on an emotional, compassionate level, I don’t want to believe the task is too big; nevertheless, my internal academician tells me to weigh the realities of the situation. My internal idealist then authentically begs to plunge forward to a greater understanding and discover possible emerging solutions.

The first possible solution that comes to mind is an enhanced understanding of achievement – or, as Treuer (2012) calls it, an “opportunity gap” for Native American Youth, who carry the “pernicious history of boarding schools and historical trauma” (p. 141). Due to echoes of past educational assimilation measures such as boarding schools, “many Indians rightly question whether modern education is still designed to assimilate” (p. 141).

Second, as an education professor, I have engaged undergraduate and graduate students regarding this very challenge of Native American and other cultures whose mosaic is growing to a significant level and which soon will represent over half of U.S. classrooms – taught primarily by white women who make up approximately 84 percent of the total teaching populace. Of course, our class dialogues are not geared toward demeaning women’s role in educating children; rather, we acknowledge and move to emerging understandings, such as Nieto’s (2013) recommendation of culturally-responsive and social just practices in U.S. classrooms. The promising hope is for students to have faint glimpses of their own educational experiences and understandings of Native American culture, since most of their culturally-relevant experiences are in elementary school. It seems, based on personal experiences in the higher education classroom and in the field with pre-service and current educators, that synthesis (a piecing together of experiences as a learner and practitioner) is in order and possible. Nieto (2013) offers more thought here relative to progress being made, in terms of closing opportunity gaps to cultural groups, such as Native Americans, previously seen as non-traversable.

A third understanding-based solution is based on embracing the reality of standardization in education. Without acknowledging this reality, a piecing together of culturally-responsive and social just experiences and practice might travel down the same dust bin of educational reform ideas as too many other good ideas. As Sleeter and Carmona (2017) point out, there is a necessity to acknowledge such a reality by an “un-standardized knowledge” at the ground level of the classroom “while working toward high standards of academic learning” (p. 4). The distinction the authors make between standards and standardization is critical, and there are movements afoot that indicate a shift to more localized or, dare I suggest, democratized approaches supporting such a distinction.

Despite DAPL trials and tribulations that seem still to spike at various times, there are glimpses of more democratic approaches by North Dakota citizens, as well as some politicians and other government officials, who are cultivating various spaces for potentially healing dialogue between Native and Non-Native people in the Capital city of Bismarck. Thanks in big part to the North Dakota Heritage Center, there seems to be what

I would identify as culturally-relevant or responsive gap movement relative to a recognition of distinct differences on a number of institutional fronts, one of which is what Treuer (2012) identifies aptly as “educational systems” in the areas of “values, skills sets of emphasis, learning styles, and cultures” (p. 142).

To this end, the State of North Dakota is making emerging strides, led by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), via the recent development and “roll out” of the North Dakota Native American Essential Understandings (NDNAEU). Ultimately, the goal is to see the NDNAEU filter through all public school district curricula, more effectively guiding a culturally-relevant approach to the classroom. As Kana’iaupuni and Ledward (2013) point out in referencing Culture Based Education (CBE) research, the learning benefits are clear – particularly to those students with tribal or native heritage. In order to maximize such benefits, diligence is critical to this initiative, as the authors cite a need for:

...teachers to push beyond conventional best practice to achieve greater relevance, relationships, and rigor using culturally responsive, relevant approaches. Teachers can and must make learning culturally meaningful to their students and families by honoring culture and place in teaching and learning with respect to the heritage language, family and community involvement, instructional content and context, and authentic assessment. (As cited in NDNAEU, 2015, p. 2).

As I do my best to emphasize this distinction in my respective college classrooms and hope students advocate the same, while echoing a number of theorists presented, it would appear this approach to “push beyond best conventional practice” by engendering all students in our culturally-diversifying classrooms is not simply a “feel good” measure or approach. In actuality, it is a deeper good I have come to experience and know throughout a journey of years leading to and through the DAPL experience.

An evolving awareness of historical trauma, real and present, along with additional challenges associated with standardization (instruction, curriculum AND assessment), as well as the need for rigor based on multicultural teaching in a standards-based classroom, all appear to be the alchemy guiding me toward what Collins (1998) calls an ethically-based, visionary pragmatism (Sleeter & Carmona, 2017). When considering the tenets of this vision as rooted deeply in democracy, it should be familiar to me, as someone raised with all the hopes afforded with privileged access to the American Dream. Yet, in the area where I have dedicated my vocational, educational call, it seems there is an odd dichotomy between democracy preached and democracy practiced. In particular, as I ponder further this dichotomy, I think of prior experiences and present accounts of teachers who share accounts of eroding “control over what to teach in their own classrooms” moving to a more centralized control over education, and, thereby, finding themselves caught in the middle. It would appear democracy may flourish within and beyond educational settings if it assesses itself often through the lens of democratic decision-making and pedagogy.

As fundamental to an educator’s needs as this type of democratic environment would be in order for teaching and learning to flourish, as the cited authors point out, this is not a simple “shift from teacher-centered to student-centered, democratic pedagogy

without help or support” (Sleeter and Carmona, 2017, p. 166 - 167). It is in the call for “help or support,” that I hear from the cited authors and from many educators I have met, that I am beginning to hear with ears only afforded me by my blessed current station as a university professor and my several-month DAPL experience.

Prior to the DAPL experience, I think I was always a visionary, but I did not recognize always the wisdom associated with pragmatism, despite the fact that I have been utilizing the authors’ works for several years. Now, however, I recognize what the authors point out as the tension linking visionary thinking and pragmatic action. I feel my calling as an educator since the DAPL experience is to stand in the tension (or, as Parker Palmer (2004) would say, “standing in the tragic gap”), bridging the reality of the present context with what lies beyond that context.

Though the challenge can seem overwhelming at times when considering all that resides in the tension in which I situate myself, paradoxically I also find solace there. Solace because, while there are many others who are gifted in such approaches politically and otherwise, I find my place in the classroom doing, as Collins (1998) suggests, my “best by students in the context of possibilities now, [hoping] to maintain and nurture a vision of a participatory democracy for tomorrow” (As cited in Sleeter and Carmona, 2017, p. 168).

As I look forward to what may transpire with a solace of place and purpose, I take with me two final images which, on the surface, seem melancholic, and will remain and shape me. The first is the sentiment shared by those at the camp school that it “sends a message that real life continues even in the transient impermanent setting of a camp in a wide meadow near the reservation“. The second is from a camp school parent who said, “I wanted my whole life to see a gathering like this for good and for a purpose, and, in my life time, I’ll never see this again” (Emerson & Donovan, 2016).

Thank you, DAPL experiences. While I never will have this experience again, I will have the image of wide meadow in my mind forever – where I learned, even in places of tension, harmony of good and purpose can be found.

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