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# Native American Educators and Their Leadership Roles on Reservations in the Northern Great Plains

Terry Huffman

**ABSTRACT**—Native American educators occupy a significant place within their respective communities. In this article I report findings from a qualitative investigation on the various ways Native educators define their roles to their students, schools, and communities. Using personal interviews in conjunction with combined snowball and purposive sampling techniques, I documented the perceptions and experiences of 21 Native American educators on their roles as professionals serving reservation schools in the Northern Great Plains. Reflecting the complexities of reservation life, the educators played a myriad of intertwined roles. Analysis of the data led me to identify two types of educators. One I refer to as *affinitive educators* and the other *facilitative educators*. Moreover, upon closer examination, I also discovered that the participants articulated two types of roles they perform, *definitional roles* and *foundational roles*. In this article I present the two types of educators and the associated roles expressed by the participants.

**Key Words:** Native American education, Native American educators, reservation schools, school leadership

## Introduction

I know I am affecting their lives in ways that they might not comprehend now and I might not comprehend now . . . that I've made a little bit of a dent in their lives and in the Indians finding a better way. . . . Hopefully my legacy when I'm gone is that I gave these guys a lot of hope for a better tomorrow.

—Montana principal discussing his role as educator on the reservation

Native American educators are invaluable resources to reservation communities. They stand in the crossroads of mainstream and tribal cultures (Leavitt 1995; Cajete 2006; Beynon 2008; Huffman 2013a). Indeed, Stairs (1995) refers to Native educators as cultural brokers for their potential to translate different (and often seem-

ingly incongruent) educational or cultural methods and goals into meaningful systems and outcomes for Native communities. Moreover, scholars have documented that Native American educators commonly regard their profession as a call to service rather than a convenient occupation (Chavers 2000; Pavel et al. 2002; Beynon 2008; Cherubini et al. 2009; Cherubini et al. 2010).

Despite their obvious importance, there has been little research on the personal and professional experiences of Native educators (Erickson et al. 2008; Huffman 2013a). For instance, in a series of studies, Cherubini and colleagues (Cherubini 2008; Cherubini et al. 2009; Cherubini et al. 2010) chronicled the experiences of Canadian First Nation educators. His investigations reveal a common vision among First Nations educators to use their profession to build Native communities. Most notable is the responsibility to assist in tribal cultural preservation. Nevertheless, as Cherubini admitted, the "literature is virtually silent" on the nature of the specific roles indigenous professionals perceive they perform as educators (Cherubini 2008, 44).

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In one of the few such studies, Beynon (2008) met regularly with 10 Canadian First Nations teachers for a decade following their graduation from the Prince Rupert/Simon Fraser University First Nations Language and Culture Teacher Education Program. Beynon documented the transition from being a tribal community member to becoming a Native educator. It is noteworthy that the teachers in Beynon's study increasingly drew upon their tribal strengths as their careers continued and evolved. While facing perplexing challenges, these First Nations educators were equipped with the appropriate tribal repertoire to engage the community in culturally consistent and meaningful ways.

Hill et al. (1995) also found that five American Indian female teachers who had "been reared by culturally conscious Indian families" (42) deliberately worked to positively influence not only their students but also the larger community. A specific focus of their study was the use of tribal identity to maintain personal and professional coherence. Ultimately, the authors provide evidence that the reliance on their tribal identity facilitated their individual successes and allowed the participants to be effective teachers of Native youth and community resources. Similarly, in a study specifically designed to explore the self-described roles assumed by Native educators, Friesen and Orr (1998) found that the First Nations educators in their investigation deliberately attempted to preserve tribal culture, presented themselves as role models to students, and worked to positively influence the community.

These studies notwithstanding, most investigations offer only global accounts on how Native educators see their professional contributions to their peoples (Duquette 2002). While such examinations are valuable, greater insight is needed to more fully appreciate the service Native educators render to reservation schools and communities. My research resulted in large measure because of that gap in the literature.

## Method

The project called for an exploratory qualitative design. I used personal interviews as a way to document the perceptions and experiences of the participants. Further, the research process consisted of four steps including gaining institutional approvals, sampling and contacting participants, conducting personal interviews, and analyzing data.

After approval of my university's Institutional Re-

view Board (IRB), I informed a number of tribal chairs and/or tribal councils throughout the Northern Plains on the nature and purpose of the research. I secured institutional permission from tribal authorities to conduct interviews on two Montana reservations and three South Dakota reservations. At the request of several tribal councils and tribal IRBs, I agreed not to identify specific reservations. The parameters required all participants be active educators (including teachers and principals), Native American, and currently serving in a reservation school. Using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques, I assembled a sampling list of 45 Native American educators (Maxwell 2013; Mills and Birks 2014). I contacted all individuals on the sampling list with an invitation to participate in the research. Twenty-five of the 45 (56%) initially agreed to an interview. However, due to scheduling conflicts and unforeseen personal circumstances, I ultimately interviewed 21 (47%) of the educators included on the original sampling list.

Eleven of the participants were from the two Montana reservations and 10 were from the three South Dakota reservations. Women (15) outnumbered men (six) in the sample and teachers (14) were more numerous than principals (seven). The majority of the participants were found in elementary schools (12) rather than secondary schools (nine). The average age for the sample was 47 years old, with the youngest participant 31 years old and the oldest 60. The average length of experience as an educator was 18 years, with a range of three years to 33 years.

During the semi-structured interviews I proceeded from an interview schedule consisting of guide questions in which all participants were asked the same questions (see Appendix). However, I also pursued important issues as they emerged. I recorded each interview with the permission of the participant. I later transcribed these recordings. Moreover, I kept detailed field notes on the general nature of the educators' experiences and perceptions, and relevant observations on the reservations, communities, and schools. I took specific care to note anything that a participant said that might provide additional insight on their role as a Native educator. The data analysis approach involved a three-phase process of initial coding, focused coding, and thematic coding (Miles and Huberman 1994; LeCompte and Schensul 1999; Maxwell 2013). In the initial coding, I sorted answers to each of the interview schedule questions (along with other extemporaneous questions) into tentative response categories. During this phase I employed an

in vivo technique to create response categories. In the second phase I reviewed the initial coding categories to identify similarities among the responses. Thus, I collapsed individual responses into a smaller number of common response categories. I continued this procedure until I could no longer reasonably merge categories. At this point I treated the finalized categories as *themes*. As part of the thematic coding, I reviewed the themes for conceptual similarities and looked for theoretical connections among them.

The educators in this study did not perceive that they engage in just one role; rather, multiple roles characterized their service. In fact, the participants diverged in the way they described their primary responsibilities as educators.

### Typology of Educators

The analysis of the interview data led me to identify two theoretical constructs, which I present here as a typology of educators: affinitive educators and facilitative educators. Essentially, affinitive educators emphasized the importance of building interpersonal relationships and chiefly endeavored to be effective role models, while facilitative educators stressed the practical benefits of educational achievement and primarily strove to be effective classroom teachers.

Before completing the interviews, I began to recognize that the participants differed in the way they described their roles. I made numerous theoretical notes on this issue in my field notes, and while still in the field I began to develop an analytical framework. After all the data were collected and the interviews transcribed, I discovered overlapping themes in the way the participants discussed their roles. For instance, five themes consistently clustered in the responses of one group of educators. These themes include serving as a role model, developing personal connections, providing encouragement, forming interactions with parents, and functioning as a family member. I consider these themes to be specific dimensions of the theoretical construct I call affinitive educators. A second set of themes tended to cluster in the responses of other educators. These themes include being an effective educator, promoting the benefits of education, acting as an academic and personal motivator, being an agent of change, and serving as a caretaker of children. Consequently, I considered these themes as dimensions of the theoretical construct referred to as facilitative educators.

Further, I arranged each individual participant into the theoretical schema. Specifically, I classified each participant based on the way the themes clustered in his or her interview along with the global description of the roles he or she performed. Generally, the participants offered clear portrayals of their perceived roles, so that classifying individual educators as either affinitive or facilitative proved a relative easy task.

### Definitional Roles and Foundational Roles

As is the case with virtually all social science research, my findings disclosed a number of significant intricacies. A close examination of the data revealed two kinds of roles identified by the participants. Some of the roles appear to cluster together and thereby define the two kinds of educators as described above. More to the point, the affinitive educators tended to articulate five roles that are more or less idiosyncratic to that group. The facilitative educators outlined five different roles more or less distinctive to them. As such, I refer to these roles as *definitional roles* because they essentially distinguish one type of educator from another in terms of how the participants described their responsibilities (and presumably their professional identities).

In addition to definitional roles, I also found the participants shared important common ground in their professional experiences. Both groups described two significant roles they perform. In relatively equal proportion they expressed the necessity to use their profession as a means to help preserve tribal culture; they also related the need for community involvement. These two roles I refer to as *foundational roles* because they appear to undergird the efforts of virtually all the participants regardless of the definitional roles they described. Thus, while working to preserve tribal culture or the importance for community involvement may not have been the first roles the participants discussed, these were two roles that virtually all the participants seemed to agree they must perform as Native educators.

### Definitional Roles Delineating Affinitive Educators

Affinitive educators emphasized the similarities between themselves and their students. They regarded themselves primarily as role models and thus reported cultivating interpersonal relationships with students and the wider community. I classified 12 of the 21 partic-

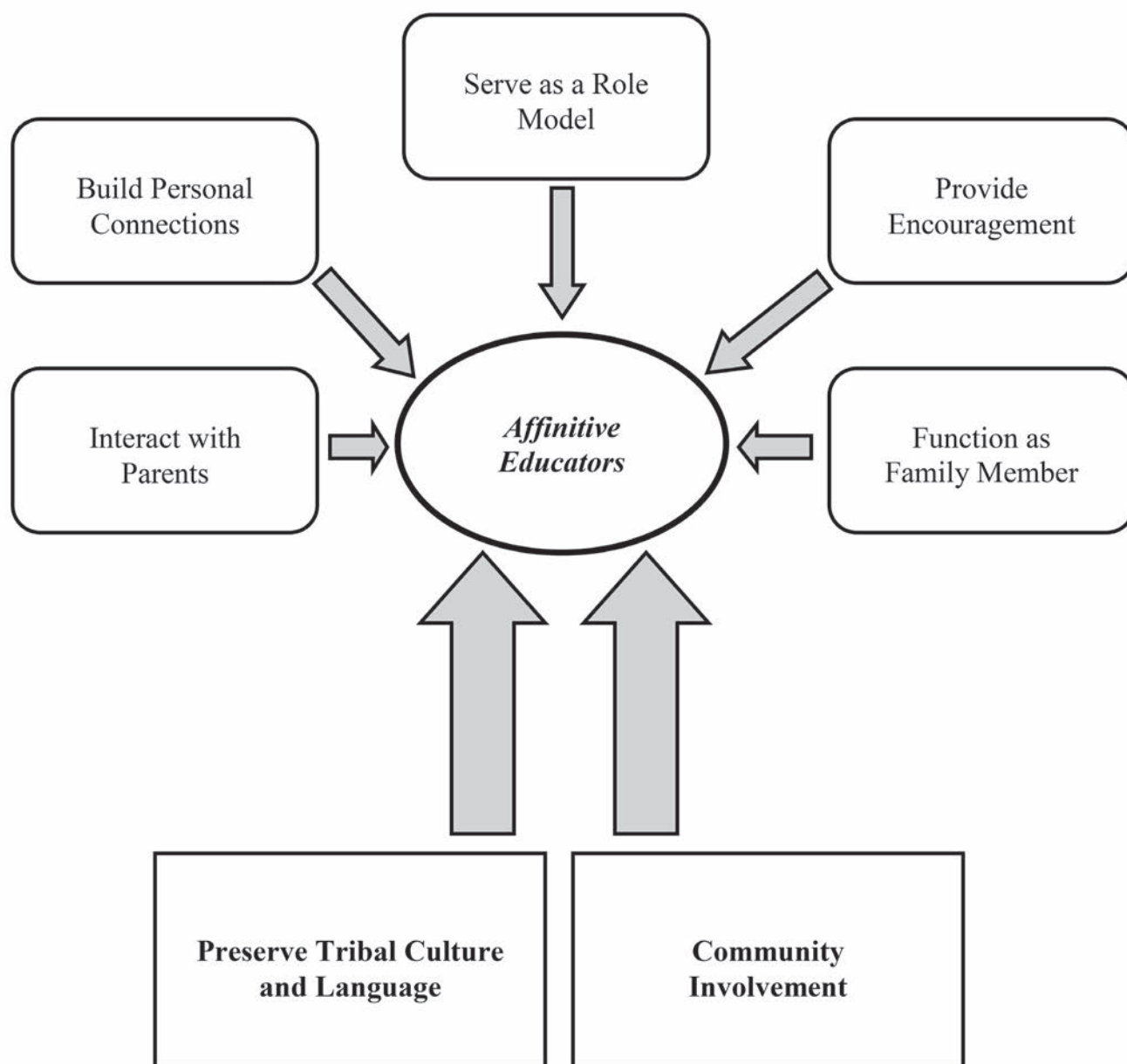


Figure 1. Definitional and foundational roles for affinitive educators.

ipants as affinitive educators. While they recognized the need for Native children to receive a quality education, they nevertheless tended to focus on meeting personal and emotional needs as much as academic ones. As mentioned, five definitional roles tended to converge and thus delineate affinitive educators, including serving as a role model, developing personal connections with students, offering encouragement, interacting with parents, and functioning as a family member (Fig. 1).

#### *Serve as a Role Model*

Serving as a role model constitutes the most prominent theme defining affinitive educators. All 12 of the participants I classified as affinitive educators identified being a role model as a critical function they perform. These educators regarded themselves as examples of academic and personal success. Many Native students do not have successful role models to emulate. Thus, affinitive



educators realized the power of role models to Native American children. They regarded their own personal experiences as illustrations of potential opportunities their students might not otherwise recognize. For instance, a Montana educator said:

I think my role to Native children is to be a role model, first of all, to show kids that there's more—I mean you can be whoever you want, whatever you want to be, whoever you want to be, and there are choices. . . . You can choose to stay here, which I did for 20 some years, and work with my people, or I can choose to go out to someplace else, which I've also chosen to do.

The influence of role models on reservation students cannot be overemphasized. Research has shown that impoverished children often lack adults who model academic and occupational achievement, and thus these children potentially develop limited visions of their own life prospects (Elliott et al. 2006). Reservation schools are commonly staffed by non-Natives whose example likely does not possess the same potency as the demonstrated success of Native educators (Ambler 1999, 2006; Chavers 2000). Affinitive educators emphasized the importance of serving as a role model and worked to influence students through personal example.

### *Build Personal Connections*

Affinitive educators viewed building personal connections with their students as essential. They recognized that many students require and desire personal relationships with their teachers. Thus, they regarded relationship building as one of the most crucial roles they perform in their schools. The perspective of a South Dakota teacher illustrates this view:

Everyone has all these answers and all these ways people are going to learn today when the real answer, I think, is just in making more connections with the kids. You know, giving them that personal touch, that personal attention because that is more lasting and that's how they learn. I think we lose that personal touch. The kids as it is grow up in a world where even the parents don't have that personal connection. Their babysitters are a TV, video games. . . . The kids need that personal connection and it's very hard for them to cope.

Affinitive educators also regarded empathy as a major component of building personal connections with

students. They appreciated the obstacles facing students and used this understanding to build personal connections. A Montana educator spoke of the visceral tie she has with students:

I guess I can relate to the experiences that the children are going through. . . . I believe in all the research, in all the academics that I've learned, you know, I need to be firm, fair, and consistent. But I also have a heart to understand what these kids are coming from. And I believe in Maslow's hierarchy. I always have. If those basic needs not being met, and we need to understand, yeah, we can't just say it, we need to truly understand and empathize with what the kids are going through.

Serving as a role model and working to build personal relationships with students represent complementary responsibilities in the minds of the educators. As the above excerpts illustrate, the affinitive educators rarely discussed building personal relationships without also mentioning the importance of being a role model. I believe that while these roles are conceptually different, the interviews also indicate just how intertwined they are in the daily affairs of affinitive educators. Both of these roles intersect with other roles they play—most notable is the responsibility to provide encouragement to students.

### *Provide Encouragement*

Participants as affinitive educators saw themselves strategically positioned to offer encouragement to students. Likely this role naturally grows out of the effort to serve as a role model and build personal connections. These educators were deeply moved by the emotional needs of their students and strove to help. Some of the educators attempted to enhance the self-confidence of their students. A South Dakota elementary teacher related:

I have always worked with my kids to give them self-esteem that they can compete anywhere they want to and be anything they want to as long as they work for it. And if they want it bad enough, then don't let anybody get them down. And I teach them how to do that, how to survive, how to look for answers. . . . You are going to have to learn all these things that are hard.

For many of the affinitive educators this role required they offer hope for the future. Toward that end, the im-

portance of serving as role model and building personal relationships were especially prominent in their accounts. A Montana educator stated:

I think the one thing that I give kids is hope for a better life. I live right there, right across the street. I'm connected, I'm part of these kids, I'm flesh and blood and I think hopefully I give them that. When you start as a teacher on a reservation school, it was easy for me because I am from here, but I think you just sort of want to survive at first because things can be overwhelming. We have a lot of problems in our school, a lot of things our kids deal with . . . they don't relate well to the Hollywoods of the world. . . . But what they do relate to are people from their own community who they can touch, who they can feel, who they can see, who have done things and now are back in the community doing things. Our kids, they need that, they need to see it, they need to feel it, they need those people around. I hope what I give them is this hope.

Providing hope involved small and large gestures. The participants described words offered as encouragement, efforts to personally intercede, and attendance at important functions celebrating the success of students. The participants cared for students and the emotional connection was clearly evidenced in how they described their role as educators.

### *Interact with Parents*

Affinitive educators lamented the lack of parental involvement in their schools but also understood its personal and historical context. Many parents do not highly regard schools and recoil from past negative educational experiences. Thus, the participants believed they need to take the initiative to establish contact and maintain interaction with parents. A Montana educator assessed her school's efforts (and lack of efforts) to connect with parents:

We do have some [teachers] that have developed that relationship piece with not only the students, but with the parents. And I think that's where we lack, a lot of our staff lack, that initiative to take it one step further and develop that real relationship piece with the families. And it doesn't mean I'm always calling them when things are going bad. . . . A lot of parents won't answer and say, "Oh my God,

that's the school. I don't want to hear what they have to say." But, if you leave a message and say, "I just wanted to say that your child's doing really good today and it's such a pleasure to have them in class." So, I think they can certainly take advantage of that if they would take the initiative. . . . I see my role to the community as showing the people that the school system is not bad. Yes, historically, the school system has always been the bad guy, but times have changed. . . . And I think that some of the school personnel are finally catching on to, yeah, we need to reach out.

A Montana elementary teacher ended our interview by discussing the importance of trust that results from personal connections with parents. When I asked if there was anything she wanted to add, she concluded, "I think you really need to get to know the families. The more you know the families the more they trust you, the more you trust them. And be really patient. You have got to have lots of patience, lots of patience."

Scholars have long identified the reluctance for many Native parents to engage with schools (Philips 1983; Davis 1986; Cleary and Peacock 1998; Ward 2005; Huffman 2013b). The fact that the affinitive educators addressed the need to interact with parents, therefore, does not come as a surprise. What is notable in their experiences, however, is the consistency to which these educators identified the context for the lack of parental involvement. Their voices indicate a keen awareness that Native parents have legitimate reasons for their suspicion of schools. Indeed, quite a number of the participants had their own negative educational experiences. One affinitive educator became a teacher because of the racism she felt her own children had encountered in school. More than a few described how they had been unfairly treated as schoolchildren. Affinitive educators felt the burden was upon educators to correct perceptions and make the initial strides toward healing past wounds. Resultantly, the affinitive educators were sensitive to the need to proactively engage parents.

### *Function as a Family Member*

Affinitive educators believed they sometimes must function as a family member to their students. This role, in large part, results from the social problems found on the reservations. Frequently, while describing this role they noted the extent of poverty and/or family dysfunc-

tions in their students' lives. Moreover, the responsibility to function as a family member has a critical cultural element. Tribal members are frequently regarded as part of an extended family and thus must care for one another. A Montana teacher described what this role means in her teaching experience:

Well, sometimes it's mother [*laughed*]. Most of the time it is mother [*laughed some more*]. Mother, friend, mentor, of course teacher. And as a mother you are all these things anyway. You look in there [*pointed to a closet in the classroom*]. I have Gatorade, I have food because sometimes they are hungry. I have a shelf in there where I keep breakfast bars and things like that. "Did you eat this morning?" We do have free lunch and free breakfast here but sometimes they don't get here until 8:30 and it's closed by then. They have to be in class—but if you are hungry? They know to come here and get something. And I'm not the only one that does that.

A South Dakota elementary teacher spoke of how playing the role of family member to her students entails the responsibility to teach tribal values. This particular individual was culturally oriented and served in a traditional community on the reservation. Thus, her approach to the education of young children reflects the expectations of her community:

The first year I was here I had my sister's daughter in here. And she said, "You're my auntie!" And I said, "Yes I am." So another little girl said, "If she is your auntie, you're my auntie too!" . . . So in the kids' eyes they all call me grandma, they'll call me mom, they'll call me auntie. So I see myself in all those roles. At the same time I see myself teaching the social skills of the [name of tribe]. They wanted to kill one of those ugly worms, a centipede, the other day. And I said, "No. They have a right to live too. That is their right. You have a right to live. They aren't bothering you." I told them, "I was always taught that everything has a right to live." Or when we go pick sage, I tell them, "You always offer a prayer. Don't just take it. Some of you pull these up by the root. Don't do that because they are not going to grow back the next year. You have to break them off, say a prayer, and make an offering. . . . It's whatever you have in your heart. You can even give a prayer but you are giving something back for taking that life." And then we talked about life on the playground.

As previously mentioned, the responsibility to function as a family member has a powerful cultural dimension of Native life. Native peoples generally value and frequently operate as extended family networks (Mainor 2001; HeavyRunner and DeCelles 2002). By its very definition the extended family includes many individuals who perform important family functions. For tribes of the Northern Plains, the extended family is not necessarily restricted to individuals sharing blood relationship. Thus, the extended family essentially involves community-based kinship. A claim to function as family member carries considerable cultural meaning for these individuals. This role includes significant social expectations and responsibilities beyond a symbolic metaphor. These participants taught tribal values and strove to ensure that children did not go hungry. They did these things not only because they were compassionate people, but also because they understood they must perform traditional responsibilities of tribal leaders.

### Definitional Roles Delineating Facilitative Educators

Facilitative educators include those participants who emphasized the instrumental benefits of academic success. They regarded being a proficient educator as a basic definitional role. Thus, they pervasively spoke of the need to equip their students with the skills necessary for academic achievement. I treated nine of the 21 participants as facilitative educators. My analysis revealed five generally intersecting definitional roles that serve to delineate facilitative educators, including performing the role of effective educator, promoting the benefits of education, serving as an academic and personal motivator, operating as an agent of change, and acting as a caretaker of students (Fig. 2).

#### *Perform as an Effective Educator*

Facilitative educators regarded their fundamental obligation to be that of a competent educator. Of the nine participants treated as facilitative educators, all said their primary role was to be an effective educator. They considered educational success essential for their students' future. As such, although these individuals recognized other important roles, they emphasized the critical need to serve as efficient educators who facilitate educational achievement. A typical sentiment came from a Montana elementary teacher who explained:



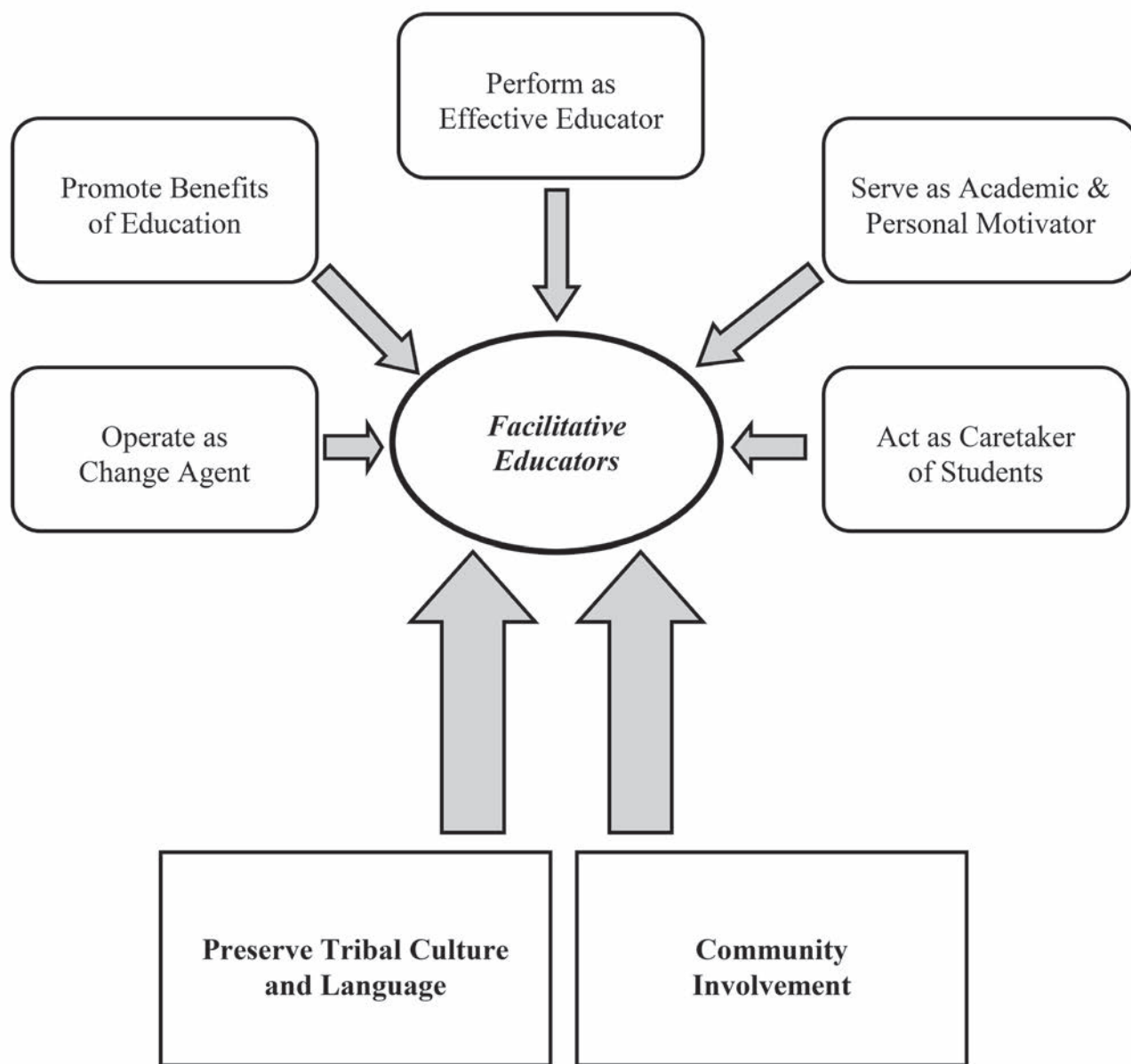


Figure 2. Definitional and foundational roles for facilitative educators.

My first role is an educator. I am a disciplinarian, a motivator. Sometimes I am like a friend. It depends on the kid, it depends on the day. But it's a combination of a lot of things, a lot of roles. Most important being that they are here to learn and I have things to teach them. And from 8:15 to 3:15 they have to learn as much as possible because we don't have a lot of time. So getting them to see the bigger picture and look down the road, have some ambition and develop some goals and dreams [is important].

Such descriptions typified the facilitative educators. Much like the Montana educator quoted above, a South Dakota principal stated:

I think my main goal or role is that I want the best education possible for the students in my building. I really believe that education is important and if I can somehow make that connect with the students that education is your key to success in life, I think I have done my job. That is probably the biggest goal that I have in this school.

The necessity to perform as a competent educator defined the facilitative educator more than any other role they described. However, while the facilitative educators stressed the importance of professional effectiveness, the well-being of children was never far removed from their thoughts. These individuals did not strike me as mechanical, inflexible teachers and principals who were only interested in classroom instruction and management but who miss the human needs of their students. What I saw in these individuals are educators who care deeply and profoundly for Native children. Roughly half the facilitative educators broke down in tears at some point during the interview (this was similar to the reaction among the affinitive educators). I encountered individuals who, far from being emotionally distant educators, truly believe their best contribution to Native children is to offer the highest professional competence they possess. Because they cared, they worked hard to be professionally competent.

#### *Promote the Benefits of Education*

Facilitative educators frequently discussed the greater options provided by educational achievement for both students and the reservation. As such, facilitative educators described their role to actively promote the benefits of education. A Montana teacher exemplified this disposition:

Honestly I think there's, in our community, a reverse racism mentality where education, doing good in school is for whites. There's an attitude like that I believe and it kind of hinders kids. That education is not important. As an Indian educator I have to combat that mentality and stress to these kids that education is important. And we talk about the problems in our community and we're trying to get these kids to see that if they are educated they can do things about the problems in our community. And that's where I try to push my kids.

Another Montana principal spoke of the need to overcome generational barriers in order to promote the benefits of education. He recognized that his people's negative history with education impacts his role as an educator:

Some of the parents and grandparents . . . have that perception, you know, their own recollections of what their school history was like. And that's kind of hard to get over because one of the things they say

is, "Well when I was going to school . . ." And I show them our mission statements and say, "This is what we are," and you are welcome to come in. . . . So part of my role too is overcoming those perceptions of what the school is.

In many respects the role to promote the benefits of education for facilitative educators is similar to the responsibility to interact with parents expressed by the affinitive educators. Both types of educators recognized barriers resulting from past perceptions and experiences. Moreover, facilitative and affinitive educators realized the need to counter resistance to education on the reservation. Nevertheless, the interviews indicate they approach this task in different ways. Affinitive educators chose to engage parents. To them, personal interaction was the most feasible strategy to overcome negative perceptions of schools. Facilitative educators, on the other hand, described efforts to present education and schools as inviting, promising, and consistent with tribal values. Their descriptions appear to be less proactive than those suggested by the affinitive educators, but not necessarily less important. In the end, facilitative educators and affinitive educators were essentially working toward the same goal. They wanted those on the reservation to understand that the school was part of the community.

#### *Serve as an Academic and Personal Motivator*

Facilitative educators held high expectations for their students. As a result, many described working hard to motivate them to achieve in school. Others discussed their attempts to inspire students in personal matters beyond academics. Whether in the classroom or outside of school, facilitative educators related that they frequently act as academic and personal motivator.

A Montana high school teacher described how she motivates students. Moreover, she believed that she can effectively inspire students specifically because she is a Native American educator from the reservation:

As an educator I think that my students already have accepted me. I am from here; I'm a tribal member. . . . So it's different how they perceive me from maybe another teacher. That's what I see as the difference. They know that's where I'm from so that doesn't change for them. So I can do the other part [motivation] for them. I can say this is what you are going to need in order to succeed; this is why I am pushing you. I try

to push them all because I just realize that education is going to be their key to success. . . . And I don't so much worry about offending them culturally or whatever because I try to push them.

When affinitive educators talked about encouraging students, they frequently described helping with self-esteem issues. Facilitative educators, on the other hand, were more likely to relate attempting to motivate students either academically or in personal matters. I concluded that the participants were discussing two different concepts. The descriptions provided by the affinitive educators contained a nurturing essence. They deliberately attempted to offer hope and lift the spirits of children. Facilitative educators too desired to encourage their students, and the interviews documented just how emotional those efforts could be for them. Nevertheless, facilitative educators largely took an approach different from that typical of affinitive educators. Their descriptions portrayed attempts to intellectually move students. As a result, they were more likely to appeal to students' rationale. The efforts among the affinitive educators had a visceral quality; the efforts among the facilitative educators had a cerebral quality.

#### *Operate as Change Agent*

A number of facilitative educators also indicated they see themselves as agents of change on the reservation. Generally, they described this role in more abstract terms than they did their responsibility to promote the benefits of education, although there may be a close relationship between the two roles. A Montana teacher reflected about serving as a change agent framing social change as a return to a reliance on traditional tribal values:

I kind of see myself as an agent of change, and the people who have an opportunity to change it are our generation and these kids. Because a lot of things need to change around here. A lot of negative characteristics that are not traditional. There's a lot of self-centered, selfish behaviors out there and traditionally you are supposed to see yourself as part of the whole, part of the larger group. Sometimes that perspective is kind of forgotten, it seems like. People are just looking out for themselves or just looking out for their own family. But there are people who still understand you got to look out for everybody, you got to look out for the tribe. If you can take care

of these kids and give them a good head start and a good foundation, then they will take care of the next generation. So my role is kind of like a role that a lot of people played before. I preserve what has been taught to me and pass on as much as I can.

A South Dakota principal discussed his school's part, and by inference his own role, in effecting social change on his reservation: "My goal is for this school to be a model of change, and we don't have one of those on the reservation." Facilitative educators recognized the urgency to combat the perplexing social problems found on their reservations. In their view, Native American educators represent one of the few available models of social change for reservation communities. As a result, the facilitative educators took this role very seriously.

#### *Act as Caretaker of Students*

The prevalence of domestic violence is a sad reality on the reservations I visited. The participants frequently discussed the consequences of this social problem. Many of the educators, both affinitive and facilitative, addressed the necessity to provide security for their students. However, the facilitative educators were more likely to identify the caretaker role for children as a specific function they perform. Some spoke of this responsibility simply and directly, such as a Montana principal who stated, "My role, even as principal, is to help children be successful in school and make sure they are safe." Others, such as a South Dakota teacher, reflected on this role:

I see the kids that come from the poorest of homes that have domestic violence in their homes. You know, once they walk in that door, they will tell us their problems. What happened that night. And we will hug them and let them know that they don't have to worry while they are at school. They just become different kids. They are just learning. I want them to feel safe and secure while they are here and that I can be trusted. That I am here for them. Because I am.

Similar to affinitive educators who discussed the need to act as a family member to students, facilitative educators also outlined their responsibility to care for students. These roles are very close but have an important, nuanced difference. The affinitive educators generally discussed their responsibilities for the holistic

welfare of the students. The facilitative educators tended to describe a more narrow focus in caring for students. These participants were specifically concerned with the protection and safety of children. They saw their role as keeping negative and/or dangerous elements away from students while they were in their care.

Facilitative educators were inclined to mention the responsibility to care for students for much the same reason as the affinitive educators were prone to identify functioning as a family member as one of their roles. The participants operated within a cultural milieu in which the care of children is expected of tribal community leaders. A Montana elementary teacher summed up the thoughts of many of the participants when he declared, “Traditionally we’re all supposed to take care of each other, to look out for one another, and my role in the community is to look out for these kids. Take care of them while they are here with me.” Ultimately, the cultural expectation to care for children was shaped by the professional identity possessed by each participant. Affinitive educators, who see themselves first and foremost as role models, sought to act as extended family members might; facilitative educators, who regard their primary role as competent professionals, desired to ensure the safety of children. These educators, both affinitive and facilitative, were performing a similar role they expressed in different ways.

### Foundational Roles

The participants also articulated sharing two important roles. Both affinitive and facilitative educators discussed helping to preserve tribal culture and being involved in the community as critical roles they perform as Native teachers and principals. I conceptualize these two roles as foundational largely because the analysis of the data suggests they are not only shared but also support the definitional roles that delineate the two types of educators.

#### *Preserve Tribal Culture*

The sentiment that Native educators must assist in enhancing tribal language, culture, and values permeated the interviews. Both affinitive and facilitative educators agreed this is an important role they must perform. A Montana educator, a facilitative educator, related that reservation schools need to integrate and infuse tribal values. In his view, the cultural anchoring provided by

tribal values and worldview will lead to improved prospects for students as well as the reservation:

I think what needs to happen is there needs to be a preservation of traditional values, those need to be brought back into the school system. Those kids need to relearn what has been lost. From there they will start to see, okay, everyone needs to take care of each other, we’re part of a larger group, and positive things, I believe, will start to happen.

A South Dakota educator, an affinitive educator, argued that because the community and families are not teaching children tribal culture and language, schools must assume this responsibility. Specifically referring to the tribal language of her reservation, she stated that schools must be responsible “because the parents don’t teach Lakota. The community doesn’t. It’s not like they are teaching the language, I wish they would, the community people. But it’s on our shoulders now. So I do it throughout the day. I teach the language.”

While generally scholars have not widely investigated the roles performed by Native American educators, nonetheless, the obligation to strengthen one’s tribal culture is a prevailing theme in the existing literature. For instance, in her study with 14 First Nations teachers serving indigenous communities, Duquette (2002) reported a major motivation to become an educator was to assist in the survival of traditional tribal culture. Begaye (2007) also found that the Native American teachers in his study emphatically stressed the need to assist in tribal cultural preservation. Begaye related, “Respondents stated that preserving, sustaining, and perpetuating language and culture in schools is critical” (2007, 43).

Consistent with previous findings, the participants regarded the preservation of tribal culture as a critical responsibility. The conclusion is clear. Generally, Native educators serving reservation communities embrace the responsibility to assist in the preservation of tribal culture. An enormous opportunity exists to employ educators in efforts to preserve tribal history, language, and traditions.

#### *Community Involvement*

The affinitive educators and facilitative educators in roughly equal proportion mentioned involvement in the community as important, and the context of the interviews indicate both groups rendered it of equivalent significance. Thus, I consider this role as foundational



to the mission of the educators in this study. The participants offered a number of reasons for the importance of community involvement. For instance, they regarded it as an essential part of the communal responsibilities expected of reservation leaders. Further, it provides an opportunity for students to see them participating in the larger community outside the classroom. Thus, being active in the community reinforces the messages they attempted to convey to students in school. As a Montana teacher, a facilitative educator, explained:

They see me as a teacher. But because I was born and raised here, they also see me as a community member. I like to get involved in a number of things outside of the school. I like to go up to the jail and visit people. And I try to just get involved in events that are not even school related. And I do that, number one, because I care about the community and care about our people. And the kids see me at these events and they will go, "Oh [participant's name], I saw you at the powwow!" And I will go, "Yeah, I was there, I saw you dancing." Or, "I saw you at the hospital." So the kids make a connection with me outside of just teaching.

Likewise, a Montana teacher, an affinitive educator, discussed her civic activities and how she tries to impact children beyond the school grounds. Her comments demonstrate the importance this educator placed on the need to be a positive role model to her students:

I think it is good [being involved in the community]. Because, like I said, they [students] watch you, they know you, and if you mess up they will let you know. But I also don't cut them down if they are ever in JDC [Juvenile Detention Center]. I also tutor over at JDC twice a week so I know who is in there. It's not just my little kids here. I know all the kids. I go over there and I do that.

Lieberman and Miller (1999) contend teachers commonly are caught in a tension between the requirements of the social institution of education and the expectations of the community. This contention derives from the unfortunate overextension of educators in contemporary society (Epstein 2001). For well over a century, teachers have been increasingly expected not only to provide for the academic needs of students but also to serve as social service agents as well.

The participants in this study recognized the larger community will not always support and value their

mission as educators. In that sense, they experienced the tension between the school and the community identified by Lieberman and Miller. However, most of the participants regarded their role to be both an educator of children and responsible community member responding to the needs of their people. These educators had largely resolved any ambiguity in their responsibilities to their community. They are both teacher and social service agent. This acknowledgment of their social responsibilities is evidenced by the display of sustained involvement in the community. It did not matter which set of roles an individual happened to emphasize, affinitive or facilitative, they understood and accepted the necessity to assist in meeting the needs of their people by acting as engaged community members.

## Conclusion

Carmelita Lamb (2010) reported on the efforts to train future reservation teachers at Turtle Mountain Community College (TMCC) in Belcourt, North Dakota. What is particularly relevant to this study is how she described the objective of the teacher preparation program at TMCC:

Here at Turtle Mountain Community College . . . we have a passion for the most important item on the education wish list: an exemplary teacher, someone who is knowledgeable, caring, and willing to make each student feel important and integral to the learning process each and every day of the school year. A model teacher values the cultural heritage of all Indian people and draws upon Native traditions and teachings to enrich and contextualize lessons. (2010, 40)

While Lamb does not use the terms affinitive educator and facilitative educator, it is clear the design of the teacher preparation program at TMCC is to deliberately merge the attributes central to each type of educator and instill these traits in their future teachers. The individuals I interviewed in all likelihood possess the characteristics of both affinitive and facilitative educators. Nevertheless, the interviews documented their inclination toward either an affinitive or a facilitative disposition. However, my intent in offering this typology of educators is not to suggest one is superior to the other. It is merely an analytical framework. The fact is, reservations greatly need educators possessing both affinitive and facilitative characteristics. Additionally, like



effective educators everywhere, the participants necessarily assume a number of interpersonal styles and roles. In other words, sometimes they likely emphasized the roles associated with facilitative educators and other times those typical of affinitive educators.

The educators I met have complex roles to perform. Moreover, they have multifaceted roles because they have a difficult job with tremendous demands. By necessity they must be a lot of different things to a host of people and circumstances. A critical question originally driving the research was, How do Native American professionals regard their role as educators? The participants' responses revealed the intricacy underneath what would otherwise appear to be a straightforward query.

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## Appendix

### *Personal Interview Guide Questions*

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

I am interested in knowing about your background and life journey. As much as you feel comfortable, can you tell me about your life and important moments?

How would you describe your family in terms of tribal affiliation and relation to Native culture? (Probe on tribal language use, participation in traditional ceremonies, etc.)

How would you describe yourself in terms of Native cultural traditions?

#### EXPERIENCE AS AN EDUCATOR IN RESERVATION SCHOOLS

Why did you decide to become a teacher?

I'm very interested in the intrinsic rewards in teaching. What are the greatest rewards you experience as a teacher?

I'm also very interested in the challenges you face as a teacher. What are the greatest challenges you face as a teacher?

I would like to know your thoughts on No Child Left Behind and the prevalent use of standardized tests in schools today. What are your views and experiences?

Let's talk about tribal culture and language and reservation schools. What issues, thoughts, and experiences would you like to tell me about regarding tribal culture and the education of Native students?

#### PROFESSIONAL GOALS AND DESIRES

How would you describe your role to Native students?

How would you describe your role to the community?

What do you wish to accomplish as a teacher, what would you like your legacy to be?

Do you have any regrets in becoming an educator?

Do you desire to remain in teaching as a permanent career or do you think you may pursue a different career?

What can reservations or tribal areas do to encourage and recruit more Native teachers?

Is there anything else you would like me to know about your thoughts on Native culture, your experience and desires as an educator?

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