

The Role that Cultural Connectedness Plays in Fostering Educational Sovereignty for American Indian Youths: A Transformative Mixed Methods Study

Shawn Clark¹
Arizona State University, USA

Abstract: In this Indigenous grounded, transformative sequential explanatory study, the author examines the influence an American Indian way of knowing educational paradigm had on cultural connectedness in a sample ($n = 41$) of American Indian youths attending a public school on a federally recognized Indian reservation. The author uses ethnographic writing to share his cultural journey with American Indian cultural immersion teachers. Participants completed a survey packet including a demographic form and, an adapted cultural connectedness survey. Results indicated that positive aspects of an American Indian way of knowing educational paradigm were associated with increased cultural connectedness (Spirituality, Identity, and Traditions) for American Indian youths. The author also sought to capture youth participants' perspectives to develop a deeper understanding of how they conceptualize cultural connectedness resulting in the identification of eleven culturally specific categories. These findings may help inform a broader development and application of an American Indian way of knowing instructional model that contributes to strengthening cultural identity in American Indian youths through culturally sustaining and revitalizing pedagogies.

Keywords: American Indian, Indigenous methodologies, ethnography, cultural connectedness, transformative mixed methods.

“School can be difficult for our children as they balance the expectations between the Western world and traditional ways.” Native Elder

Land Recognition

I begin by acknowledging that the land where this study was conducted is the ancestral homeland of the Blackfoot² people. I pay tribute to the past, present, and future Elders of the Blackfeet Nation, the Blackfeet parents and students participating in this study, and Naatosii sahkompaii and Natoyii' saamiiakii. Likewise, I also recognize the ancestral homelands of Tribal Nations where readers are as they read this article. Recognizing the ancestral homeland of the

¹ Corresponding Author: Arizona State University. E-Mail: Sdclark8@asu.edu

² The Blackfoot people are called the *Nitsitapiksi* or *Niitsitapi*, which means Real People, and individuals that can speak the Real Language are called *Nitsipoiyiksi* (Bastien, 2004). “The general term “Blackfoot” refers to all the Confederated tribes, whereas the term “Blackfeet” references an individual within the Confederacy or the tribe of the Confederacy whose lands reside under the dominion of the United States of America” (Hall, 2018, pg. 5). The difference in spelling between *Pikani* and *Piikani* represents a lack of agreement on a standardized spelling between the Blackfoot Confederacy members (Gladstone & Pepion, 2016).

Blackfoot contributes to a Blackfoot way of being (ontology). By honoring a Blackfoot way of being, I show my “understanding of the connected relationships between Country, people—the living and non-living, and the entire cosmos—the known and unknown” (Parter & Wilson, 2021, pg. 2).

Decolonizing Positionality

To decolonize my positionality, I drew inspiration from the self-location framework offered by Indigenous scholars Absolon & Willet (2005). The scholars noted that to self-locate means “to say who you are, give yourself voice, and claim your position” (Absolon & Willet, 2005, pg. 112). By self-locating, non-Indigenous scholars can overcome the nebulous, neutral, and objective voice by positioning themselves in the community and explaining their purpose (Absolon & Willet, 2005) and motivation (Kovach, 2009) for conducting research with American Indian communities (Smith, 1999).

I come from the United States of America, and I am non-Indigenous. I was a school administrator for seven years in the school district at the center of this study. My motivation for conducting this study was to form what Absolon & Willet (2005) described as a learning circle, explained as “a process that generates information sharing, connections, builds capacity, and seeks balance and healing (pg. 116). I aim to broaden the knowledge base for the ongoing growth of American Indian cultural immersion learning environments congruent with an American Indian way of knowing. I sought to learn how American Indian youths explored their ethnic-racial identities (ERI) (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014) to nurture cultural connectedness (Snowshoe et al., 2015) through a Blackfoot way of knowing (Bastien, 2004; Pepion, 1999) educational paradigm. In this study, I asked: How and to what degree does a Blackfoot way of knowing educational paradigm inform a Blackfeet youth’s cultural connectedness?

Introduction

The United States (US) government coerced American Indian³ (AI) parents into sending their children to boarding schools through sinister means (Adams, 2020; Fear-Segal, & Rose, 2016), contributing to a genocide (Moffitt & Rogers, 2022; Kirmayer et al., 2014; Wolfe, 2006). A Native Elder explained genocide this way, “When we talk about genocide, the definition is to extinguish the culture through the children” (Clark & Wylie, 2021, pg. 336). An article in the *Eagle* Keahtah Toh (1880, July) proclaimed an advantage of educating AI children at boarding schools as “Entire control of the children” (pg. 2). In 1890, US Commissioner of Indian Affairs, J.T. Morgan, directed Indian agents to use any means under their power to force AI children into boarding schools, stating:

It is the duty of the agent to keep the schools filled with Indian pupils, and, so, far as practicable, to place every Indian child of school age in school. He should accomplish this by persuasion, if possible, but, when milder

³ For the current article, the terms American Indian (Lowe & Struthers, 2001), Native (Hill, 2006; Schultz & Noyes, 2020), and Indigenous were used interchangeably, “relating to people who trace their ancestral origins to the indigenous cultures and peoples of the Americas” (Strayhorn et al., 2016, pg. 67). The term American Indian commonly denotes tribes residing in the United States (Grande, 2000) that have received federal recognition (Hill, 2006; Struthers et al., 2005). The term Indigenous is capitalized to recognize the distinct cultural and political relationship Indigenous people have with their homelands.

methods fail, he may withhold rations or annuities or use such other proper means as will produce the desired results (United States, Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1890, pg. cxlvii).

The purpose of boarding schools was to promote cultural extinction (Adams, 2020; Running Bear et al., 2018) by depriving AI children of their identity (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Reyhner & Eder, 2017; United States, Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1887) by cutting their hair, replacing their Indian names with Christian names, barring them from wearing traditional clothing in exchange for school uniforms, and forcing them to adopt the tenets of Christianity (Adams, 2020; Bastien, 2004; Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Fear-Segal, & Rose, 2016; Hernandez, 1999). The engineers of boarding schools thought to civilize AI youths by designing programs described as "the state of being reclaimed from barbarism" (Eadle Keahtah Toh, 1880, April, pg.1). Commissioner Morgan praised the boarding school experience for stripping AI children of their cultural identity, declaring, "The schools encourage Indians to abandon their paint, blankets, feathers, and savage customs" (United States, Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1890, pg. LVIII).

An inherent goal of boarding schools was to force AI children to abandon their Native languages in favor of the English language (Reyhner, 2018). The boarding school experience altered the transfer of AI languages between generations as boarding school survivors hid their traditional languages from their children in hopes they would avoid similar punishments such as having their knuckles rapped (Kimmerer, 2013). Commissioner Morgan directed his subordinates to punish AI children for using their Native language, stating, "Pupils must be compelled to converse with each other in English and should be properly rebuked or punished for persistent violation of this rule" (United States, Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1890, pg. CLI).

Richard Pratt was the architect of the off-reservation Indian boarding school (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Lomawaima & Ostler, 2018; The Red Man, 1889). He started the Carlisle Indian Industrial School (Wolfe, 2006) in 1879 with financial support from the US government (Clark & Wylie, 2021). Pratt believed that AIs as a race should be massacred (Pratt, 1892) as he built his "assimilation institution" (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018, pg. 85) on the credo "kill the Indian in him and save the man" (Pratt, 1892, pg. 46). The school was a social experiment designed to Anglicize AI youths (Satterlee, 2002). At graduation from Carlisle, AI students were forced to take an oath to renounce their AI identity (Kimmerer, 2013). The 1890 Bureau of Indian Affairs Report captures the insidious mindset of Pratt:

If millions of black savages can become so transformed and assimilated, and if annually hundreds of thousands of foreign immigrants from all lands can also become Anglicized, Americanized, assimilated, and absorbed through association, there is but one plain duty resting upon us with regard to the Indians, and that is to relieve them of their savagery and other alien qualities by the same methods used to relieve others. Help them, too, to die as helpless tribes, and to rise up among us as strong and capable individual men and American citizens (United States, Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1890, pg. 308).

Pratt believed that to achieve complete assimilation, AI children needed to be moved to boarding schools far away from tribal influences, refused access to their traditions and cultures, and inculcated in Anglo-American ways (Fear-Segal, & Rose, 2016). Assimilation refers to how people and varied cultural groups attain the fundamental habits, mindsets, and ways of living of

another cultural group (Lash, 2018; Waldinger, 2003). In April of 1890, Assistant Superintendent at Carlisle, A.J. Standing reported that 126 AI children from Montana, including 39 Blackfeet, had arrived at the school (Standing, 1890).

Scholarly literature has noted that multiple generations of AI decedents may have transferred the trauma they inherited at boarding schools to their children, grandchildren, and distant relations (Deloria et al., 2018; Evans-Campbell, 2008). The phenomenon is studied as *historical trauma* (Chase & Ullrich, 2022; Deloria et al., 2018; Mohatt et al., 2014; Sotero, 2006; Wexler & Gone, 2012) or the *Soul Wound* (Duran & Duran, 1995). Historical trauma is defined as the shared experiences by groups of individuals (Brave Heart et al., 2011; Mohatt et al., 2014) who faced deliberate “genocidal or ethnocidal intent” (Waters et al., 2011, pg. 181) through hideous acts of colonization across generations (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Crawford, 2014; Gone, 2013; Kirmayer et al., 2014; Sotero, 2006). Academic literature has described “ethnocide as the destruction of the people and cultural genocide as the destruction of the physical manifestations of culture” (Pruim, 2014, pg. 283). Historical trauma contributes to diminished individual and collective tribal identity (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Gone, 2009) by subjugating cultural perpetuity described as the cultural anchors intended to guide future generations of AI youths (Running Wolf, 2021).

Authors declared that culturally based protective factors are vital to examine because the history of colonization has disturbed the transfer of traditional values between generations of AIs (Mohatt et al, 2011). In this study, I used a participatory action research model (Walter, 2005; Wilson, 2008) to examine the degree of impact an American Indian way of knowing educational paradigm had on cultural connectedness in a sample of forty-one-, nine-, and ten-year-old AI youths attending a public school on a federally recognized Indian reservation.

Theoretical Lens

The contents of this essay were viewed through the analytical lens of the integrated model (García Coll et al., 1996) augmented by Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) (Brayboy, 2005). The integrated model offers a resiliency grounded framework to examine AI culture through a strength-based lens instead of viewing their culture as a deficit. In particular, the strength-based focus centered on the integrated model’s concept of adaptive culture, explained as “a social system defined by sets of goals, values, and attitudes that differ from the dominant culture” (García Coll et al., 1996, pg. 1896). I focused on a salient component of adaptive culture identified as ethnic-racial socialization, defined as, “the transmission of one’s cultural history, values, and beliefs from one generation to another or across groups” (Perez-Brena et al., 2018, pg. 719).

AI scholar Bryan Brayboy pioneered TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005) and grounded the theory on beliefs culturally focused on AI people and their communities (Castagno & Lee, 2007). TribalCrit scholars question the structural inequalities and social institutions that preserve and replicate the oppression created by colonialism and racism. The theory is vital in the conversation on AI education because it recognizes the positionality of AI people as both colonized and racialized in America. Brayboy (2005) described colonization as a historical and universal attempt to make AIs abandon their culture to adopt the dominant group's culture.

Tallbear (2013) maintained that European-American conceptions of race contributed to the racialized identity of AIs. Racialization of AIs ties to the Dawes Act of 1887 (Garrouette, 2001; Grande, 2000), which permitted the US government to use blood quantum (Gampa et al., 2020) as the basis of determining who was AI (Rodriguez-Lonebear, 2021) with the goal of eliminating anyone from identifying as AI (Garrouette, 2001; Krakoff, 2017). Contemporary blood quantum

philosophies are rooted in settler-colonial ideology (Deloria et al., 2018; Rodriguez-Lonebear, 2021; Wolfe, 2006) and link to the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) (Rosier, 1999), co-sponsored by Montana Senator Burton K. Wheeler (Schmidt, 2011). Section 19 of the IRA described in part the term “Indian” to mean “Persons of one-half or more Indian blood” (US Government Publishing Office, 1934, pg. 7).

Study Design

I used an Indigenous grounded, transformative sequential explanatory (Creswell, 2015; Mertens, 2010) transformational data study (Creswell et al., 2004; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) centered on a Blackfoot way of knowing educational paradigm (BWKEP). The BWKEP is a philosophical education framework based on 1) a Blackfoot Worldview, 2) Traditional Blackfoot Learning, and 3) the Blackfeet Education Standards (BES).

Blackfoot Worldview

Indigenous methodologies reframe the research paradigm to mirror AI cultural views (Walter, 2005) and make a meaningful and logical Indigenous worldview noticeable within the inquiry process (Getty, 2010). Academic literature indicates that a Blackfoot worldview is circular (Gladstone & Pepion, 2016), devoid of hierarchical positioning, and combines a balance of abstract and physical components to every living thing and entity, recognized as “shadow.” Therefore, every act associated with Blackfoot culture is understood as an element of the “shadow” or physical being or a combination of both (Crowshoe & Manneschmidt, 2002). Long Standing Bear Chief (1992) maintained that a Blackfoot worldview centers on the belief that all things were given a spirit from the Creator and are interrelated. Bastien (2004) explained the complex connections between all things as engaging in mutual renewal, which she described as reciprocally creating interdependence and interconnectedness by breathing the same air as their ancestors. Gladstone & Pepion (2016) declared that a Blackfoot worldview is conceptualized through the tipi camp circle, where knowledge progresses from the outer ring of tipis through a matrix of concentric circles towards the center tipi. Crowshoe & Manneschmidt (2002) explained the circle structure as the bundle concept to convey the associations between the “sociopolitical and spiritual systems of the Blackfeet” (Gladstone & Pepion, 2016, pg. 13).

Traditional Blackfoot Learning

Blackfoot scholar Prete (2021) asserted that settlers subjected Blackfoot people to oppressive educational systems that ignored their way of knowing by altering a learning system grounded on holism. Bastien (2004) suggested that “traditional [Blackfoot] learning is an interactive process ... that is premised on a ‘knowing’ that is generated through a “participatory and experimental process” (pg. 119), realized through the “Tribe’s way of life” (pg. 120). The experimental learning process is dependent on discovering the relationships and connotations in words heard (Bastien, 2004). Chambers & Blood (2010) (as cited in Prete, 2019) wrote that Blackfoot pedagogy “is about a way of living, being, and learning” (pg. 35). Bastien (2004) emphasized that a traditional element of learning for Blackfoot children is helping them renew their associations with ancestors. Other Blackfoot scholars noted that Blackfoot traditions and spiritual practices are chronicled in stories that explain their origin (Hernandez, 1999) and are the basis for understanding Blackfoot way of knowing (Pepion, 1999). Scholars maintain that stories provide a

bridge to knowledge, transfer life lessons, and describe philosophies of being (Bastien, 2004; Raczka, 2017).

Blackfeet Education Standards

The Blackfeet Tribal Business Council (BTBC) adopted the Blackfeet Education Standards (BES) in 2005 to integrate Blackfeet language and cultural standards into educational programs located on the Blackfeet Indian reservation. The BTBC issued Blackfeet Nation Resolution #59-2005, expressing concern that the loss of traditional values would negatively influence the Piikani way of life. Council members stated, "The Blackfeet Tribal Business Council is committed, in its educational endeavors to the preservation and integrity of Blackfeet language, history, traditions, values, and culture for current and future generations" (BES, 2005, pg. 4). The BES embodies the Piikani Code of Education (PCE), stating, "Since education is, in part, the transmission of culture and values, we declare that education within the territorial boundaries of the Blackfeet Reservation shall include the transmission of the Piikani language, culture, and values" (BES, 2005, pg. 7). The BES rests on Blackfeet values, defined as "standards or principles considered valuable or important for life" (BES, 2005, pg. 4). The framers of the BES included the Hoop of Values as part of their work. They identified the values as Honesty, Generosity, Respect, Spirituality, Courage, Humility, and Compassion (BES, 2005; Hall, 2018).

Methodology

Storywork

In the story that follows, I braid elements of Storywork (Archibald, 2008) with ethnographic writing (Ellis et al., 2011; Méndez, 2013) to share my cultural journey with Blackfeet cultural immersion teachers identified as Teacher 1 and Teacher 2, so the reader has a context to draw connections with my strategies of inquiry (Wilson, 2008) and findings. The reader experiences classroom activities used in Blackfeet cultural immersion classrooms that formed the foundation of the BWKEP used during this study. The school district established the Blackfeet cultural immersion program and grounded the model on place-based learning to braid the Western curriculum with a Blackfoot way of knowing. I, at times, use both the Blackfoot language and the English language. The Blackfoot language is the Native language of the Tribal Nation included in this study and has only existed in written form for about 100-years (Clark & Wylie, 2021).

Cultural Immersion Classroom Journey

I drove the fifty-five miles from my home to the largest community on the Blackfeet Indian reservation. The Blackfeet Indian reservation encompasses nearly 1.5 million acres and rests against the Rocky Mountains to the west and Alberta, Canada, to the north (Pepion, 2013). I had made this drive hundreds of times as the school principal at the state's largest AI student attending high school. I turned off US Highway 2 and headed west to find a parking space near the school at the center of this study. In the distance, I could see the remnants of winter's past and the precipitous peaks of Glacier National Park.

I approached a parking space and steered my car between two vehicles that encroached on two dimly colored white lines. I carefully opened my door and stepped from my vehicle as stiff gusts of wind attempted to turn me into a ball of sagebrush and send me spinning across the

windswept prairie. As I walked toward the school's doors, I noticed five dogs in two different packs searching for their next meal. I walked through the first set of doors and pushed a button to ask permission to enter the building. The hallways were crowded with students eagerly rushing to their classrooms. I stepped into the research classroom and greeted Teacher 1. I moved to the back of the classroom and sat on a chair designed for a nine-year-old. Teacher 1 hurriedly wrote instructions on the whiteboard as she greeted students. The students sauntered past me; some provided a wry smile before plopping into their seats and rummaging through their book bags.

The morning bell chimed, and students quickly turned their eyes towards the teacher. She began taking attendance by calling out each student's Indian name. AI scholars indicate that a Native Elder gives a name to an AI child or person during a ceremony (Bastien, 2004; Eli, 2013; Pepion, 1999). Academic literature noted that an Indian name contributes to an individual's identity and social status (Elliott, 2019). Wissler (1912a) suggested that an Indian name guides a person throughout life. A Blackfoot Elder described the significance of an Indian name this way "I think your Indian name is your spirit ... If people are calling me by my Blackfoot name, it has meaning—it has feeling—and has a spirit with it" (Clark & Wylie, 2021, pg. 317). Blackfoot names link to elements of a Blackfoot worldview (Bastien, 2004; Lombard, 2011; McClintock, 1992). Blackfoot Elder Frank Weasel Head (as cited in Lombard, 2008) noted that an Indian name reflects a history, and "is not only the history of the person carrying the name, but it extends back to whoever else has carried the name previously, and that may be over many centuries, sometimes even thousands of years" (pg. 58). Bastien (2004) proclaimed that an Indian name allows [Blackfoot] to connect directly with their ancestors. Eli (2013) and Armstrong Jr. (2021) signified an association between an Indian name and a person's identity.

Teacher 2 took a small wooden box called an altar (*iitāwāamāatō'osimō'•p'*) and lit a small amount of sweetgrass (*Sevastana odorata*), producing a pungently sweet-smelling smoke. The altar containing the lit sweetgrass was presented to students so they could smudge (*āwāamāatō'osimāa*). Scholars noted that smudging signified the beginning of a ceremony (Absolon & Willet, 2005; Bassett et al., 2012; Crowshoe & Mannes Schmidt, 2002). Wissler (1912b) described smudging as a cleansing custom that includes lighting "sweetgrass (*Sevastana odorata*), sweet pine (*Abies lasiocarpa*), narrow-leaved puccoon (*Lithospermum linearifolium*) or wild parsnip (*Leptotaenia multifida*)" (pg. 255). Kimmerer (2013) indicated that braids of sweetgrass are plaited of three strands, and the braids are understood as the "hair of Mother Earth" (pg. 197). The late Blackfoot historian Curly Bear Wagner revealed that the three strands of plaited sweetgrass represent the sun, water, and earth and signify the entire universe when used to smudge (Wagner, 2018).

Authors describe the smoke produced during smudging as a powerful spiritual agent to transfer messages to a higher power (Portmann & Garrett, 2006). Blackfoot scholars maintain that smudging purifies (Pepion, 1999), and the smoke symbolizes prayers (Armstrong Jr., 2021) going to the Creator (Pepion, 1999). Bastien (2004) indicated that "smudge is used to ask for a blessing, such as good relations with relatives or that the journey of life be long and full of kindness" (pg. 85). A sense of calm prevailed across the classroom as students fanned smoke into their faces and through their hair.

The connection between smudging and spirituality was ever-present. Indigenous cultures frame spirituality as a way of being and it is understood as the belief in the interconnectedness of all-natural things (Long Standing Bear Chief, 1992; Wagner, 2018). McClintock (1968) illustrated the interconnectivity by stating, "The Great Spirit, or Great Mystery, or Good Power, is everywhere and in everything - mountains, plains, winds, waters, trees, birds, and animals" (pg. 167). Bastien (2004) surmises that reality is co-created and changed through universal energies produced through prayer. Through these prayers, Blackfoot people connect directly with spiritual beings in the natural

world (Bastien, 2004). Sheets (2013) suggested that “traditional Blackfeet spirituality conceptualizes all types of life as sacred, and that sacredness is acknowledged and engaged with through prayer ...” (pg. 49). Spirituality was an essential part of the research classrooms. Following the completion of smudging, Teacher 2 asked for student volunteers to say a blessing in Blackfoot language over the school P.A. system. Several students eagerly volunteered and raced to the school office to recite the niitsiitüpii äatsimoi•’kään (real people blessing):

iyō isstsiipāattüpiiyō•’p’ (oh, source of life), isspoōmoōkinnāan (help us), nāa”kaiyiistsiisinnāan (so that we may listen), nāa”kaikimmoōtsiisinnāan (So that we may treat each other with kindness), nāa”kayikāakimāasinnāan (So that we may try hard), nāa”koōkōkākimāatoōsinnāan (So that we may be honest), nāa”kāto’yiiūksisinnāan (So that we may be spiritual), āayoō”toōkinnāan ā•pīsstoōtoōkii (Hear us Creator), kimmis kōōkōōsiiks (Pity your children), iiksiikimmātā•psiiyāa (They are in need), kāmōiāani (Grant us safety), Niisīāawātsiimāan miisūmiiipāattüpiisin (So we may grow into having long lives), kyīnn (amen)

Having Blackfoot youths use their Native language is central to being Blackfoot as it reflects their philosophies (Prete, 2021) and houses essential knowledge (Armstrong, 2021) containing the rules and responsibilities transferred between generations (Bastien, 2004; Cajete, 1994). Scholars noted that language is an integral element of cultural world views (Absolon & Willet, 2005; Raczk, 2017) and "a crucial symbol of ethnicity" (Perea, 1992, pg.356). A human's existence mirrors the meaning and purpose found in their language where assumptions and relationships with people live—it is the happenings caused by those relationships that are crucial for Blackfoot pedagogy (Bastien, 2004). Language stores unique ideas (Kimmerer, 2013) and transports culture (Grande, 2000). People are more in touch with their feelings and personal thoughts when experienced through their first language (Kirmayer et al., 2000).

Sustaining traditional languages is essential to cultural identity (Grande, 2000) and Indigenous community sustainability (Searle et al., 2018) because embedded in the language are the life-sustaining elements of understanding ceremonial practices that are the bedrock of Native peoples' identity (Benally & Viri, 2005). Blackfoot scholar Head (2012) noted that language connects AIs to the land, their ancestors, and the spirit world.

I positioned myself towards the center of the students and reached into a well-worn leather attaché case to retrieve a copy of Napi and the Rock. Blackfoot families have used the misfortunes of the trickster Napi (Ewers, 1939; Pepion, 1999) to strengthen social norms (Zedeño et al., 2021), identify ethical practices to follow (Bastien, 2004), and teach life lessons to generations of Blackfoot children (Bastien, 2004; Eaglespeaker, 2017). Napi is described as a "supernatural being" (LaPier, 2015, pg. 127) who can communicate with animals and perform mystical acts (Pepion, 1999). The edition of Napi and the Rock used for this study was an AI Elder approved version composed by Indigenous scholar Eaglespeaker (2017).

While I read a portion of Napi and the Rock, Teacher 1 drew a graphic organizer on the whiteboard and engaged students in narrative meaning-making to conceptualize the values included in the Hoop of Values highlighted in the story. A graphic organizer is a visual aid used to focus on the critical information in a story (Stenson, 2006) to help students develop a deeper understanding (Jiang & Grabe, 2007). We also explored traditional learning practices by creating a Winter Count. Winter Count comes from the North Peigan tribe and is represented by a small

picture commonly painted on an animal hide (McClintock, 1968) used to chronicle critical historical events (Raczka, 1979; Tovías, 2014).

Measure

The instruments used included 1) a Demographic questionnaire and 2) the Blackfeet Adapted Cultural Connectedness Scale (BACCS-S). The author administered the pre-survey and post-survey. The pre-survey respondents ($n = 41$) and the post-survey respondents ($n = 41$) answered 14 questions including four demographic questions; four related to the identity subscale; three connected to the traditional subscale; three related to the spirituality subscale. All ten questions of the BACCS-S had a yes/no or not applicable response scale. The 14 questions pre-survey and post-survey, attached as Appendix A took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Demographic questions included gender, age, ethnicity, and the number of years of participation in a cultural immersion classroom.

Blackfeet Adapted Cultural Connectedness Scale (BACCS-S)

To measure Spirituality, Identity, and Traditions as elements of cultural connectedness, a Blackfeet-adapted version of the Cultural Connectedness Scale Short (CCS-S) was used. The CCS-S is based on a subset of the original 29-item Cultural Connectedness Scale validated through a sample ($n = 319$) of Indigenous youth (Snowshoe et al., 2015). The CCS-S version has ten items spread across three subscales: Spirituality, Identity, and Traditions. Of the original CCS-S items, five had a dichotomous response scale of yes/no, four had a 5-point Likert response scale ranging from Never to Every Day. One had a 5-point Likert response scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The CCS-S was tested with 290 Indigenous youth between the ages of 11 and 24 years. The measure demonstrated good scale score reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$, 95% CI: [.641– .752]; Snowshoe et al., 2017).

The Blackfeet version was adapted under a Community Advisory Board (CAB) to reflect Blackfeet culture and age appropriateness. For example, the original Cultural Connectedness Scale-Short Version (CSS-S) question number 1 states: I know my cultural/spirit name, and was adapted to state: I know my Indian name; question number 6 states, I have a strong sense of belonging to my [Aboriginal/FNMI] community or nation and was adapted to state: I have a strong sense of belonging to the Blackfeet Nation; and we added a question stating: If a traditional person/Elder speaks to me about being Blackfeet I would listen to them carefully.

Youth Interviews

To frame how Blackfoot youth, realize cultural connectedness, the author conducted semi-structured interviews with youth participants ($n = 41$) using an interview guide attached as Appendix B. The interviews took place at school and lasted approximately 17-minutes (*average* = 17.12, *SD* = 4.52). The interviews included one question from each of the three BACCS-S subscales: Spirituality, Identity, and Traditions, as well as probing and clarifying questions for each of the original interview questions. To maintain a commitment to using Indigenous mythologies, follow-up questions were intentionally designed to permit the youth participants to become storytellers and share their stories based on their lived experiences. Indigenous epistemologies and research approaches center on storytelling (Brayboy, 2005; Iseke, 2013). For example, the author asked the participants a series of questions related to their Indian name that began by asking them

if they knew their Indian name and, if so, could they pronounce it. They were then encouraged to tell a story of what their Indian name means, where their Indian name came from, and why it is important.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Three paired *t*-tests were used to compare the means of the pre-survey and the post-survey for each subscale of the BACCS-S (Spirituality, Identity, Traditions), participant age, and gender to determine any significance at the $p < 0.0001$ (Using a Pearson Correlation on SPSS Version 19), illustrated in Tables 1, 2, and 3. The degree of internal consistency of the Blackfeet adapted cultural connectedness survey instrument was measured by applying Cronbach's Alpha (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$), indicating strong internal reliability.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The Hoop of Values affixed to the Blackfeet Education Standards, and the five Great Values developed by Sanchez (2007) guided the analysis. A data analysis process described by Saldaña (2013) in which the researcher uses interviews, observations, and field notes. The precoding process was initiated by sifting through 41 fully transcribed youth interviews by reading each a minimum of four times before creating two-column notes to determine patterns of words and phrases used by the participants.

To identify categories voiced by the participants, the author used In Vivo coding linked with narrative or the practice of storytelling (Green & Thorogood, 2014). In Vivo coding and narrative analysis align with an Indigenous paradigm (Wilson, 2008). In Vivo Coding uses the participants' words as codes instead of scholar-created codes (Saldaña, 2013). The scholar (2013) maintained that In Vivo Coding is "particularly useful in educational ethnographies with youth" (p. 91). Saldaña, (2013) indicated that youth voices are often minimized, and scholars can better understand their perceptions by using their exact words. Narrative analysis was performed to understand how interview participants categorized and make sense of life events in order to tell an authentic and persuasive story (Riessman, 1993). An example of In Vivo Coding used on a passage captured during this study follows:

I like when our teacher uses our Indian name when he takes role—It makes me proud and helps me connect to our Blackfeet culture. My Indian name is important because it came from an elder's dream about the stars. I like cutting dry meat so I can hear the stories from my gram and eating berry soup at the bundle openings. When we smudge in our class it calms me down and it lets me connect to our Creator.

- 1. Indian Name
- 2. Pride 3. Connect
- 4. Culture
- 5. Elder 6. Dream 7. Stars
- 8. Dry Meat 9. Hear 10. Stories 11. Gram
- 12. Berry Soup 13. Bundle 14. Smudge
- 15. Calm 16. Connect 17. Creator

Results

BACCS-S Quantitative Analysis

Three paired-samples *t*-tests ($n = 41$) were conducted to determine to what degree a Blackfoot way of knowing educational paradigm informs cultural connectedness, illustrated in Table 1 (Subscales), Table 2 (Age), and Table 3 (Gender).

Table 1

Blackfeet Adapted Cultural Connectedness Scale (BACCS-S) Paired t-test (Subscales)

(n=41)	Mean			T	df	P-Value
Variable	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey	Difference			
Spirituality	2.71	2.9	-0.195**	-3.114	40	0.003
Tradition	1.93	2.56	-0.683***	-4.823	40	0.001
Identity	3.71	3.9	-0.195*	-2.72	40	0.01
Covert Bored.	2.14	8.21	-6.073***	-9.973	40	0.000

Note: * P< 0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

As shown in Table 1, the results of the Paired Sample T-test indicated that the survey program was effective and caused a significant increase in the mean values of Spirituality (T (40) = -3.114, p-value < 0.01, Tradition (T (40) = -4.823, p-value < 0.001), Identity (T (40) = -2.720, p-value < 0.01) and Covert Bored (T (40) = -9.973, p-value < 0.001) from pre-survey to post-survey. The results of the Paired Sample T-test indicated that the difference was statistically significant at a 0.01 level because of having a p-value less than the standard significance level of 0.01; T (40) = -3.114, p-value < 0.01.

Table 2

Blackfeet Adapted Cultural Connectedness Scale (BACCS-S) Paired t-test (Age)

Age	Variable	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey	Difference	T-Value	df	P-Value
9 years old (n=21)	Spirituality	2.81	2.95	-0.143	-1.826	20	0.083
	Traditions	2.14	2.62	-0.476**	2.911	20	0.009
	Identity	3.76	3.86	-0.095	-1.451	20	0.162
	Covert Bored	2	6.14	-4.143***	-6.087	20	0.000
10 years old (n=20)	Spirituality	2.6	2.85	-0.25*	-2.517	19	0.021
	Traditions	1.6	2.5	-0.9**	-3.943	19	0.001
	Identity	3.65	3.95	-0.3*	-2.349	19	0.03
	Covert Bored	2.28	10.38	-8.1***	-9.924	19	0.000

Note: * P< 0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

As shown in Table 2, the results of the Paired-Sample T-test indicated that the mean value of Spirituality significantly increased for 10-year-old children (T (19) = -2.517, p-value < 0.05). In contrast, the amount of increase for the 9-year-old children was not statistically significant (T (20) = -1.826, p-value > 0.05). The mean value of Tradition for post-survey was significantly higher than pre-survey for both 9-year-old children (T (20) = -2.911, p-value < 0.01) and 10-year-old children (T (19) = -3.943, p-value < 0.01). The mean value of Identity significantly increased from pre-survey to post-survey for the ten-year-old children (T (19) = -2.349, p-value < 0.01), while the amount of increase from pre-survey to post-survey was not statistically significant for the nine-year children (T (20) = -1.4516, p-value > 0.05). The results also indicated that the mean value of

Convert Bored significantly increased from pre-survey to post-survey for both 9-year-old children (T (20) = -6.087, p-value < 0.001) and 10-year-old children (T (19) = -9.924, p-value < 0.001).

Table 3

Blackfeet Adapted Cultural Connectedness Scale (BACCS-S) Paired t-test (Gender)

Gender	Variable	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey	Difference	T-Value	df	P-Value
Male (n=18)	Spirituality	2.72	2.94	-0.222*	-2.2046	17	0.042
	Traditions	1.5	2.5	-1**	-4.123	17	0.001
	Identity	3.56	3.83	-0.278	-2.051	17	0.056
	Covert Bored	2.3	12.07	-9.778***	-21.492	17	0.000
Female (n=23)	Spirituality	2.7	2.87	-0.174*	-2.152	22	0.043
	Traditions	2.17	2.61	-0.435**	-2.865	22	0.009
	Identity	3.83	3.96	-0.13	-1.817	22	0.083
	Covert Bored	2.01	5.19	-3.174***	-6.987	22	0.000

Note: * P < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001

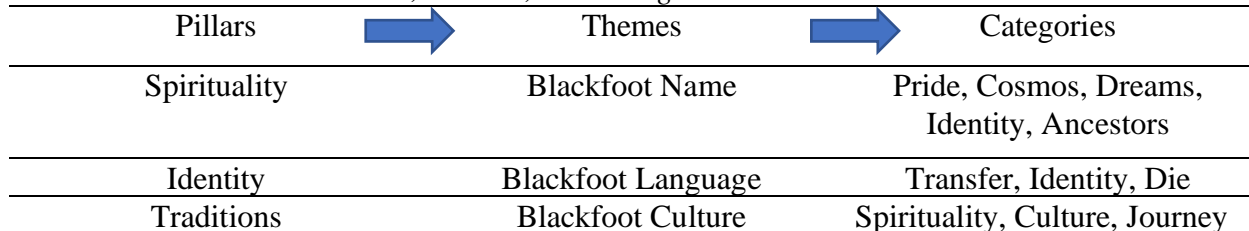
As shown in Table 3, the results of the Paired-Sample T-test indicated that the mean value of Spirituality significantly increased from pre-survey to post-survey for both males (T (17) = -2.204, p-value < 0.05) and females (T (22) = -2.152, p-value < 0.05). The mean value of Tradition for post-survey was significantly higher than pre-survey for both males (T (17) = -4.123, p-value < 0.01) and females (T (22) = -2.865, p-value < 0.01). Although the mean value of Identity overall significantly increased from pre-survey to post-survey, it did not significantly increase for males (T (17) = -2.051, p-value > 0.05) and females (T (22) = -1.817, p-value > 0.05) separately. The results also indicated that the mean value of Convert Bored significantly increased from pre-survey to post-survey for both males (T (17) = -21.492, p-value < 0.001) and females (T (22) = -6.987, p-value < 0.001).

BACCS-S Qualitative Analysis

Three overarching pillars of responses were derived from the cultural connectedness survey subcategories: (Spirituality, Identity, and Traditions), and three themes: (Blackfoot Name, Blackfoot Language, and Blackfoot Culture), and 11 categories captured from the youth interviews, illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Cultural Connectedness Pillars, Themes, and Categories



Transformational Data Analysis

To develop a robust understanding of the relationships between the Cultural Connectedness Pillars and the youths' perceptions, a transformational data analysis was used to quantify the qualitative findings (Creswell et al., 2004; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

Cultural Connectedness Pillar 1: Spirituality (Blackfoot Name)

To understand how the youth participants came to know their Indian names, they were asked a series of questions related to their Blackfoot names. The results from the interviews showed that 37 out of 41 students knew and could pronounce their Indian name; 36 out of 41 knew the meaning of their Indian name; 36 out of 41 could explain why they were given their Indian name, and 37 out of 41 could articulate why their Indian name was essential to them. Student quotes supporting the Blackfoot Name Pillar include, "My Blackfoot name is who I am," "My Indian name is important to me because it comes from the stars and that's where we come from," "My Indian name is important because it came from an elder's dream who gave it to my mom," "My Indian name is important because it was given to me by an elder who passed."

Cultural Connectedness Pillar 2: Identity (Blackfoot Language)

BACCS-S pre-survey and post-survey showed that 41 out of 41 students indicated it was vital for them to learn their Blackfoot language. To develop a more robust understanding of how youth participants understood the importance of knowing the Blackfoot language, they were asked if learning their Blackfoot language was necessary. If so, could they explain the significance? In all, 37 out of 41 students indicated that they believed learning the Blackfoot language was necessary. Student quotes supporting the Blackfoot Language Pillar include, "I use our language to pray and teach it to my little brother," "I think we should really start using our Blackfeet words when we say stuff because our language is starting to die," "Some of the elders have died out, some of them have gone to the other-side and we don't have many speakers left," "If it dies out, our culture will die out," "Our language is our culture."

Cultural Connectedness Pillar 3: Traditions (Blackfoot Culture)

The BACC-S pre-survey indicated that 18 out of 41 students had participated in a cultural ceremony, and the post-survey stated that 32 out of 41 had participated in a cultural ceremony. In all, the interviews revealed that 24 out of 41 students could explain their favorite cultural activity. Student quotes supporting the Blackfoot Traditions Pillar include, "Getting the berry soup," "I like cutting dry meat so I can hear the stories from my grandma," "I like bundle openings and seeing the elders smoke the pipe—I also like getting my face painted," "My favorite activity is going to stick game with my grandfather."

Discussion

This study aimed to assess the degree of impact an AI way of knowing educational paradigm had on AI youths' cultural connectedness. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study to use an integrated model (García Coll et al., 1996) as a strength-based approach to measure cultural connectedness with AI youths. This essay illustrates how an adaptive culture may increase

an AI youth's cultural connectedness. The findings from this examination add vital knowledge to expand the application of an integrative model to study developmental competencies in AI schoolchildren (Marks & García Coll, 2017).

The results show that AI youths included in this essay gained a deeper connection to their culture by experiencing culturally influenced schooling practices and environments that nurtured ethnic-racial identity (ERI) exploration (Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014). Academic literature notes that ethnic identity exploration counters the ill effects of oppression and colonization (Tsosie, 2003) suppressed as innate (Bourdieu, 1984; Deloria et al., 2018; DiAngelo, 2011; Kirmayer et al., 2014; Mohatt et al., 2014). Scholars claimed that ERI development might nurture positive attitudes towards school (Bakth et al., 2022) and increased sense of self and well-being for AI youths (Byrd & Legette, 2022; Hoffman et al., 2021).

Academic research claims that traditional educational systems focus on helping youths learn skills needed to function in the dominant culture's system by disregarding AI cultural capital (Bastien, 2004; Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018). Swartz (1997) revealed that academic accomplishment is more related to cultural capital than aptitude or meeting academic benchmarks. Pidgeon (2008) purported that Native languages, knowledge, and cultural traditions are elements of cultural capital for Indigenous people. The offer of cultural capital is especially significant for AI youths who are led to believe that their Indigenous knowledge (IK) is primeval (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Castagno et al., 2022) and that their Native languages are inferior to the dominant culture (Battiste, 2009).

Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) offered a narrow interpretation of cultural capital based predominantly on a White, middle-class culture that included things innate or owned by the middle class and the accumulation of specific epistemologies, aptitudes, and adroitness deemed valuable by the dominant class. Yosso (2005) expanded on Bourdieu's narrow concept of cultural capital to incorporate *familial capital* and *linguist capital* as elements of cultural capital. Yosso (2005) explained *familial capital* as the cultural knowledge transferred between kinship "that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" (Yosso, 2005, pg. 79). The author noted that *familial capital* includes an extension of traditional kinship alliances consisting of aunts, uncles, and grandparents (Yosso, 2005) who play a part in educating and nurturing a child as they develop throughout their life (Bastien, 2004; Prete, 2021). Adopting a broader understanding of kinship is vital to AIs as they counter the colonization methods designed to redefine their identity by eroding tribal kinship alliances (Bastien, 2004; Garrouette, 2001; Grande, 2000; Wolfe, 2006).

Yosso (2005) wrote that *linguist capital* emphasized the links between racialized cultural histories and language. The scholar underscored the legitimacy of intellectual knowledge and social skill acquired and histories passed on through storytelling that includes memorization. Literature noted that memorization is a credible aspect of storytelling (Katner, 2021) and is a component of culturally responsive education (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Blackfoot scholars assert that people use memory the way scholars use data, which is to say, that "what we remember of the past molds the present, while what we are concerned with in the present shapes our memory of the past" (Crowshoe & Mannes Schmidt, 2002, pg. 75). Blackfoot Elder LaPlant underscored the element of memory as a counter-narrative to settler-colonial accounts that attempt to present a fictitious and racialized history of AI people, stating,

The reflections of events are represented very differently, and the interpretations of those events are represented extremely differently than what's in the memory of people who have experienced the passage of history over millennia from a completely different standpoint that has to do with memory and place (LaPlant, 2018).

Researchers maintain that storytelling is a legitimate source of transferring tribal philosophies, beliefs, and traditions between generations (Brayboy, 2005; Mason, 2000). Blackfoot scholars avow traditional Blackfoot values (Prete, 2021), and knowledge are transferred between ages (Bastien, 2004; Pepion, 1999) through creation and mythology stories that provide the basis for Blackfoot culture (Bastien, 2004).

Culturally grounded schooling practices illuminate the hidden assimilation ideas embedded in educational policies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014) by transforming deficit approaches of teaching and learning (Paris, 2012) to move Native people closer to educational sovereignty (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; McCarty & Lee, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014). Students thrive academically when teachers provide quality instruction braided with cultural competencies (Suarta et al., 2022). Evidence suggests that identifying with traditional cultural elements and having pride in one's culture contributes to a better school attitude and increased academic success (LaFromboise et al., 2006; Whitbeck et al., 2001).

To nurture culturally centered learning environments, we must acknowledge the near silence in the existing literature on the roles that racism and oppression play in modern-day AI schooling practices (Brayboy, & Lomawaima, 2018; Cleary & Peacock, 1998). That is not to say that there is no scholarly work exploring racism experienced by AI schoolchildren. In fact, scholars argue that race and racism are entrenched in schooling across America (García Coll & Ferrer, 2021; Kohli et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Quijada Cerecer, 2013). Instead, I suggest that the scholarship on discrimination experienced by AI schoolchildren rarely includes a discussion about the differing worldviews on spirituality and cultural traditions that, in part, nurture social stratification (García Coll et al., 1996) grounded on racism and oppression (Yosso, 2005).

To be discriminated against because of one's spiritual faith or cultural traditions is the most dangerous form of bias. It gouges the spirit leaving in its place a deafening silence, misconstrued as pride. AIs who uphold their traditional beliefs are victims of discrimination, especially when those beliefs are antithetical to the dominant culture's educational systems. To improve AI youth's school experiences, educators must understand and appreciate AI belief systems. If deprived of this understanding and appreciation, the only possible outcome is discrimination, which injures AI people's souls (Locust, 1988).

Limitations

This study's findings must be understood considering specific limitations. One of the significant limitations of this study is that the author is non-Indigenous. I also note that my sample came from only cultural immersion classrooms. This fact may limit the generalizability to other Blackfeet youths, as these youths may have been particularly exposed to Blackfeet culture before the examination. Finally, I acknowledge that each Tribal Nation has its own unique culture, and the results of this study cannot be broadly generalized to other Tribal Nations.

I probed community members' perspectives of this study to address my limitations, including members of a community advisory board (CAB) and my cultural liaison. The community participants were current or former school district employees or board members, and each had prior

knowledge of this study. Before explaining the conclusions, I provided them an opportunity to offer their perceptions of both the strategies of inquiry and the conclusions drawn. The community members collectively identified the significance of following proper Blackfeet protocol and using cultural guides to establish research credibility. The adaptation of the cultural connectedness survey to reflect Blackfeet culture was praised, as was the commitment to capturing the perspectives of the youth. Overall, community members recommended replicating the current study to include more youth from cultural immersion and non-immersion classrooms.

Conclusion

The finding from this study add important context for establishing place-based learning opportunities grounded on an AI way of knowing. The results show that youths' cultural connectedness is significantly impacted by experiencing culturally engrained learning practices. The results are essential because cultural connectedness is believed to improve self-esteem for AI youths (Snowshoe et al., 2017). The youth participants also provided important perspectives about how they contextualize cultural connectedness. Their voices are critical because AI youths are rarely studied (Quijada Cerecer, 2013) or represented in school settings (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Serafini et al., 2017).

As a non-Indigenous scholar partnering with AI scholars for participatory action research, we must acknowledge that the colliding worldviews between the colonizers and colonized influence the perspectives we all bring to communicating the results of this study. As Wilson (2007) artfully noted, "We cannot be separated from our work and nor should our writing be separated from ourselves" (pg.194). The partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars highlighted in this study is symbolic of our commitment to situating ourselves in our cultural and colonial histories that contribute to "healing to our recovery" (Absolon & Willet, 2005, pg. 116) between the colonized and colonizer.

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Blessing Permission

The author was granted permission by his cultural liaison and cultural guide to include the Blackfeet Blessing in this publication.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared the following potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research and publication of this article: This work is expanded from dissertation research, though substantially different in scope and purpose.

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Notes on Contributor

Shawn Clark served as a building-level administrator for 19 years, including seven years at the largest American Indian student attending high school in Montana. Shawn earned his Doctoral degree in Education (Leadership and Innovation) at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. His research centers on elements of belongingness, cultural pluralism, and rural education.

ORCID

Shawn Clark, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7474-9696>

Appendix A

- How old are you?

- Indicate your sex by circling your choice?

Female

Male

- Place a check next to each grade you were enrolled in an immersion classroom:

K____ 1____ 2____ 3____ 4____ 5____

- Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be by circling your choice(s):

American Indian or
Alaska Native

Asian

White

Black or
African American

Native Hawaiian or
Pacific Islander

Other

Please answer each question to the best of your knowledge by circling either YES, or NO. If you are unsure or if the question doesn't apply to you circle N.A. There is no right or wrong answer.

- | | | | |
|--|-----|------|----|
| 1. I know my Indian name. (S) | YES | N.A. | NO |
| 2. I have participated in a cultural ceremony. (T) | YES | N.A. | NO |
| 3. I want to find out more about my culture such as its history, traditions, customs and language. (I) | YES | N.A. | NO |
| 4. I believe things like animals and rocks have a spirit. (S) | YES | N.A. | NO |
| 5. I have a traditional person/Elder who I talk to. (T) | YES | N.A. | NO |
| 6. I have a strong sense of belonging to the Blackfeet Nation. (I) | YES | N.A. | NO |
| 7. If a traditional person/Elder speak to me about being Blackfeet I would listen to them carefully. (I) | YES | N.A. | NO |
| 8. It's important that I know my Blackfeet language. (I) | YES | N.A. | NO |
| 9. The Eagle feather has a lot of meaning to me. (S) | YES | N.A. | NO |
| 10. Someone you are close with uses sage, sweetgrass, cedar, or sweet pine. (T) | YES | N.A. | NO |

Appendix B

Original Question	Follow-Up Question(s)
Do you know Your Indian name?	Can you say it to me? What does your Indian name mean? Why is your Indian name important to you?
Is learning Blackfeet language important to you?	Why is knowing Blackfoot language important to you?
Describe your favorite cultural activity you have participated in?	Describe what you like about it?
How do you know when you are doing well in school?	Describe how it makes you feel?
Describe your favorite activity to do at school that makes you happy?	Describe how it makes you happy?
