Cross-Cultural Field Experiences in Alaska Native Villages: Implications for Culturally Responsive Teacher Education

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CROSS-CULTURAL FIELD EXPERIENCES IN ALASKA NATIVE VILLAGES: IMPLICATIONS FOR CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHER EDUCATION

TIMOTHY E. JESTER and LETITIA H. FICKEL
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The purpose of this article was to examine a cross-cultural field experience initiative that placed preservice teacher candidates in Alaska Native Village schools. The qualitative study explored 53 candidates’ experiences and perceptions of schooling to construct a portrait of the sociocultural context of education in Alaska Native Villages and consider implications for designing a culturally responsive teacher education program. Findings revealed two major themes: (1) schools were spaces for teaching Alaska Native cultural traditions and languages and (2) schools were sites of separation where many White teachers were separated from the communities, applied a deficit orientation to student learning, and implemented curriculum disconnected from the local culture. Based on these findings, three key components for designing a culturally responsive teacher education curriculum were identified: (1) culturally responsive conceptual framework, (2) critical sociocultural consciousness, and (3) engagement with culturally relevant epistemology and knowledge.

It is imperative to prepare teachers for today’s diverse classrooms. Currently, 45% of students in U.S. public schools are ethnic minorities, and in 12 states and the District of Columbia, students of color constitute the majority of school enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2011a). According to U.S. Census Bureau (2008) projections, by 2032 ethnic minorities will comprise the majority of students in U.S. schools. Although student diversity is a hallmark of classrooms, the teaching force is strikingly homogenous—over 80% of teachers are White (U.S. Department of Education, 2011b). Many of these teachers have little or no experience in cross-cultural settings and bring limited and/or inaccurate knowledge of their students’ cultural backgrounds (Castro, 2010; Gay, 2010; Sleeter, 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Furthermore, they often use a deficit orientation when interacting with students of color (i.e., focusing on perceived faults or problems that need to be fixed), which negatively impacts students’ learning (Castro, 2010; Sleeter, 2008). This demographic landscape and the implications for teaching and learning highlight the urgency of preparing teachers to better serve the culturally diverse students in their classrooms.

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As teacher educators working in this sociocultural milieu, we are interested in identifying ways to support teachers’ development as culturally responsive educators. In this study we examined a cross-cultural field experience initiative in the University of Alaska Anchorage’s (UAA) College of Education that aimed to prepare preservice candidates to effectively teach culturally diverse students.

**Literature Review: Culturally Responsive Practices and Program Design**

Teacher educators can draw from a well-established body of literature to design programs that focus on diversity and culturally responsive practices. First, the literature presents a clearly defined vision of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) that can inform the development of program outcomes, key assignments, and assessments. For instance, culturally responsive teachers actively engage students in learning by grounding the curriculum in the local context and connecting it to the funds of knowledge students bring to the classroom (Gay, 2010; Moll & Gonzalez, 2004). These teachers believe ethnic minority students are capable learners and communicate high expectations for their learning (Gay, 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2012). They respect and become familiar with students’ cultural backgrounds and home communities (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In addition, they are aware of their own cultural frames of reference and understand these influence how they approach teaching and their interactions with culturally diverse students (Banks et al., 2005; Garmon, 2004; Rychly & Graves, 2012; Schussler, Stooksberry, & Bercaw, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Furthermore, they are teachers committed to social justice who recognize the role education can play in creating a more equitable society, and are therefore equipped to act as agents of change (Garmon, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2005; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Second, the professional and research literature contains frameworks that can be used to structure teacher education programs in ways that bring coherence around the goal of preparing culturally responsive teachers. For example, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education’s (2008) (NCATE) Diversity Standard identifies four areas that should be included in teacher education programs: (a) design, implementation, and evaluation of curriculum and experiences related to diversity; and opportunities for candidates to work with (b) diverse faculty, (c) diverse candidates, and (d) diverse students in P–12 schools. In addition, Banks et al. (2005) emphasized developing a coherent program that focuses on social justice and diversity and provides preservice teachers opportunities to learn about their K–12 students and communities, learn about themselves as cultural beings, and learn about teaching from their practice in classrooms. Finally, Sleeter (2008) presented a “three-legged platform” for structuring preservice programs consisting of university-based coursework that emphasizes culture and equity pedagogy, school-based fieldwork with diverse students, and cross-cultural community-based experiences whereby preservice teachers become familiar with their students’ home communities.

Finally, in addition to creating program outcomes based on a vision of CRT and establishing a coherent program, the literature is a source for pedagogical strategies that teacher educators can use to support preservice teachers’ development in CRT. Examples of such strategies include service learning (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), reflective writing (Akiba, 2011; Villegas & Lucas, 2002), case studies (Kleinfeld, 1998; Villegas & Lucas, 2002), and autobiographical explorations (Banks et al., 2005; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In this article, we bring attention to cross-cultural field experiences, a strategy that
places candidates in schools or community agencies located in a cross-cultural setting with the goal of enhancing their capacities (e.g., knowledge, skills, and/or dispositions) for culturally responsive teaching. For instance, during the 1990s, the Teach for Alaska initiative at the University of Alaska Fairbanks placed preservice teachers in Alaska Native villages to work in schools and in communities (Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993). Another example is Indiana University’s Cultural Immersion Project which places candidates in international settings, on Navajo Reservations, and in Chicago’s urban neighborhoods (Indiana University, 2012). Studies of these and other cross-cultural field experiences indicate participants tend to increase their cultural awareness; improve their self-efficacy; enhance their global-mindedness; and incorporate local values, beliefs, and traditions into their teaching (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Marx & Moss, 2011; Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993; Stachowski & Brantmeier, 2002; Stachowski & Frey, 2003; Stachowski, Richardson, & Henderson, 2003).

Key themes from the literature underpin this work, but we extended the literature by applying a CRT approach to teacher education program design with the goal of supporting candidates’ development as culturally responsive teachers by modeling CRT. Specifically, we used data collected from preservice teachers engaged in cross-cultural field experiences to construct a portrait of schooling in Alaska Native Villages and then considered implications for creating a context-sensitive teacher education curriculum. The study focused on two key questions: what do the interns’ experiences and perceptions of schooling in Alaska Native Villages tell us about the sociocultural context of schooling in these Alaska Native communities? and what are the implications of these findings for designing culturally responsive teacher education programs?

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 53 preservice candidates placed in 11 schools. The schools were located in Alaska Native Villages, rural communities located off the road system only accessible by airplane or boat. The population in the villages ranged from 97 to 966 with Alaska Natives making up 87% of the residents; in seven communities 90% of the residents were Alaska Natives. A federally recognized tribe was located in each community and many residents continued to engage in traditional subsistence activities such as fishing and berry picking. (Alaska Department of Commerce, 2012).

The 53 preservice candidates who participated in the cross-cultural experiences were enrolled in their student teaching internship in one of three preservice programs: Early Childhood Education (15% of participants), Elementary Education (38%), and Secondary Education (47%). Ninety-one percent of the participants were White and 74% were female. No candidate identified as Alaska Native as indicated in university enrollment data.

The 11 schools were selected because of their affiliation with the Alaska Educational Innovations Network (AEIN), a 5-year Teacher Quality Enhancement (TQE) grant from the U.S. Department of Education that also funded the cross-cultural field experience initiative. Student enrollment in the host schools ranged from 10 to 302. Although Alaska Natives constitute 23.5% of the student population in Alaska, in these 11 schools, 93% of the students were Alaska Native, ranging from 55.5% in one school to 100% in three schools (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2012) (see Table 1).
TABLE 1 Student Enrollment and Race/Ethnicity by School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>School district</th>
<th>Grades in school</th>
<th>Total enrollment</th>
<th>Alaska Native</th>
<th>2 or more races</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>#1</td>
<td>K–12</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>N: 73</td>
<td>N: 0</td>
<td>N: 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>93.5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>#1</td>
<td>K–8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>N: 10</td>
<td>N: 0</td>
<td>N: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>#2</td>
<td>K–12</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>N: 302</td>
<td>N: 0</td>
<td>N: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>#3</td>
<td>K–12</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>N: 188</td>
<td>N: 7</td>
<td>N: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>95.4%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>#3</td>
<td>K–12</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>N: 109</td>
<td>N: 1</td>
<td>N: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>95.6%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>#3</td>
<td>K–12</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>N: 138</td>
<td>N: 2</td>
<td>N: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>97.8%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>#4</td>
<td>K–12</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>N: 0</td>
<td>N: 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>98.6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>#4</td>
<td>K–12</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>N: 0</td>
<td>N: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>99.0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>#5</td>
<td>K–12</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>N: 20</td>
<td>N: 1</td>
<td>N: 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>55.5%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>#6</td>
<td>K–12</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>N: 23</td>
<td>N: 3</td>
<td>N: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>82.1%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>#6</td>
<td>K–12</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>N: 24</td>
<td>N: 0</td>
<td>N: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1,300</td>
<td>N: 1,253</td>
<td>N: 14</td>
<td>N: 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>96.3%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statewide</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>129,047</td>
<td>N: 30,433</td>
<td>N: 9,558</td>
<td>N: 68,967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>53.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Schools were classified as Title I and seven schools did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) guidelines under No Child Left Behind in 2010–2011. The average yearly dropout rate in 2008–2011 for students in grades 7–12 was 9.2%, ranging from 7.83% to 19.32% across the schools; these rates were significantly higher than the state’s 2.34% dropout rate during the same 4-year period (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2011).

The teacher demographics in these schools consisted of 83% White and 13% Alaska Natives, and 61% were female and 39% were male. During the 4 years of this study, teacher turnover rates in the schools ranged from 15.75% to 59.5%, with a 32% average across all schools, a significantly higher level of turnover than the statewide annual rate of 21.5% (Hill, 2012).

Data Sources

Data were collected using qualitative methods, primarily document analysis and interviews, during the fall and spring semesters in academic years 2008–2010. In AY 2011, we col-
lected data only during the spring semester because the cross-cultural field experience was not offered in fall 2010. The primary data were derived from a reflective journal interns completed during the field placement that addressed teachers’ perspectives of the community, school, classroom, and themselves as cultural beings. We also used a post-visit questionnaire and a focus group interview each year to collect data. The questionnaire addressed logistical areas (e.g., accommodations) as well as examples of interns’ participation in the communities and their perceptions of how the experience related to their view of themselves as teachers. We conducted six focus group interviews during the four years, each lasting about 90 minutes. The focus group sessions were conducted after interns had completed the field experience, and functioned as a forum for interns to tell about their experiences generally, as well as talk specifically about their understanding of the relationship among culture, teaching, and learning; schooling in Alaska Native Villages; and the relevancy of the cross-cultural field experience to their teaching.

Data analysis began during the data collection phase as the lead researcher maintained a reflective journal in which he recorded questions, immersing themes, links among the data, and connections to academic literature. During the summer of 2009, samples of journal data were also reviewed by the second researcher to check for the presence of themes identified by the lead researcher. After completion of data collection, analysis consisted of a systematic searching and organizing of all data sources. The data were read at least twice to document major themes which were then analyzed to create coding categories. Finally, another round of data review occurred in which the codes were assigned to the data leading to the identification of major findings. (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Context and Overview of the Cross-Cultural Field Experience

Alaska’s schools reflect the demographic landscape of U.S. schools described in the opening section of this article. For instance, about 90% of Alaska’s teachers are White (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2010), whereas ethnic minority students constitute 48% of school enrollment (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2012). Alaska is home to the largest percentage of Indigenous students in the United States with Alaska Natives comprising 23.5% of public school enrollment (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2011). In the Anchorage School District, the State’s largest urban district, as well as in many Alaska Native communities, the majority of students are children of color (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2012; Anchorage School District, 2011).

Alaska Native education is a salient aspect of the context in which the cross-cultural field experience was implemented. Schooling for Alaska Native students, reflective of educational policies and practices for Indigenous peoples throughout the United States, was originally designed to civilize, Christianize, and otherwise assimilate Indigenous children into Western/White culture (Adams, 1995; Andersen-Spear & Hopson, 2010; Barnhardt, 2001; Kawagley, 1999; Ongtooguk, 2010; Writer, 2008). According to prominent Indigenous scholars, this colonizing approach to schooling continues to play out in policies and practices contributing to devastating effects on learning (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Grande, 2008). For instance, on commonly used achievement indicators (e.g., test scores and dropout rates), Alaska Natives persistently perform below all other groups statewide (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development 2011; Goldsmith & Howe, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). In light of these outcomes, the Alaska Federation

In an effort to prepare teachers for this context so they are better equipped to counter rather than contribute to these negative outcomes, a small group of teacher educators in UAA’s College of Education, in collaboration with AEIN, implemented a cross-cultural field experience project that placed interns in Alaska Native Village schools for 2 weeks. The project aimed to support participants’ growth as culturally responsive educators as well as to provide data for ongoing teacher education program development. Although the initiative was not linked to a specific course, candidates participated in a pre-visit orientation and a post-visit focus group session; in addition, they completed a reflective journal and an inquiry project. In the field experience handbook, candidates were given the following directions for their time in the Alaska Native Village schools:

Find out all you can about teaching in a village school. Immerse yourself as much as possible in the school and village. . . . You are expected to help out in the class, work with small groups, teach a lesson, etc. as appropriate. . . . Make sure you observe as many aspects of the school as possible, for instance other classes of different subjects and different grade levels. Secondary interns should spend a little time in the elementary school, and vice versa. Talk to as many teachers as possible.

The data revealed that candidates did participate in school-related activities such as faculty meetings, professional development inservices, and community-school meetings. They spent most of their time in classrooms observing and participating in teaching-related tasks; for instance, they taught lessons, tutored individual students, read stories to students, graded papers, and administered assessments. Overall, interns’ participation in the communities was limited, and most of their out-of-school time was spent with their fellow intern(s) and/or the White teachers living in the villages; however, some of them did participate in community events such as attending church services, watching traditional Native dance performances, going ice fishing, and/or taking steam baths.

Results

The portrait of schooling in Alaska Native Villages was drawn from interns’ data that consisted of two major themes: (a) schools were spaces for teaching Alaska Natives’ cultural traditions and languages and (b) schools were sites of separation. Although our findings cannot be generalized to all schools in Alaska Native communities, we believe the themes are relevant to other contexts in Alaska and beyond where Indigenous education is a salient feature. Furthermore, and specifically related to the focus of this article, these themes provide a point of entry for considering a contextualized approach to developing teacher education curriculum that aim to model CRT and prepare culturally responsive teachers.

The first major theme was interns’ portrayal of schools as places where Alaska Native cultural traditions and languages were taught by Elders and/or other Indigenous community members. Interns reported that students in all 11 schools were learning about local cultural traditions such as dancing, carving, beading, sewing, and listening to oral histories and stories from Elders (see Table 2). Although interns did not systematically identify or discuss the amount of time given and exact strategies used to teach cultural traditions in
TABLE 2 Alaska Native Culture-Related Presence in Schools as Reported by Preservice Interns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School/District</th>
<th>Example of Alaska Native culture in schools</th>
<th>Type of language program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A/1</td>
<td>Elders teaching traditional dance, art, and language; cultural artifacts displayed (e.g., boat)</td>
<td>Special classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B/1</td>
<td>Traditional dancing; cultural artifacts displayed</td>
<td>Special classes via videoconference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C/2</td>
<td>Traditional dancing and sewing; cultural values posted on wall</td>
<td>Immersion: K–2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D/3</td>
<td>Elders pictures displayed on walls</td>
<td>Immersion: K–1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E/3</td>
<td>Teaching cultural values</td>
<td>Special Classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F/3</td>
<td>Elders pictures displayed on wall</td>
<td>Special Classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G/4</td>
<td>Elders teaching traditional dance</td>
<td>Immersion: K–3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H/4</td>
<td>Students visiting Elder’s home to learn subsistence skills (e.g., skinning a rabbit); traditional dance; Elders pictures displayed in hallway; cultural values</td>
<td>Immersion: K–4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I/5</td>
<td>Traditional dance and songs</td>
<td>Special Classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J/6</td>
<td>Traditional sewing and beading project; Cultural artwork on walls</td>
<td>No Language Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K/6</td>
<td>Traditional dancing</td>
<td>No Language Program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each school, it was clear that local cultural traditions were being addressed in all 11 schools. Furthermore, drawing from the few interns who elected to present more details about their observations in this area, we learned, for example, that in one elementary school, students met in an Elder’s home to learn about their history and traditional activities. The intern wrote, “Each age group also had instruction in the history of their peoples. These included beading and/or sewing fur skins. Instruction in genealogy, and cleaning and dressing wild game was also taught.”

The local Alaska Native language was being taught in nine schools. Two schools in the same school district were not teaching an Alaska Native language because of pressures to meet No Child Left Behind testing requirements, according to what an intern reported hearing from a teacher in one of these schools. In the remaining nine schools, the interns reported that Indigenous language programs consisted of two models: special classes and immersion (see Table 2). Three schools, in two school districts, were using a special class model in which students were engaged in either loosely organized activities, such as singing songs in the Indigenous language during a physical education class, or attended language classes two or three times per week. In contrast to this approach, six schools, in three school districts, were implementing immersion programs in the lower elementary grades. Although there were structural variations, for example all-day/full immersion and a two-way/dual approach, all these programs provided an immersion experience for students in primary grades and offered maintenance language classes for students in the other grades. It was beyond the purview of this study to explore in-depth the Indigenous language programs, but the following example from an intern’s journal presented a snapshot of the culturally integrated approach used in a language immersion classroom by an Alaska Native teacher:
In the morning, I was in a first grade [Indigenous language] instruction class. Another individual assisted the teacher ... both are [name of language] native speakers and residents of the village. ... Class began with recitation of numbers, day of the week, and the date. A student helped lead the recitation while the teachers led the exercise. At no time was English used in speaking to the children or did they use any English in responding to the teachers or amongst themselves. ... The teachers read a [Native] language book to the students that depicted a native game and then all the students and the teachers played the game. They also used Musk Ox as a substitute for Sheep in the song "Baa Black Sheep"; this was also a way to teach students about colors. I saw several projects completed by students and it was a great way to incorporate a local animal into a story that is familiar to many of us in settings that are more conventional. ... Overall, the 1st grade class was a very enlightening and interesting experience and I cannot imagine ever having an opportunity to see a program like this in an actual setting.

Clearly, Alaska Native students in all 11 schools were being exposed to local cultural traditions, and in nine schools they were studying the local Indigenous language. In most cases, however, as we present in the following section, interns described the cultural/language programs as operating in isolation to what some of them referred to as the "Western" or "English" side of school, illustrated in this example from intern’s conversation with two Elders:

I asked the elders in the [Alaska Native] room if the teachers collaborate or communicate with them about relevant curriculum and topics. They answered, "No ..." They said they have spoken to the teachers about this and they would be willing to talk about and incorporate their visits with information that is useful in the class but have not gotten any response.

The second theme was the portrayal of schools as sites of separation. This theme consisted of three major features which specifically related to White teachers: (a) separation from the communities, (b) application of a deficit orientation, and (c) implementation of a disconnected curriculum. First, 21 interns in 10 schools referred to teachers’ separation from the community, painting a scene where White teachers taught during the day then "disappeared into their homes" in the evening avoiding interaction with community residents. Interns noted that most White teachers lived in district-designated teacher housing that was typically set apart from the rest of the community; however, it was these teachers’ absence in the routines and events of community life that was most striking to the interns. For example, an intern reported her conversation with a White teacher where she asked, "Do teachers interact with others in the community?" The teacher replied, "Sad to say, no. There is pretty much the teacher community and the rest of the community." By the end of her stay in the village, this intern concluded, "They [teachers] have their own houses away from all the villagers and they are new houses. Many of them go to school and to home after.... Most of them have never been in a house in the village." And another intern wrote, "In my short time there I really saw little interaction between school staff and community. Teacher housing is separate from the village and the path between school and teacher housing is well beaten down."

School as a site of separation also was revealed in interns’ references to White teachers using a deficit orientation to describe Alaska Native children and their families. Twenty-two interns from 10 schools reported examples of this phenomenon. One intern stated her impressions this way: "There is also a stigma attached to the children by the teachers. I
have observed this through listening to teachers talk: [they are saying]: ‘The children are dirty; have poor language skills; are wild, evil, impossible; have no ideas to write about.’

Other examples of White teachers’ deficit-oriented statements drawn from interns’ journal entries in six schools included:

- It is hopeless [because] these kids are unteachable.
- Students are lazy.
- They [the children] don’t appreciate the physical environment.
- [Students have] Low self-esteem.
- Parents don’t value reading in the homes.
- Parents aren’t really involved in their children’s lives so there’s no discipline at home.
- Parents don’t supervise their children.

Not only did the interns report hearing White teachers communicate a deficit perspective in their conversations with interns, they also reported examples of it manifesting in teachers’ interactions with students. For example, an intern discussed how he had become “discouraged about the educational situation” in the school because of witnessing incidences like this one: “I even heard a White upper administrator tell a student to stop speaking [the Indigenous language]: ‘speak English.’” Note the administrator’s targeting of Indigenous language as a “problem,” a practice interns reported in four schools. To further illustrate, an intern reported hearing teachers blame “children’s misbehavior on them [the children] or their inability to speak English.”

The third feature of the school as a site of separation theme was the implementation of a curriculum disconnected from children’s lives and local communities. Sixteen interns from nine schools made specific reference to a disconnected curriculum in their journals. For example, an intern was astonished that teachers did not connect their teaching to the local context, noting that such connections were confined to the “designated [Alaska Native] room and the [Indigenous language] immersion program.” Furthermore, in three schools, interns noted that the official curriculum materials (e.g., textbooks) were identical to what was used in their internship placement classrooms in Anchorage or other non-Native communities. They described these prepackaged materials as irrelevant to the children’s lives in Alaska Native villages. For example, one intern stated

Except for the [Alaska Native language] class, the curriculum is highly Westernized; if not for the names and faces, an observer teleported into the room with no frame of reference would be hard-pressed to tell the difference between [this teacher’s] class and any fourth-grade in Anchorage.

In summary, school as a site of separation was a significant theme playing out in teachers’ separation from the communities, application of a deficit orientation, and implementation of a curriculum disconnected from the local community and cultural context. However, we want to point out there were a few notable exceptions of White teachers taking a different approach. For instance, two interns referred to an administrator who was aware of the separation issue and was attempting to “bridge that gap” by pairing White teachers with Alaska Native mentors “in hopes to promote and support increased involvement and meaningful interaction amongst all community members.” There were also isolated examples of White teachers connecting curriculum to students’ lives. For example, an intern referred to a teacher doing “some wonderful things connecting the community
to her lessons.” Another intern noted that “teachers often add in extra social studies and science content that pertains to [the village] such as lessons about the [Native] way of life and science lesson that pertains to wildlife found [in the community].” Although these exceptions are noteworthy, interns presented them as isolated examples occurring in schools where the “English/Western” side was otherwise separated from local Alaska Native communities.

Discussion: Implications for Teacher Education Curriculum

Our findings illustrate the urgency to prepare culturally responsive teachers and justify the need for an explicit focus on CRT in teacher education. For example, the three features of separation—teacher separation, deficit orientation, and disconnected curriculum—are antithetical to any model of culturally responsive education currently found in the literature. At the same time, Elders and other Alaska Native educators were teaching local Indigenous languages and/or cultural traditions in the schools. In response to this sociocultural context of schooling, we argue there are three key components needed to ground and give shape to a culturally responsive teacher education curriculum: (a) a culturally responsive conceptual framework that focuses on CRT practices; (b) an emphasis on cultivating critical sociocultural consciousness; and (c) direct engagement with culturally relevant knowledge and epistemologies.

As noted in the literature review in this article, there are a number of research-informed CRT frameworks a program could draw from to theoretically ground and bring coherence to the curriculum and focus on CRT practices. However, in keeping with our goal of situating teacher education within a local context as reported in preservice teachers’ data from their experiences in a cross-cultural placement, we put forward the Cultural Standards for Educators (CSE) (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998) as a relevant framework for the Alaska Native context. Developed by Alaska Native educators with the goal of providing schools and communities a framework for “attending to the educational and cultural well beings of the students” (p. 2), the five standards for educators are:

- Culturally responsive educators use the local environment and community resources on a regular basis to link what they are teaching to the everyday lives of the students. (p. 9)
- Culturally responsive educators participate in community events and activities in an appropriate and supportive way. (p. 10)
- Culturally responsive educators work closely with parents to achieve a high level of complementary educational expectations between home and school. (p. 10)
- Culturally responsive educators recognize the full educational potential of each student and provide the challenges necessary for them to achieve. (p. 11)
- Culturally responsive educators incorporate local ways of knowing and teaching in their work. (p. 12)

In addition to reflecting key elements of CRT identified in the literature, the standards directly address the themes identified in our study. For example, if preservice teachers meet these standards, they will move beyond the separation phenomenon by engaging in their students’ communities, approaching children with an affirming attitude, and connecting the curriculum to students’ lives. The cultural standards could also be used to support and connect preservice teachers to school-based efforts to teach Indigenous languages and
culturally responsive teacher education programs in Alaska could apply the cultural standards in developing program outcomes that are aligned to key assignments and assessments ensuring that candidates demonstrate proficiency in each standard and increasing the likelihood that graduates are prepared to teach in culturally responsive ways. Similarly, teacher education programs outside Alaska seeking to ground their preservice teachers’ learning within the local context would need to identify standards which local communities find relevant and meaningful for educating their children.

In addition to meeting practice-oriented CRT standards like the ones above, teachers’ sociocultural consciousness is an essential aspect of culturally responsive teaching (Banks et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002), and is relevant to the findings in our study. Sociocultural consciousness includes both an individual perspective; that is, one’s awareness of self and others as cultural beings; and a structural orientation that accounts for the sociopolitical/cultural contexts of schools and schooling (Nieto & Bode, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In this article we focus on the structural component, saving the individual aspect for a forthcoming manuscript. Central to the structural perspective is the awareness that schools are situated within particular sociopolitical/cultural contexts, and it is within these contexts that curriculum and pedagogical practices play out and take on meaning (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

For instance, in our study the reports of White teachers’ use of the deficit orientation and teaching a disconnected curriculum obviously contradict core principles of culturally responsive teaching; however, when one examines these practices from a critical sociocultural perspective that accounts for colonization in Alaska Native education, a latent racist ideology emerges that reframes Alaska Native students as the “savage Other” (i.e., deficit perspective) and uses schooling as a mechanism for assimilation (i.e., disconnected, prepackaged curriculum) (Brayboy, 2005; Grande, 2008; Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; Writer, 2008). For teacher educators and preservice teachers alike, to simply conclude that these practices do not meet culturally responsive teaching standards overlooks and allows the continuation of the racism inherent in colonization that negatively impacts Native youth in today’s schools (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003). Therefore, teacher education programs preparing candidates for this context should support their development of a critical sociocultural consciousness that accounts for colonization in Indigenous education and enables them to critically analyze current school/classroom practices and identify alternative ones. To this end, a teacher education curriculum should include theoretical frameworks such as Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), Red Pedagogy (Grande, 2008), and the framework put forth by Writer (2008) that integrates literature on multicultural education, Tribal Critical Race Theory, and social justice.

Furthermore, in response to the presence of Alaska Native languages and cultural traditions in the school, preservice teachers could enhance their sociocultural consciousness by examining the political and policy contexts for these practices. For example, it is important that candidates explore the practices in light of American Indians/Alaska Native tribes’ political and legal rights in the United States including their right to self-determination in education (Brayboy, 2005; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). As part of the curriculum, candidates could examine President Obama’s December 2, 2011 Executive Order (No. 13,592) calling for improved educational opportunities for American Indians and Alaska Natives; the rationale of this EO is explicitly based on the “unique political and legal relationship with federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes … furthering tribal self-determination and to help ensure that
AI/AN students have an opportunity to learn their Native languages and histories …” (p. 1). Candidates could also investigate the Native American Language Act of 1990/1992 that recognizes the significance of Native Americans’ language and cultures and places responsibility on the United States government to “act together with Native Americans to ensure the survival of these unique cultures and languages” (Native American Indian Education Act, 1990, 1992, p. 1); one strategy the Act identifies for meeting this obligation is to use Native American languages as the medium of instruction in schools. Although these particular scholarly works and policy documents are most pertinent to the Alaska context, grounding preservice teachers’ learning in locally relevant and connected research and policy frameworks is essential for developing critical sociocultural consciousness in any context.

Based on our findings that Elders and other Indigenous educators were teaching Alaska Native cultural traditions and/or languages in the schools, teacher education programs should provide preservice teachers opportunities to hear Indigenous peoples’ perspectives on teaching these cultural components in schools. We acknowledge the absence of a unitary, monolithic “Native perspective” on these areas. Nevertheless, considerable evidence exists suggesting many Indigenous peoples and organizations support the inclusion of traditional languages and cultures in schools (e.g., Alaska Federation of Natives, 2010; Demmert, 2011; Martz, 2010; National Indian Education Association, 2012). In the context of our study, candidates should consider Alaska Natives’ perspectives through direct interactions with Elders and other culture-bearers, such as the Alaska Native teachers in the sample schools; interviewing Alaska Native parents, community members, and/or students as part of a class assignment; and/or attending Alaska Native sponsored events (e.g., Alaska Federation of Natives’ annual conference).

An additional strategy is for preservice programs to include written texts in the curriculum that represent Alaska Natives’ knowledge and ways of knowing. For example, the book Alaska Native Education, Views from Within (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010) contains a collection of chapters written by Alaska Natives on a number of educational themes including culturally responsive curriculum and Native languages. In addition, the First Alaskans Institute’s Policy Center (e.g., McDowell Group, 2001; Villegas & Prieto, 2006) has published research reports presenting Alaska Native views on education, generally, and the inclusion of language and culture in schools, specifically. Looking outside Alaska, the U.S. Department of Education’s (2010) Report of the Consultation with Tribal Leaders in Indian Country contains examples of many Indigenous leaders calling Native languages and cultures to be taught in schools. The United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Rights (2007) and the Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Peoples’ Rights in Education (World Indigenous Peoples’ Conference on Education, 1999) frame the inclusion of Indigenous languages and cultural traditions in schools as directly linked to Indigenous peoples’ right to self-determination.

In sum, including these and similar texts in a teacher education curriculum in the Alaska context would provide candidates opportunities to engage with Indigenous ways of knowing and knowledge related to Alaska Native languages and cultural traditions in schools. As a result, preservice teachers would develop knowledge and skills to support school-based efforts to teach Alaska Native cultural traditions and languages and to engage in culturally responsive practices in their own classrooms in Alaska Native communities. Furthermore, considering contexts outside Alaska, within each community where teacher education programs are situated there resides a body of local knowledge, wisdom, and worldviews. The children of these communities bring that knowledge with them as their
foundation for learning in schools. Thus, to prepare culturally responsive practitioners, teacher education programs need to be responsive to and inclusive of this knowledge.

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