

**ISSUE  
BRIEF**

## **Exercising Sovereignty Rights through a Social Justice Curriculum**

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**S**overeignty has been defined as the absolute power of a nation to determine its own course of action with respect to other nations. However, in the context of American Indian Nations of today, “it has become increasingly clear that the idea of Indian sovereignty is not simply a legal concept. Numerous references to sovereignty cite the notion of a distinct people, separate from others, as the chief characteristic of Indian sovereignty indicating that so long as the cultural identity of Indians remains intact no specific political act undertaken by the United States government can permanently extinguish Indian peoples as sovereign entities” (Deloria, 1996).

Indian Nations have called for the exercise of sovereign rights in determining educational goals for their people. “Historically, schools have served to promote mainstream cultural values and expectations and have disregarded the experiences, languages, and cultural understandings of American Indians and other underrepresented groups” (Noll, 1998). There are few instances of sovereignty expression in education going beyond educating in the manner typical to the American society. Vine Deloria Jr. (1974) eloquently expressed that it requires much more than simply having Indian people running the schools, rather it requires an examination of what education really means for Indian people.

The American Indian and Alaska Native Research Agenda put forth in response to Executive Order 13906 indicates the need for research in areas of best practices and reform models that have demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing

academic achievement, as well as the need to incorporate language and culture into schooling (Strang & Glatz, 2001). The importance of locally developed instruction materials for supporting students’ language use, and overall academic performance, was demonstrated at Rough Rock Demonstration School when use of such materials increased test scores dramatically with Navajo students (McCarty, 1994).

Locally developing instructional materials is an important step in the exercise of sovereignty rights; this needs to be furthered by implementing a social justice curriculum. By implementing a social justice curriculum, particularly in urban communities where American Indian populations may become hidden, children and their families would be able to find voice and communicate in effective methods to produce social change for their communities. Putting social action into practice in schools with American Indian populations would allow for Indian communities to develop a way of orientating youth to addressing the needs of the community. In a study of post-secondary American Indian students at an urban University, students expressed the desire for their Tribal Nation to give them guidance as to how their education could benefit the nation (Butt, 2003).

A social justice curriculum examines the power structures that are established through the use of classism, sexism, and racism. However, to be truly emancipatory, education must go beyond analysis and effect a social change. A social justice curriculum is the union between thinking and acting; without the acting the thinking is just for thought, and without thinking action is ill-conceived (Freire, 1970). A social justice curriculum needs to look at “the interplay of

### **Recent History of Education and Sovereignty**

- 1966 Rough Rock Demonstration School which is the first modern day Indian controlled school funded by the federal government opens within the Navajo Nation.
- 1968 Navajo Community College as the first tribally controlled Indian community College is established in the Navajo Nation.
- 1970 Ramah Navajo High School, the first Indian controlled contract high school, opens.
- 1975 Congress passes the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, which opens up contracting.
- 1988 Congress passes Public Law 100-297, which reauthorizes the Indian Education Act and calls for a White House Conference on Indian Education.
- 1992 White House Conference on Indian Education held resulting in 113 recommendations.

Source: National Advisory Council on Indian Education. (1994). Keeping Forgotten Promises: 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, FY 1993. Washington, DC.

societal and school structures and contexts and how they influence learning” (Nieto, 1996).

## Discussion

It becomes necessary to determine what benefit sovereignty has if it is not exercised. Not only must sovereignty rights be exercised, but thinking on sovereignty must be extended resulting in a broadening of conceptualization. A logical expression of sovereignty would be a social justice curriculum. Not only would it allow communities to determine what an education really means to them, but it would be creating students who would be able to effectively articulate their and the communities interests and needs. The implementation of a social justice curriculum would allow for a systematic analyzing of the power influences which American Indians have been dealing with since contact with Europeans. American Indian communities are well aware of the issues of classism, sexism, and racism--by constructing the basis of education for the methodical analyzing of the power structures and putting knowledge into action, students will be empowered to effect social change for their people.

## References

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## SOCIAL JUSTICE STANDARDS

1. *Consistently analyze social phenomenon, prevailing values, attitudes and social practices as they affect various groups in society.*
2. *Understand how power and hegemony operate to shape and stratify society.*
3. *Recognize how individual actions affect communities throughout the world, reflecting on how every action has global implications.*
4. *Evaluate the historical and contemporary roles that racism, sexism and classism play in shaping the experiences of social groups, particularly in respect to economic and political power.*
5. *Examine various viewpoints, perspectives, and alternatives to the dominant structures of society.*
6. *Examine and compare the impact that social movements have had in addressing human injustices.*
7. *See self as self-empowered activists (both individually and collectively) by contributing to social justice by protecting and extending human rights.*
8. *Seek to understand truths, raise consciousness, conduct inquiry, articulate and defend positions, and understand sense of place in the world as means to social action.*

Source: Curriculum Design for Urban Schools Class service project, University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee, July 2003.

**Issue Briefs** present information on education topics of current interest.

This **Issue Brief** was prepared by Nicole Butt, University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee. To obtain definitions of terms for this **Issue Brief**, contact Nicole Butt [nicbutt@uwm.edu](mailto:nicbutt@uwm.edu), however, do not do so until after July 19<sup>th</sup> as the author will be in class until the 17<sup>th</sup>. After concluding the course she will once again be sleeping, interacting with her family, and celebrating her birthday.