Abstract

The goal of this thesis is to examine the intersection of how politics, economics, and society intersect with poverty and education in Native American communities in Canada and the United States of America. Through this analysis, I will provide a better understanding of how we as a society can help Native children break the cycle of poverty through the efficient use of policy, education reform, and economic principles. Native American students in both the United States and Canada have been subjected to long-standing oppression and marginalization by state, federal, and local government and an imperialistic society, causing them to be statistically more likely to be impoverished and fail in schools. However, through education reform, community advocacy, and informed policy, these communities can empower themselves and break the cycles of poverty. Education reform is perhaps the best place for empowerment to start. Through this education, these communities are not only able to start the process of breaking the cycle of poverty but also keep their historical and cultural traditions alive. Communities most often do this through ethnocentric charter schools, which work through government funding and loose standardization to provide specialized and targeted curriculum. Through this process, a more holistic and comprehensive policy reforms may emerge, providing a direct line of communication between policy makers and education providers on what is efficient and what needs to be reworked when it comes to education policy. There is still much to be done in terms of how these schools are structured, who they serve, and what change happens because of them; but evidence shows that these schools could be the key in breaking the cycle of poverty in Native American communities and keeping their students engaged in their education.
INTRODUCTION

It has been well documented that poverty and education are inextricably linked. However, a paradox exists in the system, where the more disadvantaged a child, the more likely they are to do worse in school or have a poor education (Raffo, 2010). The better an education disadvantaged children get, the more likely they are to overcome the challenges of marginalization and poverty. This is especially true for minority students, who suffer systematic injustices which make the cycle of poverty so much harder to escape. The difference between the groups of students who succeed in schools and those who do not is referred to as the ‘achievement gap.’ This gap does not divide students up arbitrarily, but follows trends based on race, gender and socioeconomic status. In other words, factors which are outside of a student’s or parent’s control will often predetermine how a student performs in school. More than this, there is also a social pressure placed upon people who are negatively affected by the achievement gap, where if they do get a decent education and they do manage to escape poverty, they must also leave behind their culture and community which they grew up in because they must integrate into a different class and social structure (López 2013, 2).

Native Americans in both the United States and Canada are no exception to this rule, their fight of balancing their traditions and the public education system is more wrought with historical and social implications. Though there are various titles that can be ascribed to the very diverse group that fall under the title of ‘Native American.’ This umbrella encompasses thousands of different tribes each with their own history and needs, because systematically they all treated roughly the same, it is safe for the purposes of this paper to put them under the title of ‘Native American’ (Levin 1994, 6). Most of the curriculum and structure of the school systems were traditionally devised to actively destroy, subvert, or discredit Native American culture and
history. This paradox and societal warfare is part of an interconnected system of the government, the economy, and social norms. These discriminating systems must be addressed and revised in order to create a lasting and meaningful change. Interchangeably, I will be using the terms ‘impoverished’ and ‘disadvantaged’ to refer to people or communities who fall below the federal poverty level. This level fluctuates yearly and is relative to how many people are in a family, but for a family of four in 2016 the poverty level was $24,300 (Federal Poverty Level (FLP)). In many sections, unless otherwise specified, ‘government’ shall refer to both the Canadian and United States government, with state and federal governments being specified as needed.

My goal in this thesis is to provide a better understanding of how society can help children and those who are living in the cycle of poverty through the efficient use of policy, education reform, and economic principles. In my paper, I argue that the best way best way to accomplish this is through bottom up reforms initiated by community members and acted upon by government representatives and through culturally responsive schooling (CRS) and ethnocentric charter schools.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POVERTY, EDUCATION, AND RACE

The issues of race, poverty, and education are important to talk about together. Though each of these different aspects are all clearly interconnected, it is often difficult to talk about them all at the same time because they are so dense. However, avoiding this discussion is dangerous, especially when one is trying to design long lasting and efficient solutions to these problems. If only a few of these issues is addressed, then the solution is inherently flawed and unlikely to have the meaningful intended impact(Raffo 2010, 9). Therefore, it is imperative that
people who are involved or interested in this issue educate themselves on every level of the problem.

The paradox between poverty and education has existed for many decades, and is supported by a multitude of societal practices and economic realities. Children are disproportionately hurt by symptoms of poverty; they make up the majority of impoverished people, with 21.1% of people under the age of 18 living under the poverty line (McCarty 2016, 1). The definition of who is considered impoverished in first world countries depends on two factors: how many people are living in the household and how much gross income that household makes. Poverty thresholds can lie anywhere between $12,000 a year to $50,000 a year (Poverty Thresholds 2015). An easier way to conceptualize the issue is by looking at people who are trying to live as we are taught is socially acceptable without the means to do so (Small 1979, 339). Historically, education was only something that the upper classes could access (Smyth 2010, 75). Though much progress has been made in providing and requiring public education for all children, it is clear that your social class and your family income still dictates to a large extend the quality of education that you receive, especially in the United States (Raffo 2010, 7). For instance, most public schools are funded from the home income tax collected in their area, which means schools that are in wealthier neighborhoods get more money, while schools that serve disadvantaged communities make do with less (Levin 1995, 7). Financially, this is a sustainable system because the funding of schools is decentralized, making a feasible and a dependable way to keep money in our schools without worrying about ulterior motives (Hoxby, 2001, 77). This puts a particular strain on the schools and the communities they serve as students who come from disadvantaged homes are often less prepared for school than their privileged social counterparts. These academic setbacks often stem from issues related to
being impoverished, such as getting enough food, having a safe shelter, and having outside academic resources such as tutoring and school supplies (Dhillon 2011, 13). One reason why this issue is so difficult to tackle is the lack of visibility disadvantaged students have and the lack of teacher training in dealing with disadvantaged students. Even when disadvantaged students attend schools with students from more diverse social classes, this often exacerbates the problem rather than alleviate it because “when the children of disadvantage attend the same schools as the children of privilege, poverty has a tendency to appear more discreet, more manageable, and less debilitating” (Freeman 2010, 3). When the minority student tries to conform to the majority it is hard to see the underlying struggles that they have to deal with on a daily basis and the systematic microaggressions that make it difficult for them to fully participate in their education.

The other layer to this is that race and poverty are inextricably linked, and are affected by decades of cyclical and systematic degradation and racism. A disproportional number of children who do live in poverty identify as non-white, non-hispanic Black and African American children make up the majority at 38%, and Native Americans are a close second at 36% (McCarty 2016). If racism or societal constructions that are reinforced by systematic oppression had nothing to do with poverty, then it would not matter what race you were.

Instead, non-hispanic whites only make up 13% of impoverished children (McCarty 2016). That is no small number, but it is a third less than the number of children living in poverty who are Native American. Additionally, people of color are statistically more likely to live in poorer communities (Freeman 2010). This means that they will also go to schools that do not have the same financial resources to do well in school as their white counterparts, meaning that the achievement gap in schools directly correlates to income inequality (McCarty 2016, 6). Minority groups tend to have poor representation in both government and school system; this is a
serious problem as teachers and policy makers are often dealing with cultures, communities, and issues with which they are unfamiliar with. This leads to ill-informed decisions that are often sustained by the current system. In other words “Legitimization of status quo ideas and capitalist state interests, which inevitably extend to the consignment of students to certain classes or social categories” (Dhillon 2011, 5). As Bryant discusses in “Understanding Poverty through Race Dialogues in Teacher Preparation”:

“racism is ordinary, not an aberration; racism is the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country. This means that racism is difficult to cure or address… equality, expressed in rules that insist only on treatment that is the same across the board, can remedy only the most blatant forms of discrimination that stand out and attract our attention” (2015, 5).

These issues can be addressed generally in a variety of ways, from improved teacher training to more conscientious representation, but they all have their roots in political, social and economic structures which continue to support them.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING EDUCATION IN NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

The two main theoretical approaches that I will be focusing on in this piece are neoliberalism and globalization. Though perspectives on poverty, education, and racism each have their own nuanced histories and theoretical backgrounds, I will focus on neoliberalism and globalization because they provide the best context for the interconnectedness of these three issues. The neoliberal framework in that most of our society operates is perpetuating inequality and poverty under the pretense of helping the poor. Only through policies that perpetuate the systems which created poverty in the first place, and then fall back on victim blaming when they fail to pull themselves out of poverty using the tools provided by the government (Lipman 2010,
60). This goes as far back as the colonization of the new world, when the settlers imposed a new market framework on the Native Americans, a practice still carried out today. Disruption of traditional economies meant that the Native Americans are often exploited by the current market system or are marginalized because they choose to live partially in a substance based economy, which they have to supplement with wages from a market economy (the alternative would be to completely leave behind their traditional way of living and identity) (Clarkson 1992, 18). Therefore, “poverty is rooted in capitalist economic relationships, supported by the state, that maintain enormous profits and the accumulation of wealth by a tiny minority at the expense of the majority” (Lipman 2010, 60). Education is also entrenched in this framework, which perpetuates problematic societal structures, especially victim blaming, but also the “neoliberal ideas of the market, school choice, accountability for performance, measurement, and testing, targeted interventions, partnerships with business and corporate interests, and other like-minded ideas” (Smyth 2010, 73). Another, less dismal way of seeing the connection between the neoliberal framework and education is that the state is responsible for the well being of the education system in terms of the economic well being of the state, which is reflected in the current structure through the emphasis on credentials, skills, and human capital of students (Gunter 2010, 164).

Globalism arose with neoliberalism as a direct result of the ideologies therein. With the advent of globalization came a host of new social, political, and economic structures that must be tested and navigated. Amidst all of this, countries were now able to compete with each other on levels that were unimaginable before technology and new ways of measuring and gauging a country’s strength. One of the many ways that governments started evaluating and competing against each other is by how well we do in education (Gunter 2010, 177-178). In some ways, this
is amazing news for the children and educators around the world as the issue of education is front and center and is a real concern for policy makers and officials. However, these people are results driven, do not often failing to take into consideration the processes or the finances of a situation, but rather just the end numbers (Gunter 2010, 179). This leads to many policies that are created with the hopes that they will be a magic bullet in solving the problems of education, producing blanket policies that affect all schools, students, and parents, regardless a child’s needs (Gunter 2010, 177-178). This means that parents and teachers are often blamed for the poor performance of a student in these government programs, arguing they they were not implemented correctly, when actually it is the program which is insufficient to the child’s needs (Luis 1997, 4-5).

Socially, there has been a push for countries to present themselves as a unified entity to the world. This means that globalization has necessitated nation-states redefine themselves, which often comes at the cost of local cultures, languages, and identities (Thomson 2010, 125-126). Economically, Native Americans “were integrated into the global economy through a worldwide system of mercantile capitalist trading companies, linked to the British state, and controlled by European interests” (Clarkson 1992, 23). The global disintegration of local economic systems automatically puts groups of people such as the Native Americans, which relied heavily on a different market, at a disadvantage economically. This has put in motion a cyclical poverty which has affected each new generation of Native Americans more severely than the next (Small 1979, 340).
The relationship between education and poverty in Native American communities must first be understood in the context of the relationship between the tribes and the federal government. This relationship is characterized as Native Americans being culturally and historically different from the dominant social structures, with increased likelihood of being impoverished, and their historically tarnished relationship with the government. Each of these components plays into what makes up the current need for education of Native American students to come from within their communities and tribes. The government has used economic and political strategies such as market restructuring, reservations, and treaties in order to control, manipulate, and subjugate Native Americans (Clarkson 1992, 19). Through this subjugation, the original Native American economic, social, and political structures have been undermined and replaced, Native American communities forcing into either systematic poverty or systematic cultural erasure (Clarkson 1992, 18). This has made these tribes and people highly dependent on the government through assistant programs rather than their own traditional leadership. Each generation of Native Americans feels this more strongly than the last (Clarkson 1992, 20-21).

Native Americans have very little choice in the matter when it comes to these decisions because the alternative is often to lose what little of their way of life they have. Despite the economic strife these communities were and are in, there was not a lot of social or political push to help because they were largely invisible (Small 1979, 340). It was not until the ‘war on poverty’ began that Native American communities began receiving recognition of their struggles and change started to occur way to go (Small 1979, 345). This power structure continues in the school systems, especially communities with a large concentrations of Native Americans, the control of the system is likely to lie with the current bureaucratic system (Levin 1994, 7).
In the early 20th century, there were purposeful efforts to re-educate Native American youths and erase their culture through forced education (Harrington 2013, 3-5). Today, the most common form of education that Native American students get through the government is the public school system. represents a form of assimilation, where students must choose between their cultures and their education; both cannot exist in the system (López 2013, 2). According to Harrington and CHiXapkaid, the current goal of the the public school system is to have the same curriculum for all students in the system, with the current standard for education being tailored for a white, middle class student (Harrington 2013, 5). However, that standard reflects very little of what a Native American student needs from their education, nor does it represent their collective identities (Harrington 2013, 15). This means that the conundrum of choosing a better life economically through education or honoring the traditions and cultures is even more strongly felt by these students because the choice brings the weight of their already threatened traditions and social structures. The cultural and historical backgrounds for Native Americans are difficult to teach at home because so much of a child’s cultural education comes from schools and is very rich and intricate.

Due to standardization, public schools struggle to address the needs of these students because each each tribe has a different history, and within each tribe there are different communities with different needs. Variation in curriculum is needed in order to make a meaningful difference (Small 1979, 342). Clearly, as our public education system stands, the system is not designed for such specification; we are too constrained by standardized testing and hemmed by societal standards to be able to adjust educational needs to such a degree for each individual community that might need them.
Native American students need to have their culture, history, language, and people represented in their education in order to succeed is a crucial part in developing policy that reflects the students needs and creating a school environment that is conducive to their learning (Harrington 2013, 2). is that if students feel distanced from their education or if they feel that their education is not relevant to who they are, then they will become disinterested. Once a student becomes disinterested in their education, regardless the quantity of standardized tests they take nor how many detentions they sit through, unless the way the material is being taught changes, they will fail (Harrington 2013, 10).

Because our education systems taking so much of a students time and energy to succeed, with very little in the curriculum about their culture and history, students are often receiving two subtle messages throughout their education: first, this history and this way of life is the most important, and second, yours is not. The students who chose to embrace their education and assimilate usually also abandon their culture and background. These are few and far between, because it is very uncommon to see someone break the cycle of poverty through education (Small, 1979, 340). Educators often assume that small minority groups such as Native Americans, which chronically underperform in schools, do not value education in general and that they simply are not motivated to learn (Dhillon 2011, 3). As many of these students greatly value education, they often either feel alienated or have other concerns in their life that are financially impacted. These pressures force their ‘interest’ in education slips as they focus on the more basic securities in their life such as food, shelter, safety (Dhillon 2011, 12).

NATIVE AMERICAN BASED EDUCATION
In response to these struggles, some Native American communities have started to take matters into their own hands, developing schools and create curriculums that address the needs of their children as Native American students. These schools are experimenting with designing and creating a form of education that reflects not only their language, culture, and traditions, but also their learning and thinking styles. It is crucial that these schools and initiatives all come from and through the communities they serve. This is imperative for these programs because it helps create new structures which help support Native American youths and the creation of more positive reform (Grub 2010, 55). One of the ways in which public schools can overcome the inherent biases within our system when it comes to race and poverty is through Culturally Responsive Schooling, or CRS. CRS is defined as a method of education which places the culture of a community (i.e. the language, knowledge, and traditions) at the center of curriculum building and teaching (López 2013, 4). There are inherent biases that exist in our society that make it difficult for policy makers and educators to create comprehensive schooling that caters to students of color and financially disadvantaged students. However, by creating and supporting schools that are centered around the theories of CRS, Native American communities can empower themselves and create their own narratives and begin to break the cycle of poverty within their own communities by advocating and educating themselves (Belgarde 2004, 108, 115).

Each community and school can have a nuanced approach to integrating their culture into schools, each of which will have varying degrees of impact. For example, pseudo Native education tacks on programs to the established curriculum such as tutoring and teaching temporally specific facts, quasi-Native education makes some adjustments to the curriculum to add in courses and studies, and true Native education is when when all the subject matter is
relevant to Native children all of the time (Belgarde 2004, 111). Though all of these options are better than no representation of Native American culture, I will be focusing on the successes and failures of the ‘true Native’ schools as these are the schools which hold the most promise for change. Before the integration of this style of teaching, there was not enough representation in the staff of schools of Aboriginal teachers, over time more and more were hired and Canadian curriculum began to reflect the language and the culture of the student bodies (Gaskell 2012, 62). This integration of the community in the schools has been beneficial in several ways; it gives students an important and positive way to see themselves represented and empowered (Gaskell 2012, 62), it gives jobs to Native American faculty helping to fight poverty in the community before the students even graduate (Small 1979, 343-344), and it is an key factor to the success and sustainability of CRS (López 2013, 4). These schools also include Native American language classes specific to the particular language spoken by the communities which they serve (López 2013, 5). This is continued in the overall curriculum to help reinforce the importance of language by incorporating native words a part of the vernacular for the non-language classes (López 2013, 5). Language is an important identifier for culture, and having it supported in schools not only helps children learn, but also keeps tradition alive. This helps keep the students engaged in their education, meaning they stay in school longer and do better in school (Gaskell 2012, 62). The community also stays invested in their education, meaning that it can easily shift and change with the needs of the student body.

RESTRICTIONS AND BARRIERS IN NATIVE AMERICAN EDUCATION

The major road blocks that these schools face are funding, performance on the standardized tests, cultural division, and segregation. Funding is already a problem for most
schools in both Canada and the United States, especially for disadvantaged communities (Battiste 2002, 23). The schools that are built around Native American culture depend on government money, just like any other public school. These schools cannot depend on supplemental finances from the communities in which they serve because the communities are inherently disadvantaged financially. It is often impoverished students who can benefit the most from more funding, and yet the schools are not getting it because the system is structured to send more money to higher income neighborhoods (Hoxby 2001, 77). In addition, because these schools are structured to break away from the established curriculum in the country, the standardized tests which students must take for the things these schools are trying to distance themselves from (Buchanan 2004, 102-103). However, these schools require their students be able to test at a certain level on the standardized exams. Students are therefore underprepared for the tests, even though they may be more engaged, learning more, and the schools are more catered to their needs (Belgarde 2004, 117). To put it another way, “standardized performance tests can be expected to measure exactly those things from which these schools have fled, while providing no information about the effectiveness with which the schools have instilled the values which lie at their core” (Buchanan 2004, 102-103). Furthermore, Native American and First Nation schools also teach a different way of thinking, with a focus on group mentality and big picture thinking. students have to work twice as hard to be able to understand and work through standardized tests. Though this does imply that our system values education standards over identity standards (Gulson 2016, 9), it does not negate the fact that this is how the system exists at this time and schools must grapple with the reality of that as they try to help these students. While Over-testing and associated stresses have been widely criticized in the educational fields, they do serve a purpose in making sure that students are being taught information that will make
them competent adults in society. While the goals are noble, if the schools cannot successfully
teach the students according to the standards of the government and are shut down, they have not
really accomplished their goal of creating a more relevant learning environment for Native
American students.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF BOTTOM-UP REFORMS

One of the least conductive things that can happen when talking about education,
minority groups, and poverty is victim blaming. Victim blaming refers to when a person or
entity, such as a school or a community, is thought to be the agents of their current situation,
either by outsiders or by themselves, when in truth their position is caused by forces outside their
control (Dhillon 2011, 3). Victim blaming happens at all levels in impoverished communities.
Schools, educators and administrators often blame parents and students for the student
performances in school despite the external conditions and hardships these students go through
(Levin 1995, 3). Blame is often internalized by the students and parents, making them believe
that the reason for their student’s failure in the schools is their fault (Thomson 2010, 126).
Schools do not escape the target of victim blaming because they are judged as harshly by
representatives in government and the system at large. These systems fail to understand the block
of standardized testing which schools are measured and valued for their worth in educating kids.
This is done without taking into account such factors as overcrowding, underfunding, lack of
resources, underpay, language barriers, and economic distress, nor the fact that standardized tests
disproportionately hurt disadvantaged students and students of color (Lipman 2010, 64). Victim
blaming is counterproductive when it comes to education and policy reform because it pushes the
need for action away from the people who can make a difference and onto people who have very
little control over their situation (Levin 1995, 3). Bottom-up reforms, or policy action that is supported and enacted by people from communities and schools working with government, requires that people step away from victim blaming and towards a comprehensive solution that works with and for the children in that community.

Each of the different levels of involvement and participation requires a very important actor to jumpstart the process: the advocate. Change often begins at the macro level with small advocacy groups pushing for reform, which is later picked up and acted upon by the government (Laforest 2013, 154). These advocates are simply people who firmly believe that a cause is worth hours of their time and dedication because it will ultimately better the community. Advocates can be parents, teachers, principals, and even policy makers at almost every level in our government. Typically, it is activists from the other two groups who spur the government into action, and even then it tends to be a slow process because of the political bureaucracy. The modern incarnation of this advocacy began in the 60s, which is when some of the first schools were created in Canada (Gulson 2016, 2). These schools remain a reaction of parents who became so frustrated with the system. It was then that they used Canada’s commitments to freedom of choice in education to create school curriculums which were aimed specifically at helping their children (Gulson 2016, 2). The creation of these schools was met and still faces varying levels of protest from communities that are not directly served by these schools, due to questions of segregation and discrimination accusations (Gaskell 2012, 65-67). While these concerns are important, but equally so is the need to encourage and support Native American children (Gaskell 2012, 65-67). Suggests why advocacy at every level is so important. Advocacy keeps the public engaged and informed so that the rights of minority groups such as Native Americans are defended and represented and to keep working towards solutions that benefit all children. It takes a community
of committed parents, educators, administrators, and policy makers to create and protect reforms which benefit Native Americans. This bottom up approach can have amazing results, especially if all communities joined in.

It is essential in schools and in policy that the voices and opinions of the community and parents are heard and acknowledged during, throughout, and after the creation of reforms. Parents often feel that they have very little choice in the matter of where their kids go to school and what they are taught (Rofes 2004, 251-252). Individual biases are the hardest to overcome (Clarkson 1992, 1), and educators are no exception to that rule, they will often support or oppose a project, proposal, or suggestion based on their own personal biases (Levin 2009, 3). This means that when parents try to engage teachers in reforms, educators are not receptive, which can lead to parents feeling marginalized in how or what their child is taught in schools (Lewis 2001, 188). However, it is crucial, especially for minority groups, to include parental and communal involvement in the schools, because although they may not be professionally trained in teaching children, they know what is important for their child’s education within the realms of their traditions (Golarz 1995, 3). As such their opinions should be taken into consideration when it comes to designing and implementing curriculum and policies. Parents can also act as vanguards and partners with teachers and policy makers, informing them when something does not work and needs to be changed, and when what they are doing is going well and should continue to be implemented and strengthened. For Native Americans, who feels it is crucial that they have a voice in the education and how it is disseminated due to the important and fragile nature of their culture. Biases are very hard to overcome, because they have been reinforced and drilled into a person by decades of societal norms (Thomson 2010, 124). Therefore, Native Americans are the best equipped for identifying and replacing the expectations and the rules for
what is right and proper against what is imperialistic because they are the furthest removed from these structures. By having a choice as well as a right to participate in the education of their children, Native Americans can gain more empowerment and freedom, helping them build stronger communities while helping their children succeed. Through working closely with politicians and educators, parents can secure their child’s education, where keeping their culture and traditions alive, and start rebuilding and supporting their communities.

Schools, in the meantime, should include more restructuring through diversity training and they students, teachers, and policy makers are better informed and so that each actor in the system can help each other towards a better more constructive system. Diversity training includes programs which help provide context and meaning to the lives of disadvantaged students and parents, or peoples whose cultural background differs from the educator (Bryant 2015, 2). Diversity trainings and the like can help break down the perceived barriers between students and teachers and help teachers navigate communicating with parents and teaching students who may have a different cultural or economic background from them. This will also help schools and teachers know more specifically and accurately what they need to do and what they need to supply in order to help specific communities, information which will be helpful when they interact with their local representatives. It is well documented that educators and administrators do not do enough to advocate for their students, even though they are in the perfect position to be the bridge between the government and students (Levin 1995, 7).

Meanwhile policy makers, on all levels, should be more engaged with their communities and be better informed about the people who make up their constituents (Harrington 2013, 18). It is very clear through what policy is passed and how it is enacted that policy makers often do not have a very good understanding of the culture and history of Native Americans and the real
struggles that face them when it comes to education and poverty, instead the conventional wisdom of the day prevails (Levin 2013, 50). This is what differentiates evidence based policy from public policy; evidence based policy undergoes some form of scrutiny and quality assurance, whereas public policy relies more on intuitive and personal experience (Cooper 2013, 67-68). It is important for policy makers to take this extra step in double checking their policy against research because of the internalized biases that could unknowingly slip into the policies that they craft that could end up doing more harm than good (Belgarde 2004, 119-120). Policy makers can also include research conducted by and about Native Americans in their policy development, furthering to tear down the imperialistic values that are ingrained in the Education system (Harrington 2013, 5). When policy makers listen to both schools and parents of Native Americans, and then take those conversations and turn them into policy and action, is when our education system as a nation will stop failing our students.

THE PROMISE AND PERILS OF MARKET-BASED SCHOOLS

Market-based schools can refer to private schools, charter schools, out-sourced schools, school vouchers, variances, and alternative schools (Finn 2001, 43). Variances and vouchers provide parents and students the opportunity to send their children to a school of their choice, linking them closely to the success of a charter school in reaching their target audience. However, I will be focusing only on charter schools in the United States and Alternative schools in Canada because these are the options which best help and are targeted to Native American students. These are schools which are technically public, which means they cannot block entrance to anyone who wants to enter and qualifies, but they are independent in the sense that they get a more ‘hands on’ approach to the learning process. What makes these ‘market-based’
schools is that they engage with the school system as a business, and their school is product targeting students and parents as customers. Because these schools may do more with less money, they can refine and revise how these schools are organized to best suit the needs of the students and parents (Robson 2001, 27). These schools have more room to fail and are more likely to take risks because they are not held as closely to the standards of the government. Most of these schools are driven by community members and parents, making them particularly well suited to the needs of students in those communities. However, the flip side to the argument is that the more successful these schools are and the more students they attract, the more strain they come under to conform; the fewer resources will be available for public schools, making their success a very contentious one in the education community.

**GOVERNMENT PARTICIPATION**

Market-based schools depend on the government for funding, validation, and cooperation in helping students attend their schools. Most private schools are able to accommodate their students and provide alternative curriculums and programing or endowments based on their students needs because their funding comes directly from the parents whose students they are teaching; “when parents have more choices, school budgets are more elastic with respect to parents’ preferences, and therefore policy is more responsive to their preferences” (Hoxby 2001, 78). However, whether or not parents can choose to send their child to a private school depends heavily on income as well as geography and what is available near them (Hoxby 2001, 75-76). In addition, charter schools wishing to serve disadvantaged communities, such as Native American communities, cannot depend on such an independent form of funding because these communities are already under such financial strain that it would do more harm than good
to require tuition payments. For charter schools to exist, the states in which they operate need to have laws supporting them such as ____ in the United States of America and ____ in Canada, and need to follow the rules and regulations to be categorized as public schools (Just the FAQs 2016). This means that they will be able to receive funding from the government per student, exactly like public schools, but because of their charter status, they have more freedom for what and how they use the money that is allocated to them. These schools still struggle financially to pay staff and faculty, because their funding is based specifically per student, though once they figure that funding out, these schools often are successful (Just the FAQs 2016). Governments can also further help these schools by providing need based vouchers to students who do not live in communities where the schools are able to support them (Lewis 2001, 187). Policies such as these are the main ways in which top down approaches can actively help these disadvantaged communities with specific needs.

These programs also offer one of the best ways in which policies can be changed from the bottom up. Because these schools live between worlds, serving disadvantaged communities while needing the cooperation and participation of the government, they offer a unique way in which policy makers and representatives can interact with disadvantaged communities. This means that they can have a better understanding of what these communities need and want, making it easier to design long lasting policy which more effectively targets the needs of these communities. In the United States, most of this policy change happens at the state and province level, but if enough states enact and support these charter schools in Native American communities, the effects can ripple upwards through the system to the federal government. In Canada, the approach is similar, but in order to make the laws greater standing and give them more protection in the system, the communities that drafted and pushed them through their local
governments gave them the same treatment as if they were going to go through Parliament (Laforest 2013, 156). Mimicking the way in which charter schools are like public schools with looser government regulation, these laws have the force and power of a federal law without the constraints that come with them. In addition, the government is actively interested in preserving and advocating for these schools because most voters support funding charter schools, initiatives have been politically viable and interesting for policy makers (Robson 2001, 29). Furthermore, there is always the possibility that if parents and communities start to feel strongly enough that their government is not supporting or representing them in the schools, it could lead to violence and political strife (Coulson 2001, 67). By offering parents and communities choices in where they can send their children and what curriculums are taught, policy makers prevent such an uprising. However, change in communities comes about more through local initiatives outside of the control of government policy (Hopkins 2000, 5).

COMMUNITY ADVOCACY

It is important to note that there are two different types of charters: those that are corporation based and those that are built from the ground up from within the community and are for the community. The corporation based schools bring with them a wide range of problems, which make them no better than the broken public school system, and retain many characteristics which make them much worse. These schools embrace whole heartedly the idea that education is a commodity to which successful aspects are kept and failing programs are scrapped. This applies even to students, which creates “a cycle of decline is set in motion: the charter school enrolls the most motivated students, avoids the students with high needs, and boasts of its higher scores; the test scores in the public school decline as some of its best students leave for the
charter, and the proportion of needy students increases” (Ravitch 2013, 247-248). The commodification of students in our school system is the loudest, objection to the charter system in the United States and Canada today. These schools often skew the numbers of success for charter schools because they do not serve students who struggle in school or who require more effort, attention, and money to succeed. This does not mean, however, that charter schools that are based in the community do not serve their students. While these schools, which are often labeled as ‘ethnocentric charter schools’ do not succeed at the same rates as the other charter schools, they do instill the traditions and cultures of their people, and therefore provide greater service to their communities (Buchanan 2004, 102-103). However, this distinction between commercial charter schools and ethnocentric charter schools is rarely made in discussion, in my paper I will be focusing on the effects and consequences of ethnocentric charter schools.

In order for these ethnocentric charter schools to exist after the law, though, there needs to be enough interest, passion, and motivation within the Native American communities to make a charter school exist. Though the policies make the schools possible, community involvement and local advocates bring them into being (Medler 2004, 191-192). This is supported by the evidence that “where marginalized groups have organized themselves, improvements in educational outcomes have followed” (Levin 1995, 11). Not only are these communities the brains of the operation, they are also what make the charter schools unique and able to cater to the needs of students. This unfortunately means that only Native American communities who already have a sense of empowerment and responsibility to their people have taken the step to build and design their own schools so the most disadvantaged communities, that need ethno charter schools the most have are often left out of the development process (Gaskell 2012, 58).
The most successful of these schools make an effort to include and encourage community participation, especially parents and guardians of students.

Under ethno-charter school systems, communities that once felt used and abused by the system are now in charge of what their children are learning; they are taking back and redefining their forms of leadership in their community, helping to improve their lives from the bottom up. According to Faircloth and Tipeconnic, two Native American leaders and researchers, this form of education helps decolonize the education system by restructuring the curricula to be more central to Indigenous communities (Faircloth 2013, 3-4). In short, charter schools have become “a way for the dominated classes to participate agreeably in their own domination and take the work off the shoulders of the dominators.” (Rofes 2004, 255). Teachers who feel like they want to do a greater service to their community and to disadvantaged students often choose to teach at these smaller, more local charter schools because they have more control and more of a connection to the students and parents (King 2004, 166).

**COMPETITION OR COMPLEMENTATION?**

The two main concerns with schools like these is that they take away students from public schools. The complaint about competing for students mostly applies to the commercialized charter schools, because they siphon off the most accomplished and the most driven students, leaving public schools the burden of the most challenging and most disadvantaged students (Ravitch 2013, 247-248). However, the aspect of these schools competing with public schools is integral to the idea that these schools can bring about social and political change, and why they are considered (Medler 2004, 189). These schools do offer an alternative for parents and students seeking a reformed approach to teaching, and one that aligns
more closely with their own beliefs or needs. The ideal is that there is not any competition between schools and that all aspects of the system are complimentary to each other with every students needs being filled. However, some level of competition between public and market schools is necessary in order for them to fulfill their function; if charter schools were truly complimentary, there would not be a need for them in our education system (Medler 2004, 190).

As more charter schools pop up from the communities which they serve and take students from public schools, they incentivize the public schools to change and reform how they are teaching. Charter schools also offer a unique opportunity for educators to experiment what works and what does not with how much they can be budgeted for and what they are teaching their students. As charter schools figure out the best and most useful tools, they are free for public schools to use, creating overall a better learning environment for all students.

CONCLUSION

Native American students in both the United States and Canada have been subjected to many years of oppression and marginalization by the government and society. This has resulted in their communities being at high risk for impoverishment and disenfranchisement. For several decades now there has been very little movement, neither politically nor socially, to try and mediate this situation because the lack of visibility and there was a phenomenon of internalization within the communities. Recently though, there has been more of a push for empowerment and calls to actions within these communities to claim more agency, resulting in a rise in activism through bottom up approaches to alleviate this problem. This has been especially important in their work in education, where the issues of race, poverty, and marginalization negatively affect young children and their chances of success in education. This is perhaps the
best place for this empowerment to start, through education these communities are able to start
the process of breaking the cycle of poverty and keep their historical and cultural traditions alive
and well through education. What communities have most often done this through ethnocentric
charter schools, which work through government funding and loose standardization to provide
specialized and targeted curriculum. These schools often also help the broader community by
offering a source of employment and empowerment. Through this process, a more holistic and
comprehensive policy reforms can emerge, providing a direct line of communication between
policy makers and education providers on what works and what does not when it comes to
policy. There is still so much that needs to be done in terms of how these schools are structured,
who they serve, and what change happens because of them; but the evidence shows that
ethnocentric charter schools and bottom up activism could be the key in breaking the cycle of
poverty in Native American communities and keeping their students engaged in their education.
The implications of this shift are drastic; if communities are successful in implementing
ethnocentric charter schools and bottom up reform, over time this could lead to a drastic
reduction in poverty levels and a shift in cultural and social perceptions on education, poverty,
and Native American communities. This paper provides an outline on how to incorporate
politics, economics, and sociology to form an effective solution to the problem of poverty in
Native American communities, but more specific and long term research should be conducted,
and more importantly action taken by the affected communities, before real change can occur.
Works Cited


