

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

ECONOMIES OF URBAN AMERICAN INDIAN BELONGING: CULTIVATING  
ACADEMIC AND CULTURAL STRENGTH THROUGH TITLE VII PROGRAMS

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*For my family,  
always in my corner  
always on my side*

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own classes – that I feel intellectually fortified, well-equipped and well-prepared, to take on the world. So, thank you, all of you, for making this project – and my little rising star – shine.

## ABSTRACT

This study examines an urban Title VII education program in mid-Michigan, seeking to understand how it facilitates the cultivation of distinct and the seemingly alternative, social worlds and social projects that affect both the positive and problematic distribution of educational and cultural outcomes for Indigenous stakeholders. As a federally-assisted supplemental education program, Title VII was primarily designed to address both the educational achievement and the “culturally-related academic needs” of American Indian students attending non-tribal public schools. This dissertation, therefore, works to approach these programs and their students as complex entities who deserve to be understood in their diversity and multiplicity of layers.

By using varied, multi-stage anthropological methods, this study notes the everyday processes and interactions that occur, both on-site and off-site, ,while keeping broader temporal and spatial, discursive and material, contexts in mind. Rather than pre-judge certain actions as important and others as less so, I have used two years of extended time in the field and the variety of my data gathering activities (active participation and observation, interviews with multiple levels of stakeholders, existing data, and documents/archival information) to build a more comprehensive representation of stakeholder experiences and the environment that initiates, mitigates, or otherwise affects those experiences. This work may be particularly revealing of the uneven landscapes of both alternative and normative social projects in urban Indigenous life because the field site is an American Indian education program in a small city without a nearby reservation, which means that the most direct links to the places, families, cultures, politics, and economics that are often discursively associated with historical and contemporary American Indians are *least apparent* and *most complex*. It is my intent, therefore,

that this work advance Anthropology's - and, indeed, humanity's - understandings of what processes and practices, and combinations thereof, cultivate and contest alternative possibilities for educational programs within the world, especially for those who are culturally, ethnoracially, politically, and/or economically marginalized, whether historically and/or in the complex present.

With that in mind, the chapters in the text include: 1) Introduction; 2) Geographic & Historical Context; 3) Program Development & Structure; 4) Academics; 5) Culture & Identity; 6) Theorizing the Program & Its Liminalities; 7) Conclusion.

**KEYWORDS:** American Indian identity; urban education; anthropology of belonging; culturally relevant pedagogy; federal policy.



## PREFACE / POETICS

In the routes of (all)  
This liminalit(ree/y)  
Your name sounds  
Like you were born, where  
In (the womb) carcerated  
And how, I wonder  
Was I supposed to?  
Sav(e)(io/you)(r) time  
With you, never enough  
Words writ, thieving  
Thick digital, cross in  
Slash-inked crisp white note  
apps  
Memo(rie)s, spirit(ual)  
SHIFT  
So circle drums up while I  
Go, thumb-t(r)ack(ed) painting  
Tele-graffiti-ing your li(v)es  
Onto my heart, strung  
By daily out-pourings  
Strain to reconcile, love  
And eth-no-gratify my  
Wont of do-gooding  
Apply this activist(ick)  
Directly to the forehead  
And lock me out of  
Theory land(s) like  
SPLAT  
Tiny selves twitch, gooey  
On (com)mute(d) shields  
Stuck and (un)clear, washed  
Like subjectivity Whiteout  
Start a/new, strict(ure)--  
structure?  
Subtle, listen(in), (ob)serve  
these

Weeks by math widgets  
Count your neg(add)ative  
Alge-bratty backflips, over  
What matters? Culture?  
Slick, running (be)t(w)een  
lessons  
Sheets for (w)rapping out, our  
Sessions, switch 3rd-4th-6th  
Still see your hall waves, left  
Cheer, gloom, and frustrated  
Sleep-brazen and hard-working  
And I (we all) know  
YOU  
Stay home to(o)  
Care for sick brothers  
Sleep off 2am newspapers  
Read every book near you  
Cause, no one (is) there to  
Care, when you miss, I--  
Skip the bus, Wednesday  
Absent(ee) is ummm--  
Down, grades, down  
And your (needs)-- I can't--  
Carve my stomach free  
I don't-- What can I--  
Say, get away  
From this, gnawing  
Fix-it-now-please  
Sensation(al)(ism)  
So I (un)just shut  
Up, my eyes, so tight  
Mouth moving, mind  
Write and right to paper  
"What Scenes May Come"  
Dark, in colors, then  
Try, again, try again

TRY  
To anthr(o/a)pologize  
The best, must a-struggle on  
Like tattoos, set in  
Shades of pale toward  
Earth(in) brown like  
Mine, almost, family  
Warmed, together we  
Test new-old recipes, identities  
In ears and at shoulders  
Aunties' heart(h)s, no doubt  
Blazing mis(re)presentation to  
n(o/augh)t  
A way for "our kids," they say  
And "our" is?  
SEEDS  
I know, planted  
Me too? May be, deep  
hang out, dry description  
Headnotes? Call back that  
Mess in sharp margins  
Recognitions, splayed open  
Say it can('t) be, but  
Smudging serendipitously  
Makes (il)legible this  
Alterity, even of me  
Belonging? (Im)proper  
Mutuality? No, more  
You claim to best my  
Evidence, the s(k)in of labor  
But does(n't) data cry too?  
*Don't my data cry too?*  
Or am I yet a(n)/(other)  
Ghost stand(in) between  
This f(i/e)l(d) of dreams  
... and truth.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Walking into the "Turtle Shell" for the first time, I noted that it looked very much like a fun educational space. With three large rectangular tables arranged in a loose triangle, surrounded by five to eight chairs each, a round table toward the back of the room heaped with snacks and juice, a wall half-full of bookcases and another wall featuring shelves with colorful-looking educational toys, papers, and arts materials, the room mixed elements from classrooms I might recognize with something more like a daycare. Or, I realized later, maybe not a *daycare* exactly, but a classroom for students who were still encouraged to have *fun* while learning. I wondered, for comparison, how long it had been since I'd been inside an elementary school classroom and couldn't decide on the number of years. The space definitely *felt good*, though, or at least I felt good in it.

The director came over to meet me, both of our smiles bright as we did the usual sorts of introductions, and she showed me around the room. In addition to what I could immediately see from the door, there were also stacks of educational games in the cabinet on the far wall by the refrigerator, a desktop computer on the future assistant's desk, and a laptop computer, all of which students were welcome to use with permission. There was even a second room, just next door, across a little round hallway, with more comfortable chairs, a couch, and a few small scattered tables, as well as storage space for school supplies, culture and craft supplies, extra decorations, and anything else that didn't need to be out all the time. The most prominent items in the room beyond the furniture, however, were a giant black-backed dreamcatcher, about five feet in diameter and attached to both ceiling and wall in one corner, and a large thick Medicine Wheel hanging up on one of the room dividers, a piece that I would later learn was the men's drum in its protective covering. The director noted, as we exited the room, that the second room

(called "Turtle Shell 2) wasn't often used on Mondays, because the afterschool program was just for students in 6th grade and up, but on Wednesdays, when all grades were welcome, Turtle Shell 2" became the place where older students could go and read, work quietly, or socialize without the littlest kids underfoot. I nodded easily, taking it all in. It seemed intuitive enough for me to feel fairly comfortable, even as a newcomer, and I looked forward to settling in there. Some of that comfort, though, likely wasn't the sensible layout of the space so much as the woman in it.

I was early so no students had arrived yet, even though the nearest school was just a few blocks away. I already had a sense, even before students came through the door, that the director was likely more often in the category of educators kids liked, and not among those students complained about most. Why? Her eyes were lit up with excitement for the start of the new school year, her smile was broad and sincere, she laughed easily, and she surveyed the rooms with the pride and confidence of one who knows that everything is in its place. She is average height for a woman, with a sturdy frame, tan skin, and brown hair with a hint of red in it that was cut to just above her shoulders, but the physical description speaks little to her *presence*. It's a bit hard to explain the sense of her, but what I would say is that she reminded me a bit of my nice-to-everyone grandmother, with a pinch of prepared-and-determined like a late aunt of mine, alongside a generous helping of charm and joy like a very well-played Santa Claus - or Mrs. Claus, I suppose. Afternoons spent baking with grandkids and lively classrooms filled with grinning eight-year-olds definitely came to mind when interacting with her. It would only be much later, after I'd been volunteering there a while, that I would ask how she felt about her job and the program, and I wasn't at all surprised to learn that she loved her job, loved the kids, and

really felt this was her calling. It showed from Day One, and that sparkle and affection is why her pseudonym herein will be Ms. Noelle.

The "Turtle Shell" is the name given to the physical space of the Bay City Indian Education Program (BCIEP) in mid-Michigan, a program currently funded under Title VII (Public Law 107-110) of the "No Child Left Behind" version of the federal *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (USDoEd 2004b). This section of the act works to "support the efforts of local educational agencies, Indian tribes and organizations, postsecondary institutions, and other entities to meet the unique educational and culturally related academic needs of American Indian and Alaska Native students, so that such students can meet the same challenging State student academic achievement standards as all other students" (USDoEd 2004b). I'll discuss more details about the local area in Chapter Two, and more about the underlying policy structure in Chapter Three. On that first day, however, my focus was more on the on-the-ground implementation of the program's stated mission and the work that had both won it a state-wide educational excellence award from the Michigan School Board Association and gained it a featured spot in a report by the National Indian Education Association (2011) on "success stories" from Title VII programs, which was written for the U.S. Department of Education's Assistant Secretary for Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development.

When I began to volunteer at BCIEP, I was still formulating my dissertation proposal and was genuinely unsure what the program had in store for me, despite reading about it online and discussing it via email and phone with the director before I arrived. Consequently, I walked into the space like a fresh new notebook, ready to be filled up with interesting facts and commentary, my mind working to understand what kinds of questions and explorations might be interesting and accessible to me through involvement with that program while also being relevant to both

the program itself and anthropology as a discipline. Mostly the core starter question was something like, "How does this work?" or "What's happening here?" When the answer to that second question initially just came back as "a lot," as if my mental computer was on the verge of shorting out, I knew I had to find a way of framing my inquiry to help me conceptualize and discuss the "lot" that was happening in concrete, traceable ways. As experiences with the program turned the gears in my mind, I began to reach for scholarship that might be "good to think with," and certain incidents early on took me down realms of scholarly literature I hadn't expected to explore.

## REUNION HUGS

After she'd shown me around the Turtle Shell, the director gave me some paperwork to fill out (the district-wide volunteer application and a background check form) as well as a double-sided sheet to read, and I sat at one of the long tables to review it all. The lone sheet was the "contract" students would sign when they came into the program at the start of the new school year, even if they had already signed the same agreement in previous years. As I was looking over the rules, expectations, and consequences that students would sign-off, however, I heard the door and looked up from the table, taking in the view of a few early adolescent students coming in the door. Ms. Noelle called out their names from across the room and they called out hellos in response, their smiles wide as she crossed the room to them and they each hugged her in turn. She asked about their summers and they shared snippets about their activities, not mentioning camps or faraway travel, but most saying it was a good - if sometimes boring - summer. They also said they missed "Indian Ed" and *her*, and she said she'd missed them too. Still beaming, she checked them in, practically dancing on her feet, very much like a relative excited to see how the kids in the family have grown up.

She introduced me and I introduced myself, shedding my natural quietness in order to engage with the students who were likely shyer than I was, with far better reasons for it. I was a strange new adult in their (safe) space. I was the one who had to prove myself, not the other way around. While I did that, though, other students trickled in and much the same reunion moment repeated itself over and over. As I told my mother later, trying to explain what sort of program it was, it put me in the mind of what it might be like to go to Thanksgiving at someone else's house, someone who did Thanksgiving like our own family - with people driving in from all over the U.S., folks greeting and hugging who haven't seen each other in a year or more, smiles and laughter and a sense of joyous anticipation in the air. It was true that the students didn't really hug *each other*, though there was definitely some chatting and friendly ribbing going on very quickly as the room began to fill up, but almost all of them hugged Ms. Noelle, even some of the teenage boys I might have thought would think themselves "too old" or "too cool" for that kind of thing.

To be clear, the hugs seemed to occur based on unspoken mutual agreement or by the express (verbal or gesture-based) request of students. I only recall hearing Ms. Noelle ask if she was "going to get a hug" one time, and no obvious complications arose from it. Without having been there yourself to see the trickle of students coming in, there might also be questions of peer pressure, or a sense of following the status quo, but most students after the initial group arrived alone or in groups of two or three, spaced far enough apart so they didn't observe the arrival ritual of the group before them. Additionally, since this reunion scene continued to assert itself in later afterschool sessions when students were returning to the program for the first time, but hadn't been able to come (or had forgotten) to that first session, I was left with a strong sense that

the Turtle Shell was a place that the students wanted to be and that Ms. Noelle, in particular, was someone they wanted to be around.

As far as initial data points went, it seemed like a strong indicator that familiarity with the director and something positive she and/or the space offered - like the comfort and warmth I felt in her presence - was experienced by students of various ages. I knew this was a place I wanted to stick around - to learn about, learn from, and ultimately to understand – and that was just from the first hour and half of the first few afterschool sessions. Did everything hinge on this charismatic leader? Was there something about the program itself and/or the space that lent itself to strong bonds between students and staff that would later lead to a number of instances where the term "family" was used in a directly referential way with the program? These initial musings led me toward literature in the burgeoning field of the anthropology of belonging and called me back to key and contemporary works in the anthropology of education, policy studies, and critical social theory.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

At first this project had a very strong focus on the field site itself - the Bay City Indian Education Program (BCIEP) and not a particular investigatory theme beyond urban American Indian education and community support thereof. My research questions developed organically over time, becoming more refined as I experienced the program and reached into various scholarly literatures to find strands of concepts I might be able to tether to those experiences in coherent ways, even if only temporarily. For this reason, I present the conceptual frameworks before the research objectives themselves, infusing this discussion with an ongoing process of questioning and wonderings from the field.

The bodies of scholarship that most shaped my thinking on this research include four foci of anthropological and related literature: 1) the anthropology of belonging, 2) the co-production of education and culture, 3) discursive policy analysis, and 4) critical theories of race and indigeneity.

### Anthropology of Belonging

It is perhaps not immediately intuitive why anthropological discussions of belonging would contribute so much to the theoretical framework of a project on urban American Indian education, but there were many moments throughout the course of my two years volunteering there during which a sense of kinship or unity, more broadly, was invoked - even beyond reunion hugs. The director of BCIEP regularly referred to the program and the participants who constitute it as “family” and the term “culture” was often referenced via the inclusive singular form (as in “our culture”) by multiple people in BCIEP spaces. This continued throughout my time there, even as the sort of kinship connections considered more recognizable to mainstream institutions (e.g. biological or legal kinship ties) were both debated and affirmed, with respect not only to bonds between participants themselves but also to bonds between participants and various of the forty-plus American Indian tribes and bands represented in the program. Seeking out scholarly discussions of kinship in ways that went beyond blood, birth, or marriage, therefore, seemed like an obvious first step. What kind of kinship was this? How might this sense of being “family” interact or overlap with conceptions of culture? It made me consider if work on cross-cultural adoptions might hold some insights worth exploring at the crossroads of kinship and culture.

Yngvesson (2010) and Kim (2010), for example, both show the ways in which “adoptive kinship” practices both disrupt and reify “real” kinship, race/ethnicity, and



nationality/citizenship, situating adoptees as simultaneously *belonging* and *not belonging* to both their adoptive communities and their communities of origin. How do students from a variety of family situations, who are ancestrally connected to notably diverse tribes and bands develop a form of solidarity often marked as familial? Are there different experiences of that sense of belonging and familial solidarity among stakeholders within the program? What does it mean to address the “culturally-related academic needs” of American Indian students in urban spaces when “culture” is still something “under construction” in their lives as they encounter and work to master new cultural knowledge in ways affected both by age and by varying levels of cultural exposure at home? If we think about the question of kinship and belonging in a way more explicitly aligned with scholars of adoptive kinship, into what are students being adopted? What constitutes these two poles in the process, origin included?

If we set aside questions of directionality in this process, however, and consider belonging as something more complex than the simple duality of *belonging* and *not belonging* or belonging *here* vs. belonging *there*, we can access new layers of information. The work of DeBernardi (2004), as well as the work of Li (2000) and Ceuppens & Geschiere (2005), reveal concurrent processes and structural realities which complicate and disrupt experiences of belonging in ways under-explored in adoptive kinship literature. DeBernardi's (2004) research, for instance, examined immigrant religious spaces and practices, observing processes of borrowing and transforming cultural elements, as well as acts meant to express "cultural loyalty." While practitioners positioned themselves in this space of belonging/not-belonging, they also crafted and contested the cultural frameworks within which they were positioned, leading DeBernardi to theorize the presence of complex "geographies of self" in post-modern societies. How then do students, families, and community members involved in BCIEP shape the

parameters which mark belonging in that space? How do they co-construct and contest the cultural frameworks with which some feel connected enough to call "our culture" in BCIEP spaces?

The work of Li (2000) and Ceuppens & Geschiere (2005), similarly, destabilizes the concept of belonging, theorizing it less as an amalgam of experiences and self-conceptions and more as a phantom, a contested "global conjecture" that both "promises safety" and concurrently maneuvers to situate some lives as "more important" than others. These works point to the fact that belonging is not only contested, but it is also co-produced and more than just about locality, but also about access to extralocal, even global, resources (both discursive and material). That is to say: belonging, even on what seems to be a very individual level, is inextricably and structurally situated within macro-processes that cannot be ignored. They also reveal the ways in which discourses related to belonging have "elasticity," changing and inciting or inspiring the creation and maintenance of alternative approaches to the challenge of belonging and the disparities in safety and resources that seem inherent within the current world system. With that in mind, how might the belief in a sense of belonging or familial solidarity in BCIEP imply certain promises, like safety? How might it situate some stakeholders differently in terms of importance, access, and resources? What macro-processes is this form of belonging embedded in and affected by?

Enter Elizabeth Povinelli (2011), who sets the concept of belonging in relation to "social worlds" such that belonging and what she calls "abandonment" lead to an uneven distribution of good and harm, both in the lives of individuals and in the histories and future potentialities of groups. Her focus is primarily on mechanisms of recognition and the ways in which groups - Indigenous peoples, for example - struggle, almost continually, in a liminal space of potential,

striving to make themselves legible to others, and especially to the state, on their own terms. On one hand, normative social worlds are structured in ways that make belonging/recognition something that only happens under certain parameters, parameters which largely benefit dominant cultures and groups and maintain the uneven distribution of good/harm in their favor (e.g. Indigenous peoples being seen as "traditional," and therefore historical, or "modern," and therefore incorporated into body politic sans difference). On the other hand, alternative social worlds, by their inherent focus on difference and problematic realities of the state, would rather be ignored/avoided or cast as part of a sacrificial process toward a greater societal end, and they remain liminal in their radical persistence or are ultimately aborted, subverted, or subsumed by normative social worlds.

Encountering this way of thinking made me wonder if BCIEP, and, more broadly, Title VII Indian Education programs, might be the focal point of an alternative (or perhaps normative, but striving to position itself as alternative) social world in the way Povinelli (2011) understands it. For Povinelli (2011), a social world is one constituted by and implicated in a number of both overlapping and conflicting social projects and she summed up her take on social projects themselves in an interview in the following way (Haritaworn et al. 2013):

*Projects are the thick differential subjective background effects of a life as it has been socially lived - and manifested as an individual ethical and political orientation. Projects feel like they are inside an individual. But 'project' is not another name for the individual, but the differential effect of dialogic social interaction on an individual's ethical and political orientation. Social projects occur when projects start being in relation to each other. ... They are the aggregated result of a set of practices coming into commonality; they are the activity of fixing phenomena and co-substantiating practices. Alternative social projects are those social projects that begin by merely more or less deviating from the explicitly given categories of life and world but slowly, through aggregating activities, come to have a context, being, and enunciation. What they come to be depends on how and within what these aggregating practices unfold.*

While her language around "ethical and political orientation" seems too narrow to encompass the full spectrum of identity, experience, and intentionality I wanted to capture, I want to take up the spirit of her argument: that the differential effects of a life "socially lived" interact with one another in ways that contribute to aggregations of practice and, in some circumstances, these aggregations, or social projects, deviate from mainstream social projects, social worlds, and articulations thereof. By acknowledging and analyzing these projects, we can note the ways in which various combinations of actions, words, and resources orient themselves toward or move in observable directions, toward recognizable ends, whether stakeholders explicitly seek those ends or not. This way of thinking also allows us to note how these projects not only aggregate discourses, practices, and materials, but how they do so in ways that are affected by (or enmeshed in) larger state governance projects, which may have structures that are not wholly deterministic, but are also far from the question of unconstrained choice. These structural elements of governance are in some ways coaxing and in some ways constraining (what Povinelli refers to as "obligation"). They continue to create uneven "terrains" for the distribution of belonging and abandonment - good and harm. In this case, that might largely mean positive and problematic educational and cultural "outcomes" for various program stakeholders. Her work, in particular, offered a method of articulation that seemed most relevant to what I was experiencing in the field.

When I worked to bring those questions of belonging into conversation with the subfield of educational anthropology, however, I found that most works on belonging there were often either too narrow, focusing primarily on practical approaches to increasing a "sense of belonging" in classrooms and schools (Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama 2004), or too broad, unwieldy and not quite applicable, like tying said "sense of belonging" to broader "culture" and

"education" questions in examinations of Black and Latino student experiences (Carter 2005; Ladson-Billings 1994; Ogbu 2008; Pollack 2004). Additionally, many of these discussions continue to struggle to disentangle themselves from the historical debates around cultural discontinuity/dissonance and the need (or not) for culturally-responsive/relevant pedagogy, suggesting that "culturally-based" models "work" (if they work) because they act as a "bridge" between the (marginalized) cultures of students' homes and the (societally-prioritized or "mainstream") culture of most public schools (Gay 2000; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama 2004; Howard 2001; Klug & Whitfield 2003; NIEA 2011; Ogbu 2008; Powers 2006; Ward 2005). By bringing the work of anthropologists focused on belonging in other contexts into dialogue with explorations of the *co-production of education and culture* (Carter 2005; Foley 2001; Levinson, Foley, & Holland 1996; Pollack 2004), this project works to advance discussions on the ways in which potentially alternative social worlds, like the Bay City Indian Education Program, strive to persist and make manifest various alternative social projects, especially in highly liminal or "in-between" spaces. This dissertation, further, explores how those strivings and manifestations may not only disrupt and shift, but also constitute and reify the uneven distribution of belonging and abandonment, good and harm, and other outgrowths of said social projects.

### Co-Production of Education and Culture

Within the subfield of educational anthropology, it has been nearly four decades since Paul Willis (1977, 174-175) concluded that "there is no inevitability of outcomes," because "[s]ocial agents are not passive bearers of ideology, but active appropriators who reproduce existing structures only through struggle, contestation, and a partial penetration of those structures," and it has been nearly two decades since Levinson, Foley, & Holland (1996, 11) pointed out that the "identities of participants... cannot be taken as predefined by class

position... [or] by any essential aspects of race or gender” and, in fact, that such identities are “contingent and fluid.” It was very much in this spirit of distancing oneself from presumptions, either about the actors involved or about the inevitabilities of processes, that meant I was not content with givens or with imagining that I might easily connect the dots between American Indian students, their families, and related common narratives, especially considering the under-researched circumstances of urban American Indian education and, in general, American Indians in mid-sized and small cities. Instead, I worked to approach “culturally related” educational programs and their students as complex entities who deserve to be understood in their diverse specificity, within a broader historical and present context, and with a careful mapping of their many layers.

Pollock (2004, 42) is particularly adept at pointing out the ways in which both scholars and stakeholders in studied educational spaces struggle with the "paradoxical twenty-first-century task of trying simultaneously to think and not think in terms of simple race groups," especially in cases where the distribution of resources is highly correlated with racial hierarchies, revealing that any "talk" or intentional refusal to "talk" about these issues actually reproduces these racial groupings and hierarchies. Consequently, the work of this dissertation is to provide insights into the aggregations of discourse, practice, and materials that contribute to and contest these distributions of goods/harms (and belonging/abandonment) in the social world facilitated by the field site's Title VII program, without either presuming or refusing to acknowledge the identity-related nature of said constitutive and implicated social projects. This research also actively notes, without suppression, the ways in which the research process itself is not somehow outside of these social projects, but is also implicated in, constituted by/constitutive of, and, likely, contested by them.

## Discursive Policy Analysis

Having discussed everything from grant writing to internal politics within the school system with parents, volunteers, and staff at the program, I am very aware that BCIEP is not a program that was birthed or currently lives within a vacuum, free from external governance. Rather, BCIEP exists in the way it does in part *because* of federal, state, and local policies, which affect everything from the amount of base funding they receive (and what they can spend it on), to hiring mechanisms, record-keeping procedures, and physical maintenance for the imperfect (but rent-free) spaces of the Turtle Shell and Turtle Shell 2. Three trends in the study of policy and governance seemed most relevant: re-evaluating the object of study, the co-production of policy and implementation, and reevaluation of the very problems for which policy seeks solutions.

In theorizing his notion of governmentality, Foucault (1991, 100-103) suggests that we have to re-evaluate the very object of our study when we refer to the sphere of government, focusing not on a "composite reality" but on the "tactics" that distribute governance differentially. These tactics can take many forms, but at their base, they are the methods by which citizens of a governed space are shaped into subjects who fit within policy or governance parameters, one way or another. In this sense, policies explicitly and implicitly structure opportunities and constraints for programs like BCIEP and its stakeholders, while also re/shaping the program itself by means of its required procedures. It is important to understand not only the legalese of policies, but also the processes by which BCIEP staff and others must conceptualize and position the program in order to achieve certain aims and to avoid certain snares. Some scholars (e.g. Larner 2000) even point out that one of the ways in which problematic macro-processes like neoliberalism re/assert themselves is by constituting subject positions that

naturalize the processes of dominant social worlds and projects while simultaneously problematizing the state and encouraging conformity to it. Does (or how does) BCIEP naturalize certain processes and subject positions? What about paperwork defining American Indian ancestry? What about the ways in which the very sense of unity and belonging might marginalize students or families with a markedly distinct sense of culture or style of engaging with the program?

Once we acknowledge that governance and policies are not circumscribed objects, but many-tendrilled and capable of affecting programs and people in unexpected ways, we must also take the next step of acknowledging that both the policies themselves and the manner of their implementation are not inherently the product of singular social projects with straightforward aims. Scholars like Ferguson (1994) and Gal (1991) reveal how policies and political circumstances are actually shaped - in words and on the ground - through the clash and coalescence of different discourses. Indeed, "multiple cultural claims" are at work, and discourse is heavily implicated in both the "reproduction and transformation of social systems" (Gal 1991, 442). Consequently, this research works to acknowledge that there may be conflicting edicts and expectations, contradictions in verbiage and process, and that this complexity is already layered on top of and stitched into the fabric of BCIEP's work as it addresses requirements and preferences from the local school system, the state, and the federal government.

This research also benefits somewhat from engagement with educational policy and policy implementation literature on dealing with regimes of knowledge, "evidence," and "data," which are often held up within discursive realms, like education, dominated by talk of "achievement" and "accountability." The work of Hamann & Rosen (2011), Ladson-Billings et al (2007), and Sutton & Levinson (2001), in particular, seemed most relevant in their efforts to



upend and examine the given terminologies and the presumed directionality of policy/implementation processes. These articles largely "assert that not only policy solutions but also the purported 'problems' to which policies are ostensibly addressed are the product of social and cultural processes rather than natural or objective 'facts'," and, therefore, said "problems," the very questions imagined to incite policymaking must, themselves, be analyzed within their own webs of discourse and materiality (Hamann & Rosen 2011, 465). Applied to this research project, the question becomes something like: What *are* the "unique educational and culturally related academic needs" of American Indian students in this program? How are their challenges "unique"? How are they "culturally related"? Indeed, how are they "educational"? How was/is the American Indian education "problem" constructed such that it inspired/inspires policy support in this specific way, especially the models currently in use in urban spaces? How are (urban) American Indians themselves conceptualized within the realm of policy such that their needs are positioned in this way and processed via mechanisms like Title VII programs?

All these examinations of policy and governance projects factor into this research analysis as ever-present elements in the co-production of the social projects and social worlds that shape and are shaped by BCIEP and its constituents. How do stakeholders navigate neocolonial/neoliberal governance that creates space for federal employees to suggest that a Title VII program should just "remove" the cultural element of the program if it can't be quantified? Or where a decision-making snafu hundreds of miles away can create precarious funding situations and justify fears of having to tell the sole (and desperately needed) program assistant that she's being "let go" through no fault of anyone local? On whose terms and through what processes are cultural and educational needs defined, re/classified, resourced, and neglected?

## Critical Theories of Race and Indigeneity

Finally, when discussing the experiences and organizations of Indigenous peoples in North America, one cannot overlook the marginalizing effects of colonization and racialization. This research specifically works to create space for Indigenous voices to use what Critical Race theorists call “counter-storytelling” to contest the privileged discourses of the majority or dominant culture (Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas 1999; McDonald 2003; DeCuir & Dixson 2004). The lens through which this study views urban American Indian education acknowledges that oppressive systems of colonization affect Indigenous peoples as well as the tools and acts of decolonization that are used in resistance by Indigenous peoples and their allies. The work of Fyre Jean Graveline (1998) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) present compelling frameworks for a research ethic and methodology that not only respects Indigenous histories, cultures, values, and experiences, but actually uses these aspects of indigeneity as the basis of the research paradigm, a process which I attempted to utilize in part by engaging local stakeholders in dialogue about the work before, during, and after data collection as well as by proactively building reciprocity into the research process as a whole. Graveline (1998) and Smith (1999) also stress the complexity of culturally safe Indigenous research by asserting that such research must also acknowledge that Indigenous peoples, even specific Indigenous groups, are heterogeneous, so there is a multitude of Indigenous voices that should be represented. In alignment with these concerns, I have specifically positioned the questions of this research project not to presume any homogeneity, but rather to actively uncover and examine processes by which various overlapping, intersecting, and contested social projects become *differentially* individuated and thereby create uneven distributions of benefits and harms for diverse stakeholders.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

By combining what I found in texts on the anthropology of belonging with ongoing debates about the co-production of education and culture, discursive policy analysis, and critical theories of race and indigeneity, I began to weave a basket of foundational knowledge and theory strong enough to carry concrete and specific questions into the heart of the Bay City Indian Education Program:

1. What are the social projects referenced in and related to the social world in which this program is the focus (e.g. different "culture" and "education" projects)?
2. What aggregations of discourse, practice, and materials constitute and are implicated by these social projects?
3. How do stakeholders, especially students in the program, understand, experience, navigate, and contribute to or contest any unevenness in the cultivation and distribution of belonging/abandonment and good/harm with respect to these social projects?

Through this framework of thought, I could step back from questions solely about explicitly stated goals within and surrounding the Bay City Indian Education Program and set aside, at least temporarily, theories about cultural dis/continuity and the oft-discussed "bridge" certain programs are thought to provide between a distinct "school culture" and a separate "home culture." Rather, the questions and conceptual frameworks above provided me with a coherent mechanism by which to engage with many of the questions and moments of curiosity that cropped up during my time in the field while ensuring there was room for investigations into my gathered data that might only become clear during the analysis phase of the research. These questions created an analytic field in which this study could respectfully, but critically, examine "culturally-based education" programs in a way that worked neither to dismiss (or laud) their

value out-of-hand, nor essentialize or discount their many complex layers of overlapping, intersecting, and potentially conflicting social projects. In this way, this study becomes not only referential of and revealing for the articulation of this particular social world, but also of how social worlds, social projects, and individuated projects in a broader sense both constitute and contest the uneven distribution of good/harm and belonging/abandonment, in the worlds of “culture,” “education,” and beyond.

## METHODS & METHODOLOGY

In alignment with this project's research questions, the core elements of the data were framed in terms of "discourse," "practice," and "materials," especially those that were topically relevant to conceptualizations and experiences of "culture," "education," and the distribution of goods and harms. Those elements were also examined with an aim toward recognizing aggregations of certain discourses, practices, and materials in the manner of social projects, which I primarily take to mean largely that said aggregations seem to have recognizable trajectories or likely ends, despite not necessarily being the product of conscious directives from individuals or groups in authority. I determined that the best routes to access the first of these core elements, "discourse," would be: local archives for evidence of historical (and even some contemporary) discourse; relevant government policy documents (at the federal, state, and local level); relevant school district and program documents; current local news; commentary offered directly to the researcher (via existing data, interviews, or during observations); and commentary overheard in settings where the researcher was an observer/participant. Similarly, I determined that the best routes to access the second of the core elements listed above, “practices,” would be: observations of (and, when possible, participation in) practices-in-progress; commentary about practices offered directly to the researcher (via existing data, interviews, or during observations);

and commentary overheard in observation settings. Information on "materials," however, was more difficult to trace, let alone acquire, since, in some cases, experiences with differential access to material resources (e.g. money, food, clothes, books, transportation) was not only positioned as outside the realm of acceptable public discourse, it could also be stigmatizing and therefore actively subject to "camouflage," as Povinelli (2011) might call it. Consequently, data on materials came less through direct routes (e.g. budget statements) and more through remarks and observed practices that referenced or indexed comparisons or shifts between differently resourced individuals and groups or material-affecting events in the lives of individuals or the ongoing activities of groups.

Why did I use these particular sources for data? Documents often act as a snapshot of discourses, circumstances, and human action coming together in a form that has been recorded and made available. Existing data (e.g. academic, census, or survey data about the district or program) provide a sweeping and rapid collection of foundational information from a population or population sample, typically in a way that is simply not otherwise accessible to a lone researcher (especially one without a time machine). Interviews, however, particularly "reflexive-dyadic" interviews (during which interviewers may also share their own relevant experiences and facilitate co-produced metadiscursive moments, see: Gubrium & Holstein 2002, 849-875), build rapport between the researcher and stakeholders in question, accessing perspectives that may not be represented in documents, suggesting resources for additional information, and creating space for the active and critical co-production of knowledge. Finally, direct active participant-observation continues building rapport, allowing for the thick description of program implementation and its environment while accessing moments that may be otherwise unspeakable, and it is often the route by which a researcher may uncover issues or interesting

topics they did not initially think or know to (or how to) ask about. Indeed, I found that it was during conversations in observed spaces that stakeholders offered complex perspectives on information I had gained through other means, challenging both dominant discourses and my own thinking in unexpected ways. It is this last method that I pursued most ardently.

I spent a year in the field doing preliminary research, but I was no less committed to being present on-site and paying close attention during that first year than I was during the official research year that followed. Beginning in September 2012, when school started, I was at the Turtle Shell on Monday and Wednesday afternoons for the afterschool program, two (and sometimes three) mornings per week for in-school tutoring, and Wednesday evenings for culture and language classes, drum circles, special presentations, and gatherings. If there was a field trip, no matter the day, if there was room on the bus (and sometimes even if I had to drive myself), I went. When the whole program was in a whirl organizing Indian Education Day, a kind of one-day fair where they arrange for multiple 3rd and 4th grade classes in the district to come and learn about American Indian history and culture, I was there all day. They told me, at the 2014 Spring Gathering where they honored their graduating seniors, how many volunteer hours I had racked up over the past two years and I remember blinking at it, too shocked even to store the exact number in my brain. I missed some things, of course, and my occasional absence was noted by students, volunteers, and staff in ways that provided intriguing information of a different sort, but I did my best to be *present* - in mind, heart, spirit, and body - as much as possible, not just for this project, but for the students, staff, families, and other volunteers who were depending on me.

I would never say the work was easy. It often challenged me, even though I have served as a tutor in many circumstances for half my life. The challenge of it taught me a great deal

though, as did being as present as possible in spaces where students, parents, volunteers, and staff members were also *doing the work*, talking about it - challenges and all - and also just talking about their lives, their families and hobbies, their struggles and their triumphs. I felt, even though I was not in any imaginary isolated village, like I so immersed myself in that space that when it was time to pull back from being so thoroughly enmeshed, I seemed... limbless. Or perhaps tetherless, like a balloon suddenly floating away, loosed from its string, and sometimes, later, I would blink at my observation notes and shake my head. A scene could be so vivid that it might have happened just the day before, but there might also be some question I have now that I didn't ask then, didn't even know enough to imagine then, that I want to ask of the data and it is just long enough from my memory now so I am not always sure of the answer. Either way, the participant-observation data is the meat and the prize of this research, stocking folders with hundreds of pages of notes, not even including the many "headnotes" I added later, scribbled in margins with color-coded pens and dashed out in swift clicks on one device or another.

Most of what comes to light in the following chapters is the result of me sitting in the Turtle Shell, helping someone with math homework, or me riding a bus full of students and several parent volunteers to a museum three hours away, or me quietly asking about a student's mother who was newly home from the hospital as we sat in a study and testing room inside the counseling office at a middle school on the very edge of town. I *was* able to interview ten people, however - 2 staff members (one also an alumna), 3 parents (who also volunteer), 1 non-parent volunteer, 2 alumni (who also volunteer), and 2 students - and their answers to my more direct questions inform this work where appropriate. I would have liked to garner more interviews, but that wasn't feasible. I watched, fascinated, as many people said they were interested, but could never find time to do it, while others even specified a time or place, but something would come

up last minute or they wouldn't return my texts or calls. I wasn't personally offended in any way and didn't dwell on the lack of formal interviews. Rather, I acknowledged that many of the stakeholders I sought to interview have complicated, busy lives of their own and, while they did (and likely do) support the concept of the project and they certainly support the program itself, setting aside 30-60 minutes to answer questions wasn't high on their priority list. When I could, I reworked some of my questions into more organic conversations during my observation times and found that yielded more positive results. The interviews I was able to secure were especially insightful, however, and many candidly offered perspectives that I'm not sure they would have felt comfortable sharing in other circumstances. For this reason, I've worked diligently to integrate their quotes into the text in ways that not only mask but modify some of the potentially identifying information they offered while maintaining the spirit of their commentary.

Coming from a department and circle of peers steeped in intense, multi-year fieldwork, the value of observations and interviews wasn't surprising, but I did find myself surprised by the documents available for analysis. At first, locating items of interest in physical archives was a challenge, with one local museum having almost nothing about this particular city/county and one having a fair amount of information that was not organized in any obvious manner. Once I fell into what was available, though, and began to at least put it into chronological and then thematic order, I was able to see a few interesting strands emerge. It wasn't much, but it was enough to build a conversation between the texts, to craft a largely coherent, complex story about American Indians in the area (see: Chapter Two). The documents that were most intriguing, however, were those produced by or made available through the program itself: newsletters, flyers, announcements, field trip forms, reading program information for parents, reading program statistics, brochures for teachers, parents' committee meeting agendas, budgets, grant



applications, programs from gatherings, worksheets from culture classes, word lists from language classes, scrap work from students, music lyrics, email updates, and, yes, even Facebook posts.

I would have missed a lot if I hadn't been present to experience and observe so many of the activities mentioned above, but the paper trail itself offered another few hundred brightly-colored pages of concrete data that, at the very least, revealed how the staff thought about the program and the sort of discourse projected out to families, alumni, and other community supporters of the program. These documents were snatches of the narratives staff members formally chose, as much a statement as some individuals' clothes. As a result, a significant portion of this work involves bringing the seen, the heard, and the read into conversation, and then interrogating them to determine where the points of rupture are and what kinds of conditions of possibility these ruptures create with regard to facilitating or dampening different social projects, the individuation of said projects, and the uneven distribution of said projects' goods and harms. Once engaged in this form of text- and ethnography-based deep analysis, I could then also note the ways in which discourses and practices are implicated in and diversely constituted and contested by relevant macro-level social projects like neoliberalism and neo/colonialism.

The whole of the research process is, itself, discursively and materially situated, which makes the data and commentary from Indigenous sources especially valued and highlighted in this text. Further, as for the positionality of the researcher, I am aware that being non-White (African-American, in this case) does not inherently position me closer to a native understanding of the situation at hand, but I hope that my lifetime of experiences as the Other in my own way has helped me remain open and respectful to the voices of the American Indian stakeholders who

care most about this program. Even so, I have worked, through the structuring of this methodology, to apply my critical consciousness effectively not only to the data, but also to my process and myself as a researcher in the field.

In many days of this research, both while in the field and while writing, I learned so much, not only about the program itself, but also about how American Indians in a small city navigate public school systems as young students and adult family members, how cultural teachings in urban American Indian spaces pass between generations in sometimes unexpected ways, and how organizations and institutions, both within the city and in places many miles away, affect the material resources that expand or limit educational and cultural opportunities for urban American Indian students and their communities. The concept of a "social project," therefore, allows me to acknowledge the ways in which diverse practices, discourses, and material resources fit together into different aggregations that lead to what I might call "manifest intent," in and around the program, sometimes in ways perhaps not wholly recognized by stakeholders. Based on what I learned through this quartet of methods, however, there were multiple prominent social projects at work in and around the Bay City Indian Education Program. I have chosen to present the geographic and historical context of the field site and the program's structure and development over time before examining the program's key components in detail, laying the groundwork for more theoretical discussions toward the end of the text. The key chapters that follow after the background sections, therefore, discuss the academic aspects of the program, culture and identity, and finally theory and the relative liminalities affecting the program.

## SIGNIFICANCE

Ultimately, this dissertation works to approach these programs and their students as complex entities who deserve to be understood in their diversity and multiplicity of layers. I sought this understanding by using varied, multi-stage anthropological methods, working to note the everyday processes and interactions that occur - on-site and off – while keeping broader temporal and spatial, discursive and material, contexts in mind. I worked not to pre-judge certain actions as important and others as less so, but rather to use my extended time in the field (two years) and the variety of my data gathering activities (active participation and observation, interviews with multiple levels of stakeholders, existing data, and documents/archival information) to build a more complex and comprehensive representation of stakeholder experiences and the environment that cultivates, mitigates, or otherwise affects those experiences. This work may be particularly revealing for the uneven landscapes of both alternative and normative social projects, and the experiences thereof, because the field site is an American Indian education program in a small city without a nearby reservation, meaning that the more direct links to the places, families, cultures, politics, and economics that are often discursively associated with historical and contemporary American Indians are *least apparent* and *most complex*. It is my intent, therefore, that this work advance Anthropology's - and, indeed, humanity's - understandings of what processes and practices, and combinations thereof, cultivate and contest alternative possibilities for educational programs within the world, especially for those who are culturally, ethnoracially, politically, and/or economically marginalized, whether historically or in the complex present.

## **CHAPTER TWO: GEOGRAPHIC AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

American Indian education programs and the complex outcomes core to this research study do not occur in a vacuum, whether they occur in a classroom, a school, or another form of educational space. Rather, these educational programs, their social projects, and their stakeholders are situated relationally within a space - or spaces - of various material concerns, discursive intersections, and bodies of practice as part of both normative and alternative social projects in various states of potentiality, liminality, and actuality. Consequently, some ethnohistorical examination of the local, regional, and national context in which the program is situated is necessary. Such attention to context works to ensure that we do not reduce the experience of this particular Title VII program or its apparent impact and social projects to the uninfluenced/decontextualized actions of students, educational staff, or administrators alone. In contrast with previous scholarship, this research especially works not to presumptively confine the origin points and effects of belonging and other goods (or harms) into perceived (but not actually) bounded spaces of educational settings or the "home" and "mainstream" worlds that programs like this are often theorized to bridge.

Evidence overwhelmingly suggests, for example, that the assimilation-oriented federal Indian education policies of the late 19th and post-war 20th centuries, as well as the policy-fueled urbanization process and the reactions/responses of the mid-20th century to both were all significant constitutive forces for the contemporary landscape in which American Indian lives and identities are experienced, contested, and claimed (Adams 1995; Deloria 2005; Graveline 1998; Huffman 2010; Nabokov 1999; Nagel 1997; Reyhner & Eder 2004). How then did these and other macro-processes shape the context in which the Bay City Indian Education Program came about and exists today? This chapter explores the Indigenous history of the area,

Indigenous-White relations, and the shifting political and economic circumstances that have affected both the density and diversity of Indigenous residents in the city and surrounding county.

## GEOGRAPHY: THE LAND AND ALL ITS RELATIONS

Nestled along the eastern edge of Michigan, Bay County is among the state's smallest counties while still managing to match, in size, more than one-third the whole state of Rhode Island. Its long, uneven shape comes from the shifting of political boundaries over time, as municipalities in the area broke from one another and formed new municipalities, including Bay County itself (Butterfield 1957, 3). The city itself is similarly long and narrow, though horizontally more so than vertically, leading not only up to Lake Huron's western shore at Saginaw Bay, but also surrounding the Saginaw River, the largest river in the state, for several miles, which creates a natural division between the east and west sides of the city. With the Saginaw River providing "the only good harbor" in the area, and the surrounding land existing largely as fertile lowlands, swamps, forests, and floodplains, there were times in the natural history of the area when boats were used to traverse places where roads now stand (Butterfield 1957, 5-8; Cleland 1992, 17-25, 39-45; Kilar 1990, 34). Much of the modern prairie land that now holds the majority of the city and county's development, therefore, was actually man-made through drainage and fill processes during the first half of the 20th century (Butterfield 1957, 5-8; Cleland 1992; Kilar 1990). The remnants of floods and swamps, however, have ensured that the county can produce a wide variety of farm products (Butterfield 1957, 9).

Before the question of farming was even relevant, though, this was a space where Indigenous peoples had lived, hunted, gathered, fished, and traded for hundreds of years (Cleland 1992, 17-25, 39-45; Kilar 1990, 34). These diverse soils, combined with the natural convergence

of two "forest belts" - evergreen to the north and hardwood to the south - meant that the Saginaw Valley, which houses Bay County, held a good number of the 80+ varieties of trees native to the state, with white pine leading the pack but not wholly dominating the area (Butterfield 1957, 13; Kilar 1990). Everything from cedar to oak to elm or spruce could be found in the area with mixed groves dotting the county, but especially prized by American Indians were the abundant maple trees, which ensured ample access to syrup and sugar and the birch trees whose bark was used for canoes and wigwams (Butterfield 1957, 13-15, 24-25; Cleland 1992; Kilar 1990). These trees lived synergistically alongside many other kinds of vegetation, including various flowers, herbs, nuts, wild fruits like grapes, crabapples, plums, cherries, melons, and various sorts of berries as well as cultivated vegetables and grains like maize, potatoes, turnips, beans, squash, and wild rice (Butterfield 1957, 13-15, 24). The original Ojibwe name for a northern part of the county, which is now Pinconning, "O-pin-a-kan-ning," even meant "a place to get wild potatoes" (Butterfield 1957, 13-15).

The rich natural resources of the area didn't stop with vegetation, however. These fertile grounds and waters provided a home for a wide swath of animal life, possibly the most diverse collection in the state (Butterfield 1957, 15). In the rivers, streams, and bay itself, fish like trout, sturgeon, perch, pickerel, bass, pike, bullheads, whitefish, and sometimes even salmon all swam and evidence suggests decades, if not centuries, of Indigenous fishing in the region (Butterfield 1957; Cleland 1992). One of the areas of the county, Kawkawlin, was even named "place of pickerel" in Ojibwe (Butterfield 1957, 15-16). There are even stories from early explorers about Indians in the area ice fishing by chasing the fish until it tired and then pulling it out of a hole in the ice, but the fishing methods suggested by those accounts have been challenged in later years (Butterfield 1957, 15-16). The waters were also home to frogs, turtles (both mud and snapping

varieties), muskrats, and beavers, while birds like woodpeckers, sparrows, catbirds, gulls, blackbirds, and meadowlarks held the skies, though many, like the owl, partridge, wild turkey, goose, duck, pigeon, heron, and many of the hawks and eagles have become more and more rare - or have even gone extinct - as the swamps and forests were drained, felled, and otherwise affected by settlement, human hunting, and the influx of chemicals that arrived with modern agriculture, manufacturing, and life (Butterfield 1957, 17-18; Michigan Dept. of Natural Resources 2016).

As a hunting ground, while a few of the iconic buffalo, moose, and elk might have come through the area for Indigenous hunters to meet, early accounts more often mention deer, bears, wolves, foxes, otters, wolverines, wildcats, porcupines, and various sorts of snakes, turtles, and lizards (Butterfield 1957, 18-20; Cleland 1992, 12-25; Nokomis Cultural Center 2014). Most of these animals were especially prized for their fur or skins, but, according to both scholars and teaching documents from the Bay City Indian Education Program itself, some, like the deer and even the bear, could provide significant meat for food, and deer also provided bones, hooves, and antlers which could be made into tools and decorative items (Butterfield 1957, 18-20, 28; Cleland 1992, 17-25, 39-45). Like many of the birds, however, changes in the nature of the county's land areas - especially the draining of swamplands and the clearing of forests - along with the century and a half of industrialization and human settlement, has meant that many of these animals have migrated to other parts of the state or region over time (Butterfield 1957, 18-20).

## INDIGENOUS PRESENCE IN THE DISTANT PAST

Prior to contact with Europeans, there were three prominent eras of Indigenous settlement that factor both into the material realities and the (sometimes mythic) discourse of Bay County.

First, early archaeology suggested there were Indigenous groups in the area about whom no stories survived, even among the Native Americans present when European explorers arrived (Butterfield 1957, 20-22; Cleland 1992, 11-12). Among this early cadre of peoples were hunters of large game who passed through the area approximately 12,000-8,000 years ago, commonly referred to as the "Paleo-Indians," as well as the Archaic People who inhabited the Great Lakes from 10,000-3,000 years ago, whose archaeological presence demonstrates a variety of adaptations to climate/environmental change, including hunters who specialized in stealth and granite-grinding tool-makers, and then there were the "Old Copper" people sometime between 4,000 and 2,000 years ago who shaped copper into tools (Butterfield 1957, 20-22; Cleland 1992, 11-19). Around 2000 years ago, this group was influenced by the Hopewell People, sometimes called the "Mound Builders," with pottery styles and the growth of horticulture, revealing cultural shifts, alongside the several mound structures in the county whose contents, discovered at various points in time after initial European settlement began increasing, suggest Hopewellian ceremonial burial practices (Butterfield 1957, 20-22; Cleland 1992, 19-25). These increasingly agricultural communities are considered the precursors to the Algonquin-speaking groups that would follow (Cleland 1992, 25-27). Once we begin to see evidence of early pottery, grain gathering, and domesticated plants, these are considered developments of the Woodland Era, approximately 3,000-350 years ago (Butterfield 1957, 20-22; Cleland 1992, 11-27). During this era, archaeological analysis suggests that the Saginaw River and Valley were seasonally occupied by small groups of approximately 2-4 families at a time (Cleland 1992, 19-27).

The second era of Indigenous settlement in the area left a trace not only on the land, but also in the histories and legends of the Anishinaabe peoples who would eventually meet explorers and settlers in the lands that would become Bay County (Butterfield 1957, 20; Smith



1901, 501-512). Sometime after the mound-builders, when Ojibwe/Chippewa, Ottawa, and Potawatomi peoples were scattered across various other parts of the state and region, central Michigan, and the eastern middle in particular, was purportedly inhabited by the Sauks (spelled in a variety of ways, from Sac to Sachis), for whom the Saginaw River and Valley was theoretically named - O-Sauk-e-non or Sag-e-nong, "the Land of the Sauks" (Butterfield 1957, 22; Cleland 1992 25-29; Fitting 1970, 36-37; Mainfort 1979, 281-290). Early French explorers heard about the area from American Indians on Lake Huron's eastern shore in the early to mid-1600s, with "Sakinam" mentioned as early as 1612 and the local Indigenous group, also possibly called the "People of the Fire" or "People of the Places of Fire," mentioned as early as 1632, though related phrases were also applied to the Potawotamis (Butterfield 1957, 31-32; Mainfort 1979, 281-290). Missionaries were interacting with American Indians in the area as early as 1675, "Sakinam" Bay was listed for the first time on a map in 1680, and the "Sakis" (i.e. Sauk) Indians were noted as living in the area around both the Saginaw Bay and the Saginaw River during that time as well (Butterfield 1957, 32; Mainfort 1979, 281-290). The presence of the Sauks is contested, however, with some suggesting that the Saginaw Valley was an overwhelmingly transitory space for a variety of groups during this time - Ottawa and Chippewa most prominently, but also some Huron and possibly some Sauks, even Potawotamis (Cleland 1992; Fitting 1970, 36-40; Mainfort 1979, 281-290; Smith 1901, 501-512). If there was some major conflict it likely came about due to arguments over land use, fishing versus agriculture, as much as anything more specific (Fitting 1970, 36-40; Smith 1901, 501-512).

Accounts of that time from an Indigenous perspective are contested, but colorful. For instance, there is an account suggesting that somehow the Sauk's provoked enough of their neighbors to instigate an alliance forming against them that ultimately drove the Sauks out of

Michigan (Butterfield 1957, 22-23; Fitting 1970, 36-40). Skull Island, a nearby place now thought to refer to Crow Island in neighboring Saginaw County, was supposedly originally named so by white settlers in the area who found an alarming number of bones there, and it is said to have been the site of one of these Sauk-vs-Alliance battles, along with various other tales explaining either how the Sauks were all destroyed during that war or reduced drastically in number, fleeing west toward the Mississippi River (Butterfield 1957, 22-23; Smith 1901, 511-512). These claims have been questioned by historians and archaeologists alike, but these Indigenous counterstories or counterhistories also deserve space to be heard when examining the discursive and material context affecting the field site and this research.

Some scholars have suggested that for an unknown period of time after those violent clashes, however they came about, the Saginaw Valley was also called the "Haunted Valley" by some of the remaining Native Americans in Michigan and that few ventured into the Bay County area except in dire circumstances. However, according to other scholars, this period of semi-abandonment has been either exaggerated or misunderstood since many Indigenous groups who used the area at the time were more transient and therefore built fewer permanent villages, but were still very much present during this time of supposed absence (Butterfield 1957, 22-24; Fitting 1970, 36-40; Mainfort 1979, 281-290). Either way, it is widely agreed that before Europeans began to take more interest in the area, one or more American Indian groups settled there in increasingly more permanent patterns (Butterfield 1957, 22-24; Fitting 1970, 36-40; Mainfort 1979, 281-290). Some even suggest that this remained a midway point in journeys for many interrelated and sometimes in-conflict groups, such that eventual settlements were somewhat mixed, especially between the Ottawa and Ojibwe (Fitting 1970, 36-40; Mainfort 1979, 281-290).

The Saginaw Valley, where modern Bay County is located, was primarily the territory of the Ojibwe or Chippewa peoples during this era. However, based on the correspondence of explorers, settlers, and missionaries at the time, it may, in fact, be that the time between Sauk relocation and Ojibwe takeover was very short or that Europeans in the area confused the two groups (Butterfield 1957, 24-26, 32-33; Mainfort 1979, 281-290). Due in part to contact with other tribes, the Ojibwe peoples in this area used a slightly different dialect of the Ojibwe language and were also somewhat culturally different from their northern cousins (Butterfield 1957, 24-26; Mainfort 1979, 281-290). Whites knew the local Indigenous groups largely as the "Saginaw Indians," however, leaving many moments of documentary confusion around whether certain interactions were with the Ottawa, Ojibwe, or others (Butterfield 1957, 24-26; Mainfort 1979, 281-290). Part of the broader Algonquin cultural group, local Ojibwe bands alternately fought against and united with their Anishinaabe kin - the Potawatomi and Ottawa - in battles against other American Indian groups, forming themselves as the "People of the Three Fires" or the "Three Fires Confederacy"<sup>1</sup> (Butterfield 1957, 24-26; Cleland 1992, 17-25, 39-45; Clifton, Cornell, & McClurken 1986, iv-v; Kilar 1990, 34). Indeed, because the Saginaw Valley, and Bay County in particular, is a place where waterways intersected, it often served as a meeting place for councils and other gatherings, even up through the time of the American Civil War (Butterfield 1957, 24-26). With its natural resources, game for hunting, easy means of travel, and the shelter of forests and swamps, the Saginaw Valley became "one of the most thickly settled parts of the Great Lakes region" with various villages near both the bay and the main river by the early-to-mid 19th century (Butterfield 1957, 24-26).

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<sup>1</sup> The true formality or intended permanence of this arrangement has been questioned, however, as the first mention of it only came about during negotiations with the colonial/American government wherein the 13 colonies were referred to as the 13 fires.

Early settlers in the area reportedly found local Ojibwe peoples "more reliable than the average white man," as well as "quiet, peaceful, and very easy to get along with," but they also learned that contact with Whites could change that character in problematic ways, alcohol especially bringing out the worst (Butterfield 1957, 24-26). Notes from residents of the county from the early 1900s also recount stories of democratic-seeming meetings from the late 1800s when many Ojibwe camped by the river intending to elect "a chief for each tribe" (Butterfield 1957, 24-26). It is important to take these commentaries rather with a grain of salt since the challenge of both linguistic and cultural translation is not one that early writers always acknowledged, but this is the rhetoric found in the town's primary local historical text.

Found among these early reports was talk of the education and rearing of youth, noting that most of the teachings were about physical work and character, which aligns with, though is not as comprehensive as, discussions of traditional Indigenous education elsewhere in North America that point to kinship, religion/spirituality, natural science, and oratory as being other key subjects addressed through this form of education (Butterfield 1957, 26-29; DeJong 1993, 5-21). According to early local reports, however, boys' education largely focused on making canoes, bows and arrows, and other tools they would need as they learned to hunt, trap, swim, and fish, while girls were taught to make more domestic items, including mats, baskets, clothing, food, and tools related to their spheres of expertise (Butterfield 1957, 26-29; Littlefield 2012, 48-49). The ingenuity used in these basic-seeming tasks is notable, including methods for tricking animals into getting caught and working natural materials in unexpected ways to address human needs (Butterfield 1957, 26-29; DeJong 1993, 5-21). Character-wise, while boys were especially encouraged to be brave and cunning, all youth were taught to respect those who were truly aged in their communities and the elders devoted themselves to sharing their knowledge with the

youth, encouraging them toward greatness of their own (Butterfield 1957, 26-29; DeJong 1993, 5-21).

The local Indigenous folks didn't leave all their sustenance up to what they could find or catch, however, and letters between Europeans as early as the 1700s mention bushels of food grown via agriculture were supplied to the Europeans, from Detroit all the way to Quebec (Butterfield 1957, 26-29; Mainfort 1979, 281-290). Whether all of these supplies came solely from the Ojibwe is unclear, because the timeline of their settlement in the area is somewhat unclear. It is possible that the earliest accounts of food shared with the French occurred while the Sauks or some mix of Indigenous groups were still largely in control of the area (Butterfield 1957, 32-33; Mainfort 1979, 281-290).

One of the sons of one of the very first settlers in the county was considered by some "a great friend of the Bay County Indians" and wrote extensively, if in a somewhat romantic tone, about the difference between the local American Indians before and after extensive contact with Whites (Butterfield 1957, 26-30; Tromble 1924). He wrote, on the one hand, of "nature's Indians," noting their kindness, trustworthiness, moral superiority, adherence to their own laws, spiritual devotion, cleanliness, health, and the ability of their medicine men to cure mental disorders (Butterfield 1957, 26-30; Tromble 1924). Then, on the other hand, he wrote of the people they became after they were "robbed of their land, their homes, and their means of sustenance, after having lived the life of free men" (Butterfield 1957, 26-30; Tromble 1924). These he referred to as "those [Indians] the white man made and contaminated with whiskey, immorality, and disease," a contrast to those who "lived in harmony" until betrayed by "his white brother who held out his hand not in friendship but to grasp from his unsuspecting brother the beautiful forests, the lakes and rivers and productive lands all filled with game and fish which

was the rightful inheritance of the Chippewa Indians" (Butterfield 1957, 26-30; Tromble 1924). As problematically dichotomous a picture as this particular wording paints, there is some evidence to suggest that, if nothing else, perspectives on the local American Indians shifted as the area slid out of the era of explorers into the colonial and then American eras, with accounts of Indians primarily noting their fierceness and warlike nature, and one long-dead writer even naming the American Indians of the Saginaw Valley "the worst and most dangerous in all the country" (Butterfield 1957, 35).

#### BAY COUNTY IN THE COLONIAL AND TREATY ERA

While early explorers in the region were both English and French, these two European powers had rather different approaches to the land, resources, and Indigenous people in the area (Butterfield 1957; Cleland 1992; Kilar 1990). The French, who initially came in search of the imagined "northern passage" to India, encountered enough fur and American Indian hunters to increase their trade concerns even without the India connection (Butterfield 1957, 31-35; Cleland 1992; Kilar 1990). They sought to be on friendly terms with local American Indians when possible in order to ease the way for that trade, sending over Jesuit missionaries to share their Christian religion, living a similarly rough outdoor lifestyle to their Indigenous neighbors, and even marrying American Indian women (Butterfield 1957, 31-35; Cleland 1992; Kilar 1990). With those aims in mind, they built some "forts, trading posts, and mission stations" in and around Michigan, but few other permanent settlements. In the Saginaw Valley they eventually gave up on missionary work and didn't even establish a notable trading post (Butterfield 1957, 31-35; Mainfort 1979, 281-290). Consequently, the French neither left a major imprint on the local land as missionaries or traders, nor created circumstances under which other French settlers might come to live on the land, developing farms and towns (Butterfield 1957, 31-33; Cleland

1992, 103-114). Because of this, despite the way that the French engaged the local American Indians in their battles against the English to maintain some control over the territory in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, it was ultimately the English who brought European-style settlements to the area (Butterfield 1957, 33-36).

During the seventeenth century, with the rising interactions between Indigenous peoples, missionaries, and traders, particularly Frenchmen, there was a shift in Indigenous lifeways in the region, but the extent to which this pulled Indigenous peoples away from diverse forms of subsistence towards a heavy emphasis on procuring fur for trade, alongside an increasing dependence on trade goods, remains contested (Cleland 1992, 103-114; Kilar 1990). Cleland (1992, 110-150) argues that the most significant changes in Indigenous communities came after the extensive French and English power struggles of the 17th and 18th centuries, including the oft-called "French and Indian War", which ended in 1763 with the Treaty of Paris and France surrendering all of Canada and Michigan to the English (Butterfield 1957, 33-36). Indigenous peoples in the Saginaw Valley were specifically a part of some of these battles, with records suggesting that Chief Owosson (also called Wanson) and some 250 warriors from the area joined Chief Pontiac's united American Indian force in working to push back the English in 1762. While the overall effort failed, Owosson and his warriors were a formidable force during the conflict (Butterfield 1957, 33-36).

Scholars suggest that many of the challenges faced by local American Indians that followed came largely because siding with the ultimately defeated French meant a notable decline in trade access, as well as the rising encroachment of British, and then American, settlers and traders who were often not at all prepared to develop friendly, let alone familial, social ties (Cleland 1992, 110-150). Butterfield (1957, 33-36), a historian local to Bay County in particular,

suggests that this shift was somewhat subtler with the English bureaucratically mismanaging their interactions with local American Indians, not only caring little about friendly relations but also caring little about the integrity of their traders and administrators, ignoring concerns and complaints about problematic practices. By 1792, however, American fur companies had overtaken both their formerly French and British counterparts, and local American Indians were well used to doing business with them, respecting their connections for economic purposes but not extending those bonds to friendship or more (Butterfield 1957, 36; Cleland 1992, 103-114). Consequently, most of the Whites who traded did so without permanent encampments (Butterfield 1957, 36; Cleland 1992, 103-114).

#### Indigenous-White Relations in the American Treaty Era

The Treaty of Greenville in 1795 began the short but harsh list of formal attempts to structure relations between Indigenous peoples and settlers, and between various groups and Michigan's land and resources - relations that were fundamentally dynamic and oftentimes precarious (Bellfy 2011, 84-86; Butterfield 1957, 40, 45; Cleland 1992, 156-160, 174, 203-207). These formal agreements not only created the foundation for many current rights battles (e.g. land, fishing, hunting) and state and federal policies, they also served as complex discursive acts that constructed unified "tribes" and territories where before there existed, instead, groupings of extended families, bands, and diverse settlements (Bellfy 2011, 83-86; Cleland 1992, 205-207). With help from a series of brutal defeats for American Indians in the larger multi-state region who were working together to fight against American encroachment, both on their own in the late 1700s and early 1800s, and then with the British during the War of 1812, it became clear that power in the Michigan territory was shifting even before statehood (Butterfield 1957, 34-37, 40-44; Cleland 1992)



The first settler homesteads in what would come to be Bay County were built in this post-war, post-formalization era, particularly after the 1819 Treaty of Saginaw. Notes from travelers in 1820 already pointed towards talk of new explorers entering the area along with new missionaries from Albany, New York (Schoolcraft 1821; Williams 1953). An account from explorers in 1833 especially notes American Indian villages at Wenonah and Kawkawlin (now townships within Bay County), a large local gathering space (potentially used for the equivalent of a powwow), and wigwams along the shore of the Saginaw Bay in what would become a beach resort area by the early 20th century (Gansser 1905, 71). Most settlement structures among Whites at the time were somewhat crude, but, in 1835, the first European-style frame house was erected in Bay County and the number of settlers only increased from then on as Michigan neared and then entered statehood in 1837 and as a new treaty was signed, also in 1837, that was even less favorable toward Indigenous land tenure (Bellfy 2011, 84-86; Butterfield 1957, 40-44; Kilar 1990, 34-36). Initially, based on the 1819 treaty, two American Indian reservations were situated within what is now Bay County:<sup>2</sup> a small one on the east side of the river near its mouth for the descendants of a trader and his Chippewa wife, which was called the John Riley Reserve, and a 40,000 acre reservation on the west side of the river that stretched along the shore of the bay (Butterfield 1957, 37-44; Kappler 1904, 185-187). The larger reservation didn't survive the 1837 treaty restructuring, and most of it was sold off shortly thereafter for \$2.50 to \$5.00 an acre, a process that was supposed to steer money towards the Indians who had lost their land.

However, the payment structure made it so that everyone - surveyors and anyone else with a

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<sup>2</sup> The wording of the treaty and archival maps are somewhat unclear about the exact locations of certain tracts of land, so it is possible that references to "six thousand acres, on the north side of the river Kawkawlin, at the Indian village" and to tracts set aside for Peter Riley and James Riley, seemingly near their brother's land, might also have been within or abutted against current Bay County lines.

claim - was paid before they were (Butterfield 1957, 44). While the Riley Reservation wasn't explicitly endangered by the new treaty itself, with new, business-oriented settlers in the area, John Riley was still convinced to sell a large part of his land to the "Sagina Bay Company" [*sic*], the first major land speculation concern in the area (Butterfield 1957, 52-53).

Just having "ownership" of the land didn't bring settlements into life, however. In fact, there were was so much misinformation floating around about the interior of Michigan and the "gulf of terror" known as the Saginaw Bay that even the many im/migrants sweeping westward from the East Coast often went no further north than Detroit (Butterfield 1957, 45-46).

Transportation proved to be the last great hurdle in White settlement of the local area as the rise of the steamboat and the newly built Erie Canal created faster, less cumbersome routes for both supplies and people to take from places like New York and Detroit to the Saginaw Valley (Butterfield 1957, 47-48).

By the mid-19th century, the collection of residences and companies originally known as "Lower Saginaw" had become "Bay City" and the villages surrounding it in the county continued to grow as well, with lumber/sawmills, salt production, shipbuilding, and fishing driving most of the economy (Butterfield 1957; Kilar 1990, 34-42). The American Indian presence continued to be felt, however, with new missionaries who specifically targeted local American Indians arriving as early as 1841 and the first church - indeed, the first non-residential building - in the county actually being erected as a Methodist Indian Mission, called Ogakawning or Ogaucawning, near the Kawkawlin River in 1847 (Butterfield 1957, 196; Lee 2002). At that time, and for several decades after, the church hosted a small but steady group of parishioners - around 40 people - both White and American Indian (Lee 2002). Some local American Indian residents even say there is a burial ground behind the church, which has purportedly been the site

of amateur excavations at various points over the years by local teachers and others curious about American Indian artifacts (Mitchell 1987). The area during that era, while not a reservation, was still a place where some Ojibwe families had gathered and settled, appreciating access to local materials as well as the waterways, thereby creating a small but vibrant community (Aged Chippewa 1934; Gansser 1905, 142; Lee 2002; Mitchell 1987). Several reports suggest that this area might have even been referred to as "Indiantown," but one or two sources confuse this issue somewhat, implying that this might have been a moniker given to another nearby settlement of Ojibwe peoples who were distinct from but in contact with the Kawkawlin group (Aged Chippewa 1934; Gansser 1905, 142; Supe 1883, 11-12). There also seem to have been American Indian residents on the far north side of the county in Pinconning and Linwood, with tension and discrimination between Whites and their American Indian neighbors (Toward the Future 1988).

## BAY COUNTY IN THE LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Over the last few decades of the 19th century, both Bay City, which consisted of the villages of Lower Saginaw and Portsmouth, and West Bay City, including Salzberg, Banks, and Wenona, became bustling frontier cities, with population and economic growth only slowing when the natural resources began to run thin at the turn of the 20th century (Butterfield 1957; Kilar 1990, 34-42). By all accounts, Bay City was the worst positioned among its lumber town peers to diversify its industries and enter the new century with a sustainable economy, primarily due to internal ethnic and class dynamics, with immigrants of multiple and not always friendly European ancestries, challenges which were only exacerbated by the influence of absentee capitalists (Kilar 1990, 287-290). There were also a number of ways in which the natural resources of Bay County just didn't lend themselves well to some of the industries that attempted

to gain a foothold, including coal mining, which came and went, and oil drilling, which struggled for several decades before becoming profitable (Butterfield 1957, 90-93). This meant that the economic and population growth of the city nearly stagnated during the early 20th century when nearby cities were doubling their economic power and populations (Kilar 1990, 290-294).

Beyond the presence of the Kawkawlin Indian Mission, which the state Bureau of History (1990) says served as "the social and religious center of the [Indian] community [in Kawkawlin] since the 1840s," there is almost no information in the historical record about the American Indian presence in Bay County during this time period (Nostrand 1991). The life stories of Ojibwe peoples of note, like Jane Nochchikame, aka "Aunt Jane," who grew up in the Kawkawlin community, suggests that certain cultural practices like basket-weaving, canoeing, warrior-oriented chieftanships, arranged marriages, geographic mobility, and connections with nearby bands remained strong at least until the end of the 19th century (Aged Chippewa 1934; Lee 2002). There is even an interesting note about the problematic interactions between American Indians and government agents since Aunt Jane and her family went west when she was about eight, around 1849,<sup>3</sup> to Isabella County - the seat of the largest reservation in mid-Michigan, belonging to the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe - where they were promised 160 acres of land by the government (presumably federal) and that land never materialized (Aged Chippewa 1934). Although we have no details about the specifics of these promises, nor how long the family waited, the archive notes that the family returned to the lone acre of land in Kawkawlin where Aunt Jane had grown up (Aged Chippewa 1934). Her descendants in the

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<sup>3</sup> This incident may have happened later, during negotiations for the Treaty of 1855, because there seems to have been a great deal of confusion about when and how lands would be distributed and problems with fraud and other legal challenges seem to have only exacerbated an already fraught situation (Garrett 1968).

modern era continue to feel cheated, due to some mix of the pressure tactics used during the treaty era and the many broken governmental promises afterward (Look at the Past 1988; Trail of Broken 1979).

There were also some new lifeways and economic avenues opening to American Indians during this time period, with notable Ojibwe residents of Bay County becoming ministers who then presided over the Kawkawlin Mission Church and even the first American Indian registered nurse in the area, born in around 1915 (Bureau of History 1990; Channel 19 1995). Perhaps in part because of these assimilative new lifeways, by the early 1900s, the identifiable American Indian population in Kawkawlin and in surrounding areas had dropped precipitously<sup>4</sup> (Gansser 1905, 142; Supe 1883, 11-12). Some of this dip in population may also have been due to disease, as archival records show a doctor from Bay City was brought in to assist smallpox patients in nearby American Indian communities in the late 1800s and some authors have suggested that smallpox wiped out more than half the population of local tribes (Arndt 1976; Names Mentioned 1993; Sagatoo 1897). This shift in local American Indian density meant that even the church, which was at the heart of the community, had to close its doors sometime between 1947 and 1950 (Bureau of History 1990; Channel 19 1995; Gansser 1905, 142; Lalonde 2007; Lee 2002; Supe 1883, 11-12).

At the same time, the land-grab outcomes of many allotment and "civilization" oriented policies made Michigan's Indigenous peoples highly suspect of the shift toward removal and reservations, even as they made explicit American Indian interest in stability and educational

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<sup>4</sup> Supe (1883, 11-12) and an archived note from "History of the Lake Huron Shore" (1883, 11) suggests a drop from 1600 to 900 American Indian residents in the Saginaw Valley just between 1867 and 1883, for example, based on an account from James Cloud, "an Indian clergyman" from the Kawkawlin River community.

opportunities for their youth, and, in the end, many of their fears (like further land and resource losses, as well as increased dependency) turned out to be very well-founded (Bellfy 2011, 84-88; Cleland 1992, 236-240). Even as Michigan's economies went through growth cycles, making work in timber, mining, fishing, agriculture, sugar production, berry picking, tourism, and other fields more attainable for some Indigenous families, Indigenous communities continued to struggle while hostilities between Whites and Indigenous peoples continued to rise (Cleland 1992, 244-245, 256-262; Kilar 1990; Littlefield 2012, 51-54).

With the economic and critical ideological engines stirred by the World Wars, the pendulum of support for Indigenous rights swung into even more anti-Indian territory, angling toward termination *again* in the mid-20th century, which - along with related Indian Relocation programs - contributed significantly toward the process of migration to cities that was already in progress for the vast majority of Michigan's resident Indigenous folk (Bellfy 2011; Cleland 1992, 272-295; Littlefield 2012, 51-54). Since federal services and funds were, and are primarily, targeted at Native Americans who remain distinctly tied and physically close to reservations, by the 1990s that meant that approximately 80% of Michigan's Indigenous population was left in a veritable no-man's-land for policy (Cleland 1992, 272-295; Littlefield 2012, 51-54). The most prominent "exceptions" to that landscape of marginalization and liminality included urban Indian centers, which Bay City never developed, and certain Indian education programs, like Title VII.

Indigenous Education History: Federal and State Impacts Nearby

The "alliance between the federal government and religious groups to 'civilize and Christianize'" Indigenous peoples during the 19th and early 20th centuries cannot be dismissed in discussions of these eras, regardless of geography (Adams 1995; Carney 1999; Cole 2011; Dussias 1997, 774). Although this alliance was largely a continuation of agreements and

networks begun in colonial times, by the last quarter of the 19th century a network of missionary day schools and a handful of missionary boarding schools had developed sufficiently enough to receive assistance from the federal government in order to facilitate the assimilation of Native Americans, though the programs received rather mixed reviews (Adams 1995; Carney 1999; Cole 2011; Dussias 1997, 774). The State of Michigan actually developed one of the earliest and most modeled-after Indian day school systems in the U.S. during the mid-1800s, with some thirty schools in place (nearly two-thirds the total number of day schools in the U.S. at one point), all in response to the urging of Indian leaders who actively sought out the education promised to their communities in various treaties (Cleland 1992, 244-245). This was an education steeped in Indigenous languages, even local dialects, and, in many ways, incredibly progressive for its time, but that very innovation doomed it to backlash by an intense English-only push and the shift toward the boarding school model by the end of the 19th century (Cleland 1992, 244-245).

It was within this highly charged environment that the Carlisle Indian School was founded in Pennsylvania in 1879, as an off-reservation, fully government-run institution, rather than a contracted sectarian school located on or near reservations, like most previous day and boarding schools. This shift created what some have noted as a highly problematic sort of "freedom" (for these agents of "education") from familial and tribal intervention (Adams 1995, 45-55; Nabokov 1999, 215-216; Reyhner & Eder 2004, 75; Smith 2005, 35-36). Carlisle, with its military style, became the model for the network of schools that were to follow, even influencing policies in other settler nations working to address the "problem" of a still-present Indigenous population (Adams 1995, 55-59; Reyhner & Eder 2004, 75, 132-167; Smith 2005, 35-36). One such boarding school, the Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School, still stands in mid-

Michigan, only one hour from the Bay City Indian Education Program, and featured prominently in recent discussions of and presentations on the “Boarding School Era,” a process that seemed to be a mix of discourse-discovery and reconstruction for residents of Bay City. This context maintains a contemporary presence because the extreme circumstances of many boarding schools, and the tearing of bonds they often required, are considered by many (including many field site stakeholders) to continue to create repercussions in American Indian lives. In accordance with Carlisle-like assimilationist ideals, students in these schools were typically forcibly removed from their families, stripped of traditional clothes and re-dressed, their hair was cut, they were given new names, punished for speaking Native languages or engaging in cultural and spiritual activities from their home communities, their movements were tracked during and between highly scheduled activities (not just place-to-place movements but also manners and posture), and in addition to in-classroom learning, they were put to work on the boarding school property – and sometimes off-site in Euro-American homes and businesses (Adams 1995, 101-124, 136-163; Nabokov 1999, 216-217; Reyhner & Eder 2004, 132-167; Smith 2005, 35-). As Adams (1995, 97) sums up well: "The boarding school, whether on or off the reservation, was the institutional manifestation of the government's determination to completely restructure the Indians' minds and personalities." Consequently, many students developed a kind of "bicultural consciousness," creating "perplexing paradoxes" for both themselves and their communities who were not sure where they "fit," whether they were "still" Indian or "too" assimilated, and whether they could "become Indian again" – even as the boarding school experience itself began to be understood as an integral part of "being Indian," a sort of challenging rite of passage (Adams 1995, 336; Graveline 1998, 20-21; Huffman 2010, 33-34; Nabokov 1999, 216-224; Nagel 1997, 115-117; Reyhner & Eder 2004, 165-167, 199-204).



The Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School was established in 1892 and was built as a direct reflection of earlier American Indian boarding schools with the effort to bring that mode of managing the "Indian Problem" in Michigan, as spearheaded by Congressman Col. A. T. Bliss (who went on to become the Governor of Michigan) (Garrett 1968). During an era when the national political discourse tipped hard toward the termination of nearly all American Indian rights - territorial, economic, political, and sociocultural - this school battled American Indian existence through the lives of their children while the state of Michigan succeeded in ignoring or actively setting aside many previous federal agreements with Michigan's American Indian population that didn't align with general state laws or popular discourse (Bellfy 2011; Cleland 1992, 261-262). The school only closed in 1934 when federal policy shifted again, focusing instead on acculturation/assimilation through methods that mixed American Indian control with pushing American Indian students into public schools that were poorly prepared for, and often hostile to, their presence (Garrett 1968; Reyhner & Eder 2004, 210-228).

The rise of the Wheeler-Howard Act in 1934, commonly known as the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), and the Johnson-O'Malley Act (JOM) marked a substantial shift in the system and together provided Native Americans with both a greater sense of power to resist *some* assimilationist pressures (though the effects are highly debated) and, at the same time, an increased amount of confrontation with non-Indian values, perceptions, and practices (Nagel 1997; Reyhner & Eder 2004, 210-228). This shift toward a somewhat constrained form of self-determination, while beneficial for many Indigenous groups, could not wholly recoup the historical losses and still continued to challenge traditional governance systems and group membership customs in many communities (Bellfy 2011; Cleland 1992, 269-271). The JOM, for example, specifically allowed the federal government to contract with states, rather than directly

with school districts, in order to "educate Indian students in public schools" (Nagel 1997; Reyhner & Eder 2004, 207-228). This move brought the federal government into contracts for a variety of Indian services with a slowly expanding roster of states (four in the first seven years), while bringing Native Americans themselves into increasing - and, unfortunately, often alienating and distressing - educational experiences in mixed, but not yet really integrated, public schools (Reyhner & Eder 2004, 207-228). Most public schools didn't actually "teach" anything, including language, very effectively to Native American students for many years, such that many students remained several grades behind their White peers or never advanced at all (Reyhner & Eder 2004, 225-228).

This mix of highly problematic boarding schools and ineffective public schools contributed to disjunctures within the cultural and social networks of tribes, but it also facilitated cross-tribal ties, linguistic bridge points, and a growing sense of being "Indian" through similarities in culture and experience (Adams 1995; Cole 2011; Fixico 2003; Nabokov 1999; Nagel 1997; Reyhner & Eder 2004; Straus 2002). Friendships would later develop into social networks, marriages, intertribal gatherings, cultural exchanges, political alliances, and multitribal children, which resulted in the sharing, loss, blending, and creation of varied cultural practices, while also contributing to the development and spread of what Vine Deloria Jr. called "a pan-Indian behavior pattern," and are most prevalent in urban spaces (Deloria 2005, 29; Nabokov 1999, 216-217; Nagel 1997, 115-116; Reyhner & Eder 2004, 199-200). The very processes that contributed to certain experiences of connection and gathered strength within American Indian communities, therefore, may also negatively affect or inhibit other forms of Indigenous power and growth, especially in urban areas.

## BAY COUNTY IN THE POST-WAR 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES

### Contemporary Demographics and Statistics

Bay County, while not host to a major metropolitan area, has its own urban reality, both technically, in terms of the way urban areas are classified through the U.S. Census Bureau, and in ways that draw from various discourses about “urban” spaces (e.g. density, poverty, crime, violence, deindustrialization/post-industrialization). In fact, while the population of Bay City is currently only around 35,000 residents, with over 100,000 residents in the county, the population density per square mile in the city is actually higher than the unfortunately notorious Flint, Michigan, though not quite as high as Detroit (US Census Bureau 2010; US Census Bureau 2015a; US Census Bureau 2015b). There has also been a notable historical rise and fall in the population that is in line with demographic shifts in other urban spaces in Michigan, such that population numbers peaked in the city in the 1960s and peaked in the county in the 1970s (US Census Bureau 2010; US Census Bureau 2012). This coincided with the closing of several major manufacturing operations, including Industrial Brownhoist, aka Industrial Works, one of the great American crane-building companies and the Defoe Shipbuilding Company (Katzinger 31-32, 2004; Kusmierz 2003; Kusmierz 2007). Industrial Brownhoist was a major employer until the mid-1950s when it became caught up in a series of bad resales of the business, its crew becoming a "skeleton" of its heyday with just 40 people by 1960, and the Defoe shipyards ran out of both military and commercial contracts in the mid-1970s, shrinking their employee levels from 4,000 people during World War II to only 100 when it closed in 1976 (Katzinger 31-32, 2004; Kusmierz 2003; Kusmierz 2007; US Census Bureau 2012). It is in the shadow of this

massive loss in jobs and overall economic strength that Bay City, and Bay County, face struggles similar to their more heavily populated urban counterparts, in ways American Indian residents are even more likely to be affected than Whites.

Note, for example, that per capita income and the median household income in the city are both more than 25% below Michigan's average, and the poverty rate is more than 33% higher than Michigan's average (US Census Bureau 2015a; US Census Bureau 2015b). Further fitting with the urban narrative, the rate of violent crime in Bay City is nearly 50% higher than the average, both that of the State of Michigan and when compared to national statistics. While certain kinds of property crimes are less prevalent, residents of Bay City are almost twice as likely to be assaulted and almost six times as likely to be raped (NeighborhoodScout 2015). With local police noting a rise in graffiti associated with at least five different gangs currently active in the city, some of which have multi-decade histories in town and connections to drug trafficking and violent crime in other parts of the state and country, it is not hard to understand the *experience* of this space as urban in alignment with some of the most problematic narratives of urbanity (Coleman 2009; Stanton 2009; State of MI Court of Appeals 1998; US Govt. Printing Office 1991).

#### Local American Indian Geographies and Identities

These overall population statistics don't reveal the underlying clustering that seems to occur within the county. Archival and observational data suggest that there remain pockets of American Indian presence not only in Bay City proper, but also the township of Bangor that lies next to the city, as well as the Kawkawlin area and Pinconning (Looking to the Past 1988; Toward the Future 1988; Petrimoulx 2008). In this way, while American Indian settlement in the area has always been fluid, some themes remain throughout the three hundred years since

Europeans first began to map the area. Data from fieldwork, however - both observations and interviews - strongly suggest that many, if not most, American Indians currently residing in the Bay City area arrived during the past 1-3 generations, with Indian Education Program stakeholders and their families hailing from places as diverse as Sault St. Marie and Detroit, Michigan, Kentucky, and Arizona/New Mexico, a fact that makes all the more sense when it is revealed that the program itself has students associated with some 40+ distinct Native nations.

Consequently, it is important to note that many of the American Indians who settled in this area in the contemporary era did so not based on a connection with ancestral land or even necessarily local Ojibwe culture, but, instead, for the largely economic reasons that motivated most American Indian' migration to cities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Fixico 2000; Littlefield 2012, 51-54). In Bay City, as elsewhere, that likely meant adjusting to new structures of work, time regimentation, transportation, inadequate housing, long waits at support agency offices, and varied expectations about appearance, among other factors, making the shift to city life challenging for many Native Americans, both for adults and youth, and stripping away or problematizing identity options while also offering new ways to be "Indian" (Littlefield 2012, 51-54; Ramirez 2007; Straus 2002, 195-203). For example, scholars point the ways in which new urban realities contribute to a further diversification of class-influenced understandings of Indian ethno-racial identity, particularly conceptions of "lazy Indians," "blue-collar Indians," and, as Fixico (2000, 37, 161-171) puts it, the "neo-Indian middle class." He suggests that urbanization often came packaged with "modernization," not only in terms of technological advancement, but also in terms of "middle-class values," as drawn from work and school as well as from other city-based experiences, leading to a more highly contrasted "dichotomy of traditional and modern identity" (Fixico 2000, 166-168).

In some cases, this creates a sense of alienation from both mainstream society and Indigenous communities, sometimes building a sense of inferiority in or identity-related tension for Native American youth, which scholars have explored via concepts like "ethnostress." Some youth have also countered those effects organically, becoming especially assertive about their Indianness (Fixico 2000, 34-36; Wallace 2012, 107-108). For some, this fosters a new sense of "Indian" identity that is "adaptive," neither subsumed by a modern Euro-American class-based identity nor wholly "traditional," an approach which actually "helps guard [some] Native American youth from racial and gender attacks" while allowing them to "claim [their] right to be different [through other markers of identity like language] and to 'feel good' in the midst of exclusion, and of threat of violence" in urban spaces (Fixico 2000, 166-168; Ramirez 2007, 188-190). Ramirez (2007, 136) also, however, discusses the ways that race and class intersect in the experience of some urban Native American families, leading to "internalized oppression" and individual or family-wide denial of Native American identity, as a way to combat the racial and class prejudice tied to such identities, an unfortunate reality also noted by other scholars and present in some of the field data collected during this research (Fixico 2000, 163; Wallace 2012).

If those many shifting layers did not bring enough contextual complexity, the realities of geographic fluidity certainly would, because urban American Indians didn't tend to just "stay" in their new cities and, while this "exposure" to American cities did not always allow for easy readjustment back to reservation life, many people historically and presently engage in cycles of leaving and returning, also noted during my fieldwork, though to a lesser degree than scholars seemed to find elsewhere (Fixico 2000, 162-169; Straus 2002, 195). This ebb and flow of residency contributes to increasingly complex notions of Indian identity as individuals and groups become, in ways, both unmoored from and hyperaware of geographically situated

understandings of self and group-belonging (Fixico 2000; Ramirez 2007). Ramirez (2007, 12-13, 180-181, 186) even theorizes that this creates distinctions that are not so much "urban" and "rural," but "fluid" and "bounded" with flexibility and fluidity receiving increasing prominence in contemporary Native American experiences and understandings of identity, something likely further complicated by the very real material challenge of transportation for some.

One way to think about the intersectional urban spaces created in and through programs like Bay City's Indian Education Program is the notion of "hubs," which are gathering, cross-pollination, and contestation points for culture, community, and identity in urban spaces (Ramirez 2007). Many American Indians find emotional and spiritual support, while sharing, participating in, and learning various cultural practices in places not only like Indian Centers, but also through powwows, sweat lodge ceremonies, and political conferences (Fixico 2000, 127-135; Ramirez 2007, 58-83; Reyhner & Eder 2004; Straus 2002). Especially in the 1960s and 1970s, when a significant amount of political action and activism was taking root and the federal government began providing specific funds for such support spaces, a greater sense of pan-Indianism developed, even as tribal identities also continued to be co-constructed, validated, and contested in those spaces (Daubenmeier 2008; Fixico 2000, 127-135; Nagel 1977; Ramirez 2007, 58-83; Reyhner & Eder 2004; Straus 2002). With no other major American Indian organizations or designated community spaces currently available in the Bay City or even Bay County, the Indian Education Program took on prominence that it might not otherwise have gained in another urban space.

#### Local American Indian Organizations

Despite the historical presence of reservation spaces and American Indian communities within Bay County, formal political organization of either the descendants of those past residents

or more recently settled American Indian residents hasn't existed in the area since the county's founding in the 1800s, or, at least, such organization hasn't made its mark on the archival record. A few references can be found, from approximately 1930 onward, which name a few local men as "chiefs," or "Chippewa chiefs," but over what group exactly is somewhat unclear (Look at the Past 1988; Princess Watassa 1930). This is perhaps in part because the journalists and authors of earlier eras tended to conceptually amalgamate groups, saying, for example, that a local health worker had been adopted into "the Chippewa tribe" without any sense that further specificity was required (Princess Watassa 1930). In the past few decades some of the confusion also seems generated by shifting discourses of (self-)identification over the years with one prominent local man, in particular - Leonard Isaacs - being referred to in different places and at different times as leader in multiple ways: being nicknamed "Chief," being descended from an ancestral local chief and thereby being bestowed the chieftom from an older relative (possibly the Aunt Jane mentioned earlier in this chapter), being considered chief or like a chief by local Ojibwa residents, and being a "Saginaw Chippewa Chief" or "Chief of Chiefs of non-reservation Chippewa Indians in the Saginaw Bay area" (Field Notes 1988; Look at the Past 1988; Younkman 2012). Even in having named the collection of individuals who might be governed or supported by this chief or any of those before him, the question of community cohesion can neither be overlooked nor effectively answered within the scope of this contextual overview. The discussion that follows and eventually closes out this chapter, however, strongly suggests that internal diversity within the county and especially within Bay City itself may not lend itself well to any kind of one-chief structure, political or social or otherwise.

The challenge of political cohesion may be part of why the primary ongoing political presence for the area remains the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, based in Isabella County,



which is approximately an hour away. With that kind of distance and a lack of in-county reservation lands, one might think that their import might be muted, but that doesn't seem to be the case, especially since their Isabella County, and nearby Arenac County, gaming operations and related corporate enterprises have positioned the Saginaw Chippewa as not only the sole recognized political organization for American Indians in the area, but also a major economic force in the region. Discourse in the field suggests that there were talks at one time about Bay City or Bay County possibly opening its doors to a Saginaw Chippewa-owned casino, talks which eventually turned into a rejection by county or city planners and officials. Although I have not yet found any document-based evidence to support these claims, the idea that this may have led to a kind of "bad blood" between the tribe and the county has been mentioned more than once, along with the suggestion that said situation has negatively affected smaller organizations in the city and county, like the Bay City Indian Education Program, when it comes to applying for grant money from the tribe. What is perhaps even more of a testimony to the tribe's economic influence, both real and imagined, is the way in which multiple grant applications from the Bay City Indian Education Program to local foundations have been rejected with the explicit explanation that the funders feel "the tribe" should be funding such a program, an assessment that is only repeated rather than reconsidered when Ms. Noelle explains - *again* - that the program is well outside of the tribe's jurisdiction and caters to local students from *dozens* of tribes, not just the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe.

Michigan's law is such that American Indian gaming operations have to distribute two percent of their slot machine earnings to local schools and municipalities twice per year "in lieu of taxes" and "to alleviate the footprint of [their] efforts," but the governing council of the tribe gets to decide who will receive grants and how much those grants will be within the designated

radius (Gronski 2010; Jordan 2013). If local talk is to be believed, because the tribe's negotiations with Bay County fell through, the nearest Saginaw Chippewa-owned casino was established in Standish Township, Arenac County, in 2007, which is just north of Bay County (Gronski 2010; Officials to Ask 2009; Jordan 2013). This geographic positioning means that only Pinconning Township within Bay County is within the radius to receive annual disbursements from even the nearest Saginaw Chippewa gaming establishment (Gronski 2010; Officials to Ask 2009; Jordan 2013). The tribe certainly gives grants beyond these required disbursements, but the amounts tend to be significantly smaller - one thousand dollars versus twenty or sixty thousand dollars - and the field to receive them is even more competitive than the pool for the state-required disbursements. This means that the political and economic impact of the Saginaw Chippewa tribe on Bay County and the local reality of American Indians in Bay City is much more by way of its *imagined* or, perhaps, *potential* presence rather than its actual level of involvement.

There were other sorts of organizations bringing American Indians together in the area during the contemporary era. The Kawkawlin Indian Mission Church, mentioned earlier in this chapter, closed its doors and largely faded into obscurity mid-century, though the building itself caught the eye of various groups interested in historical restorations over the past few decades, most notably the local community college (Channel 19 1995; Hodges n.d.; Mitchell 1987; Nostrand 1991). Archival data suggests that another nearby church - the Church of Daniel's Band - became its own sort of minor gathering place for local American Indians with several residents noted as members, including Leonard "Chief" Isaacs (Field Notes 1988). It was also noted in the archives that the Church of Daniel's Band even used the Kawkawlin Mission Church at some point in the past, though the timeline for such use is unclear, considering that the Church of

Daniel's Band was also formed in the 1800s, but somewhat later, in 1893, compared to the Kawkawlin Mission Church's 1847 founding, and Daniel's Band originally formed in another city, only branching out recently (Church of Daniel's Band 2015; Field Notes 1988). Its current role in the local American Indian community, especially in the few years since the passing of Leonard Isaacs, is uncertain. I can find no more direct archival links after the late 1980s and it was not mentioned by name at all during my two years at the field site, so if it is still relevant to certain residents perhaps it is more prominent for those in the county rather than in the city.

Based on archival and interview data, with the exception of the Bay City Indian Education Program, there have only been four organizations solely focused on American Indian culture and community in Bay County from WWII to the present, beginning in the 1970s. The State of Michigan created the Michigan Commission on Indian Affairs in 1972, establishing a network of up to nine commissioners to oversee different regions of the state in order to "assist tribal governments, Indian organizations and individuals with problems of education, employment, civil rights, health, housing, treaty rights, and any other right or service due Indians of the state" (Lufkins et al. 1976, 5). While there wasn't a commissioner stationed in Bay County itself, the Saginaw Valley Indian Association developed during this progressive era of increased state emphasis on the needs of American Indian residents and American Indians from both within and outside of Bay County helped facilitate the SVIA's birth and growth (Lufkins et al 1976, 12).

Founded in 1973, the Saginaw Valley Indian Association was the first dedicated American Indian organization found in Bay City's archival record, with notable founding members including Juanita Isaacs, sister of Leonard "Chief" Isaacs, and prominent nurse during local polio vaccine trials in the 1950s (Younkman 2012). With the federal government passing

the Indian Education Act in 1972, much of the state-wide and in-state regional organizing momentum quickly went toward the formation of Indian education-focused Parent Advisory Committees, Native American specialist, and liaison positions in Michigan public school systems, and even a State Indian Education Advisory Council (Lufkins et al 1976, 10-13). Archival data from the collected notes of Marvin Fisher, a local American Indian activist, suggest that in the 1970s there were multiple educational, skills, and career oriented initiatives for American Indians in the Saginaw Valley area and in Bay City, specifically, with the Bay County Parent Advisory Council of 1975-1976 being particularly noteworthy (Fisher Papers 1972-1976). Perhaps because of this existing alternative stream of organization for education-related challenges, much of the recent archival record for the Saginaw Valley Indian Association focuses on their cultural events rather than any political advocacy work they might have done, towards educational issues or anything else.

For example, Bay County has served as the site for many powwows over the years, though many were small and success was hit-or-miss, and the Saginaw Valley Indian Association took over control of the local powwow in the early 1990s, almost immediately increasing the turnout and sales, with the intent to make it "one of the major gatherings in Michigan" (Beehr 1994; Black River Powwow 1990; Teepee Going Up 1993). At some point, after running some successful powwows the Saginaw Valley Indian Association disbanded or faded into obscurity and its nonprofit status was automatically dissolved by the state (Bizopedia 2015). In its wake, possibly independently or possibly as an offshoot group, the Native American Pride Committee rose to prominence, continuing the local powwow and was more often highlighted in the local press for protesting or otherwise drawing public attention to social justice issues like sacred sites, re/burial of remains, and the handling of locally discovered American

Indian artifacts (Johnson 2002; Younkman 2003). They have even publicly been associated with Michigan's chapter of the American Indian Movement, the primary civil rights organization of American Indians circa the late 1960s and early 1970s (Riggle 2000). Perhaps what is even more interesting is the way in which the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe remains present, even if without offering direct comment, in the discourse on activist-oriented activities in the area, with authors referencing the tribe as if it is the final arbiter of what matters to American Indian people in Bay County and representatives of the tribe often speaking as if that is unquestioningly the case, regardless of the geographic and – seemingly – social distance between the two populations (City, Chippewas Walk 2000; Riggle 2000; Younkman 2003). Interview and observational data suggest that the tribe is not considered - either in an everyday way, nor in times of major crisis - as a body local American Indians can reliably look to for assistance or *would* even look to, beyond the cultural offerings that require transportation to access and the grants which are always applied for, but which are never a sure thing.

Somewhere in this muddle another dedicated American Indian organization developed in Bay County with overlapping, but also distinct, aims and group membership. The Bay Area Anishinabek, or BAA, of which I found no record beyond some vague references in a few interviews and their two aging websites,<sup>5</sup> styled itself as "[h]eadquartered in Bay City,<sup>6</sup> Michigan... [but] serv[ing] the Saginaw Bay region including the counties of Arenac, Bay, Gladwin, Huron, Midland, Saginaw, Sanilac and Tuscola," though most of the events listed on its websites and in posted newsletters were in Bay City (BAA n.d.; BAA 2002). The mission of this

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<sup>5</sup> Both of which seem to have been used and yet also remain unfinished, with some sections still reading like the random filler verbiage in a template for any organizational website.

<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps notable that at one point the mailing address for this organization was actually in Kawkawlin, which is in Bay County rather than the city proper and it has many years of American Indian history. The other mailing address listed - earlier? later? (it is very difficult to tell) - is a Bay City address, however.

organization is listed in different places as "preservation of Native American traditions and assistance to needy Native families," preservation of landmarks, burial ground, and sacred sites, and even to implement "a specific plan to educate 'All Races' about Native American People" (BAA n.d.; BAA 2002). Considering the fact that the Bay City Indian Education Program and its events feature prominently on both sites, and the current (and then) director of the program, Ms. Noelle, is repeatedly referred to as a "friend and sister," this is likely the group whose membership most tightly intertwined with program stakeholders.

Interview data, while slim, supports what I found of the existence of both the NAPC and the BAA and further confirmed that the lack of recent data on them is because they both fell apart sometime within the past 5-10 years. The discourse surrounding the demise of these organizations pointed to issues of size (both of them being comprised of less than ten core members), intergroup and intragroup squabbles, and even improper teachings or ways of doing things in terms of tradition. Even during their short tenure in the community, while seemingly impactful in their own ways, neither of these organizations, nor the SVIA before them, had a dedicated ongoing physical space. This meant that the Bay City Indian Education Program not only outlasted them, but by the early 2000s, BCIEP was also uniquely positioned to facilitate community among American Indians in the Bay City area through the kind of place-based stability and centralization that likely has not been accessible since the Kawkawlin Indian Mission Church and, before that, the reservations and villages lost to the press of Euro-American expansion nearly two hundred years ago.

### **CHAPTER THREE: PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND STRUCTURE**

The Bay City Indian Education Program as it exists today is quite distinct from some of its previous iterations. The charismatic director, Ms. Noelle, who had already been there for over a decade when I started my research, has transformed what had previously been more of a when-in-need counseling and advocacy position with some oversight for occasional tutors, into a multifaceted program with its own defined space in the district. Programming activities include afterschool and supplemental enrichment activities, as well as tutoring and check-ins during the school day, all supported by a cadre of volunteers in addition to the hours and efforts put in by her and her assistant. While it might not be unique, either in Michigan or nationally, when the amount of funding available to her is considered, the amount of programming produced on that budget (enhanced by various small grants she procured) makes this site an especially fascinating program to explore. When we add to that the ways in which this program has been discursively situated (and thereby materially affected) by both nearby tribal stakeholders and local grantmaking agencies, it is not hard to imagine the ways in which study of this field site may contribute significant insights into the precarious positioning of Indigenous peoples and programs in urban settings, especially in the often overlooked realities of small cities.

#### **PROGRAM HISTORY**

##### Policy Retrospective

The posted history of the Bay City Indian Education Program says that it has been in existence for over thirty years, a fact which was rather confusing at first since the terminology of "Title VII" is actually fairly new. In noting that some of the program's library books are stamped "Title IX Indian Education," however, it becomes possible to inquire back in time to the growth and adaptations of a program which has had many names over the years, but has maintained its

focus on American Indian students all the while.

Title VII Indian Education, as we understand it now, only came into being in 2001 as part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act under the No Child Left Behind policy (US DOEd 2004a; US DOEd 2005). Prior to that time, similar programs had existed under Title IX of Public Law 103-382, the Education Amendments of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1994, and, prior to that, there were relevant amendments authorized and reauthorized (in both 1988 and 1974) on the original legislation, Title IV of Public Law 92-318, which was also known as the Indian Education Act of 1972 (American Indian Education Foundation 2015; US DOEd 2004a; US DOEd 2005). Although the exact details and frameworks of the legislation have shifted somewhat over time, the primary programmatic thrust has remained the same: to establish a "comprehensive approach to meeting the unique needs of American Indian and Alaska Native students," including everything from culture and language programs and substance abuse education to family literacy outreach and teacher training/professional development (US DOEd 2004a). Among the various federal American Indian education programs, Title VII particularly focuses on addressing those needs in circumstances where students are attending non-tribal and non-Bureau of Indian Affairs run public schools, a situation that strongly skews the program towards urban Indigenous communities of various sizes and with various historical contexts.

Based on the notes of Marvin Fisher (1972-1976), a local Native American activist, the likely impetus for the start of Bay City Indian Education Program in the Bay City area over three decades ago was the Bay County Indian Parents Advisory Council of the early and mid-1970s. This organization tapped into the then-contemporary momentum around the Indian Education Act of 1972, the new State Indian Education Advisory Council, and the press of the local



American Indian populace - proportionally higher at that time in Bay County than today - in order to draw new grant dollars into the Bay City Public School District to support local American Indian students specifically (US Census Bureau 2012; Fisher Papers 1976; Thornton 1987, 221).

The funding for the current program comes primarily through per-pupil federally-allocated formula grants each year, grants that are often endangered and were actually cut rather severely during the 2013 sequestration-related negotiations in Washington, D.C. (US DOE 2004a; see the end of this chapter for more financial details). How most previous iterations of the program were funded, however, is unclear, since financial records from that time - and, really, any records from the time before the current director's presence in the program - are nearly nonexistent. Based on letters and organizational documents from the 1970s, originally archived in Fisher's private collection, we do know that the earliest iteration of the program began in 1974, when the local Indian Parents Advisory Council and the Bay City Board of Education jointly filed an application for \$7,000 in grant funds under the federal Indian Education Act, as administered by the then titled "U.S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare" (Fisher Papers 1976; IPAC Announcement 1974). They were awarded less than half of that amount - only \$3,072.31 - and immediately consulted with the director of Michigan's branch of Indian Affairs within the Michigan Department of Education who suggested other possible grants they might explore. This was conveyed later in a letter from the Bay City Public Schools to Vivian Meredith, a key member of the Indian Parents Advisory Council (Fisher Papers 1976). At that time, their priorities, in order of importance, were "special tutoring," social services, and cultural activities, but with the awarded amount it wasn't possible to offer either tutoring or other services, so the administrative assistant working on the project on behalf of the school system

suggested just using the money "to provide activities rather than to hire someone to provide services" (Fisher Papers 1976). His conclusion was not supported by the Indian Parents Advisory Council and they chose instead to attack the problem in two key ways: alternative funding and community outreach.

Representatives from the parents' committee worked with the state director to investigate local and state sources of funding, but they also sent out a call for parents and guardians of American Indian children to more proactively identify them as such (Fisher Papers 1976; IPAC Announcement 1974). Apparently, "[t]he difference between the amount requested and the amount granted [was] explained by the difficulty in identifying children of Indian descent," which would account for the strange nature of the awarded amount and the lack of any nod from the federal government regarding the quality or form of the programming to be supported by the grant (Fisher Papers 1976; IPAC Announcement 1974). Just like the current/contemporary formula grant mechanism, there was no baseline amount for programming, and each student only garnered so much in grant funds. Keep in mind, of course, that even at only \$50 per student (a rough equivalent of \$250 in 2015 dollars), this grant amount could only support just over 60 students. While this might have been sufficient if it were solely based on (highly problematic) census numbers, alternate sources of population data as well as accounts from locals strongly suggests that both the absolute number of Native Americans and the percentage of Native Americans versus the total populace were higher both in Michigan and in Bay County during the 1970s than they were during the 2010s (US Census Bureau 2012; US Census Bureau 2015a; US Census Bureau 2015b; Fisher Papers 1976; Thornton 1987, 221). So, either the per-student grant amount was alarmingly small or the local student population acknowledged by the federal government was wildly inaccurate - or, perhaps more likely, this is a situation where both

circumstances applied. In their announcement and plea to local families, the Indian Parents Advisory Council quoted the state director of Indian Education, who had noted that "one of the difficulties in identifying Indian children is the reluctance of their parents to claim Indian blood" and, further, that "the history of the treatment of Indians has been such that many persons of Indian descent have preferred not to be identified as such" (Fisher Papers 1976; IPAC Announcement 1974). They worked to counter this sentiment by publicizing that there were funds available now "to be used solely to the benefit of the education of Indian children," and, therefore, *unlike* in the past "it is to the advantage of [American Indian] parents to step forth and identify [their children]" so that funds didn't go to waste (Fisher Papers 1976; IPAC Announcement 1974).

Unfortunately, there is no one document that comprehensively explains how this initial financial challenge was resolved. We do know part of its resolution involved additional outside funds, since minutes from the April 1975 meeting of the Indian Parents Advisory Committee point to the district's application of Comprehensive Education and Training Act (CETA) funds that were used to create an office-slash-"Indian Center" in a non-school building near the local hospital (Fisher Papers 1976; IPAC Minutes 1975, April). That meeting also featured the presence of Darlene Trylch, seemingly acting in a new official capacity. She was identified in later documents as a special counselor or "Minority Consultant," some of the resolution to the challenges faced by this original launch of the program may have been policy/structure-based within the school district itself, including updated language for the pre-existing role of Minority Consultant (Fisher Papers 1976; IPAC Minutes 1975, April-December; BCPS Role of Minority Consultants 1975). We also know that whatever funds were made available, in addition to the federal support, were sufficient enough that the parents committee comfortable pursuing at least

some of their original plan, because in April of 1975 they approved the Minority Consultant's request to "hire a paraprofessional for student tutorial services" (IPAC Minutes 1975, April). While they engaged in ongoing discussions around the possibilities and issues with developing a volunteer-based tutoring program, by February of 1976 a woman named Karen Johnson was already tutoring students and she would later be identified as the "Academic Assistant for Native American Students," thus, presumably, acting as the hired paraprofessional (Fisher Papers 1976; IPAC Minutes 1975, April-December; IPAC Minutes 1976, February; IPAC Agenda & Notes 1976, March). At that March meeting, the Academic Assistant even discussed her ideas for a summer program, which was intended to include field trips, a mix of educational and cultural elements, snacks, and possible guest speakers, all the while prioritizing the needs of students who had recently failed or were in danger of failing based on their grades (IPAC Agenda & Notes 1976, March). We have no clear indication as to whether or not this summer program occurred, but the comprehensiveness of the idea shows that there were thought leaders even at the early stage of BCIEP, with the primary challenge being neither a lack of interest nor a lack of imagination so much as the constraints of funding and human resources.

After that initial push - for funding, participants, dedicated staff, and beneficial programs - it is likely that the school district and the local Indian Parents Advisory Committee continued to apply for a similar mix of federal, state, and local funding, supporting the program in part through grant streams less focused specifically on American Indian education whenever needed. Most of the details have, unfortunately, been lost to the vagaries of time and multiple layers of staff changes, both within the program and the school system itself. Observational and interview data on the bureaucratic structure of the school district suggests that while it has largely been generous with and supportive of the program over the years, it has also gone through periods of

time when support services for other diverse groups have been trimmed from the budget entirely. This positions the federal grant program that specifically targets Native American students as a constant in perhaps unexpected ways, and highlights the ways in which grant programs with broader mandates are often applied to other challenges or struggling student populations within the district which may otherwise lack an element of continuity, significantly affecting long-term sustainability. Consequently, funding for the Bay City Indian Education Program has not only been through various ups and downs over its multi-decade history, but it has likely become especially precarious during years with reduced federal funding, a theory strongly supported by contemporary data which will be discussed in more detail in the final section of this chapter.

#### Creation and Historical Leadership/Structure

After the era covered by Marvin Fisher's papers, during which a Minority Consultant and an Academic Assistant seemingly shared duties overseeing the needs of Native American students in the district, there are many years largely unaccounted for in the archival record, but we have a few hints throughout those years. For example, Bay City's then-called "Title IV Indian Education Program" was mentioned briefly in a book on the history of Detroit's Native American community due to a multi-city connection between Indigenous folks harnessing mobilities<sup>1</sup> for economic and other reasons (Danziger 1991, 56). Sometime in the mid-to-late 1970s, there are notes that an Indigenous couple worked in the program - the husband was from the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe's Isabella Reservation, an hour west of Bay City, and the wife was from

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically, this section of Danziger (1991, 56) discusses how a woman moved from Walpole Island via marriage to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where she and her husband started a family. Then they moved to Bay City to work for the Indian Education Program and then when her marriage fell apart - a marriage that forfeited her band membership and ability to return to Walpole Island with any hope of getting a job - she decided to move to Detroit and reach out to a family member already settled there, believing that "the young people are all in Detroit."

Walpole Island, a First Nations reserve that is home to a mix of Anishinaabe peoples in the southwestern corner of Ontario, Canada, near Windsor and Detroit (Danziger 1991, 56). While the discussion both about this couple and the program is brief, the fact that they both worked for the program suggests that there were multiple staff positions at that time. Whether those positions continued to be titled as Minority Consultant and Academic Assistant or shifted during this time toward the contemporary terminology and structure of Program Manager/Director and Program Assistant is unknown.

Similarly brief, but informative, was the recent obituary of David L. Braendle, a local Bay City man who died in 2014, which states that he was the director of Bay City Public Schools' LEA (Local Education Agency) and Indian Education programs from 1978-1990 (Gephart Funeral Home 2014). This overlaps with the era during which he served as the Administrative Contact for Bilingual Programs, the Directory of Secondary Education, and the overall Director of Instruction for Bay City Public Schools, suggesting that Indian Education may have been more of a "hat" worn within the school district in terms of administration, with other program staff handling more of the day-to-day activities (Gephart Funeral Home 2014). Slowly rising graduation rates among American Indian students in the Bay City Public Schools in the 1980s point to some level of efficacy, however, and discussion of the decade in documents filed with the state suggest that programming in the early 1990s was likely largely a continuation of the structures used during the 1980s, if not before (National Advisory Council on Indian Education 1990, 237).

It is perhaps also notable that Braendle did not seem to have any ties to or prominent participation in the American Indian community or any other explicitly minority community. Based on conversations with volunteers and parents at the field site, knowledge of the program's

existence during this era was uneven. Non-Indigenous individuals did step in to manage the program at a few points throughout its history, but commentary from present-day stakeholders strongly suggests that this was neither preferable for the community nor ideal for the program. It may be that the many hats of Mr. Braendle included Indian Education more by default because of a lack of qualified and willing candidates after the era of Marvin Fisher and the couple mentioned above. In this way, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Indian Education torch was passed again in the late 1980s/early 1990s when Carole Spyhalski, a Native American woman came forward to take on the role.

Carole Spyhalski, whose family had been in Bay County for multiple generations took over the program manager position (Look to the Future 1988, National Advisory Council on Indian Education 1990, 237). According to her commentary in a newspaper article from 1988 (only half of which has survived in the county archive), Spyhalski, then a mother of multiple children attending school in the district, recalled her own mother's stories of sitting in the back of the class in the small country schools of Pinconning (the northernmost township in Bay County), being ridiculed by the overwhelmingly White student population, and neither learning, nor being expected to learn, much of anything from the White teachers. She vowed then that things would be different for her children and shortly thereafter joined the staff of the Bay City Indian Education Program, also called the "Indian Education Act Formula Grant Project" in some official documents of the time (Look to the Future 1988, National Advisory Council 1990, 237).

In 1990 based on her report to the State of Michigan, the program was running with two full-time staff members and one part-time office assistant and its purported purposes were to "provide student services in: attendance assistance, academic assistance, cultural awareness, and career education" (National Advisory Council 1990, 237). Much of that work seems to have

required the tracking and evaluation of the Native American students in the district with an emphasis on reacting to problems as they arose by noting them, bringing families and teachers together to discuss them, and developing a plan to address them going forward (National Advisory Council 1990, 237). Despite the reference to cultural awareness in the mission statement, however, activities of an explicitly cultural nature are not discussed in any of the documents that have survived the years, leading to some questions about the actual level of integration between the cultural and educational pieces of the program during this era. Official documents mention "enrichment activities" that "promote positive self-concept and discipline... as part of an experiential and leadership training effort," but if this refers to cultural activities, then the language has been transformed within the bureaucratic apparatus in ways that are startling and potentially problematic.

The decade between Spyhalski's arrival and that of Ms. Noelle, the director I worked with, is shrouded with the unfortunate mystery of lost and fading information. According to interviews with present-day staff and volunteers, there had been a lot of staff turnover in the program before Ms. Noelle arrived. Sometimes annually and sometimes even in the middle of the year, a staff member might decide that working in this program just was not for them. While there is not enough documentation left from that era to say exactly when or why the rapid turnover became such a prominent problem, it is clear that sometime during the 1990s the sense of enthusiasm and accomplishment presented by Spyhalski in her 1990 report was muddled in one way or another, perhaps simply by her leaving the program and being replaced by someone poorly suited to the position. Stakeholders who spoke to this turnover issue also explicitly mentioned that some of the past staff members were non-Native, which might additionally have affected both the connection between new staff and the mission of the program and between said



staff and the students or families intended to be embraced and supported through the program.

### The New Era and Its Complications

It is telling, I think, that Ms. Noelle, the current director, came into the job with no specific credentials or experience as an educator or even as an ambassador of Native American culture. Despite being Native American herself, she was not taught much about the history or culture of her Ojibwe heritage due to the way her own mother's experiences of both boarding school and life created a strong reticence to publicly claim that heritage or engage in any Ojibwe cultural activities. What Ms. Noelle brought to the table, according to her own account of her application process and interview, was immense passion/interest and genuine care for the students. This wasn't just to be a job for her, but a *calling*. She had read the advertisement and felt immediately drawn to it, even though it was totally different from what she had previously done in finance and insurance. It would present a path for her to dig deeper into her own heritage while supporting Native students in ways that she herself had never really experienced and she was hired with that - and, likely, her meticulous organizational and budgeting skills - in mind.

Similarly, program assistants during the contemporary era often brought heritage and passion more so than educational expertise, though even those characteristics varied. Conversations with both staff and parents suggest that some of the program assistants were especially problematic, with at least one being asked to leave and a few others leaving on their own based on struggles to keep up with the workload or due to interpersonal conflicts. Based on the most recent advertisement for a new program assistant in 2012, the work is wage-based and pays barely just above minimum wage with no attached benefits for less than full-time hours (approximately 32 hours per week), despite the often extensive work required - tutoring, organizing cultural activities, assisting the program manager with presentations to non-Native

students and staff, etc. It would, consequently, not be an especially ideal job for most. In the case of the most recent assistant, this wage and benefits situation meant that she needed to continue to maintain her other part time job while working for BCIEP, which while she handled that with aplomb, it might not be manageable or sustainable for many others.

What Ms. Noelle and her first assistant inherited at the tail end of the 1999-2000 school year was a "closet-sized office" and a program that had been operating "in obscurity" for 20+ years (Brandt 2000). In interviews, Ms. Noelle further explained that the cramped office was not even solely theirs, shared instead with two other district programs. Given this arrangement, there was only one chair for their use, so either she or the assistant had to sit on the floor at times. As far as she was concerned, this was not a sustainable solution and she thus set out to revamp and revitalize the program, a process through which they came to inhabit a new physical space that staff members and students could each actually use and enjoy. With this new "headquarters" located in an old school building, a whole host of new options and opportunities became available that had never truly been possible in the prior two-plus decades of the program.

Their first new home was in the Trombley Center (also known as Trombley School), a former elementary school that had been closed in the late 1990s, but then was reopened by the school district for community programs for a few years (Brandt 2000; Dodson 2010). In the fall of 2000, "a year of firsts" began not only with a new space, but also a vibrant fall gathering and open house featuring music, dance, food, and fun for all ages, a celebration that would become a tradition within the program (BCIEP Scheduling Notes 2000-2001; Brandt 2000). Guardians visiting the early festivities already recognized the importance of the program, both for students and for themselves if they felt geographically disconnected or feeling isolated from their tribes and families (Brandt 2000). Through this new director and her assistant, the program then

became a more pro-active one with much broader opportunities for participation. In addition to tutoring during the school day in fifteen of the district's schools, they began hosting afterschool study groups and cultural classes, arranged field trips, built up a library of books relevant to Native American issues and with Native American authors, and did presentations about Native American culture in schools, ensuring that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students had some exposure to and awareness of Native American cultures, histories, and traditions from perspectives beyond their teachers and textbooks (Brandt 2000; BCPS 2001).

By May 2001, the program was in full swing and cultivating its other new traditions, including a Spring Gathering that honored graduates and others, and the launch of the Medicine Wheel Garden with help from the Saginaw Valley Indian Association and a local member of the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe. A full study of the program's calendar and announcements during the 2000-2001 school year reveal a program getting off to a solid start with introductory seminars at both the high schools and middle schools, monthly cultural classes and presentations, initial parents committee meetings with bylaw approval<sup>2</sup> and discussion about future programming, and the first mention of students with significant participation points attending a conference with the staff, a process which would be refined over the years but still become a much-anticipated and much-loved annual event. In no prior era of the program - even its founding years, which we do have some record of - did the program explicitly offer so many layers of engagement, both directly with participants and with the broader school system and

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<sup>2</sup> Approval of the bylaws in this early meeting agenda leads to questions about the state of the Parents Advisory Committee during the years since its prominence in the mid-1970s. The current grant-related federal regulations require it, but these requirements can be met with fewer than 10 people signing off on the grant, so it may be that the ongoing committee itself was either not required previously or that it had managed in some less consistent fashion before the remnant era.

community. In this way, the reign of the director I worked with is best understood within an almost revolutionary light. She took the vestiges of a program with varying structures and success over the years and built something new out of it.

The context of the school district in which this programming expanded was largely supportive, with both staff interviews and archived letters from district officials situating the program as both lauded and appreciated, with an understanding that its work would address the highly problematic failure rates and other challenges among American Indian students (Brandt 2000). Based on correspondence and documents within the program's own archive, the Indian Education Program was not the only targeted program in the district designed to meet the needs of minority students at the time. Under the umbrella of "compensatory education programs," a school system level administrator kept an eye not only on the Indian Education Program, but also bilingual/migrant education programs and Title I initiatives, which are focused on "improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged," often with an emphasis on those affected by poverty, limited English skills, or disabilities (DoEd 2004c). There was also a Multi-Cultural Committee during several of the Indian Education Program's early years, which brought together the staff of various minority-focused programs, including bilingual/migrant education for Latin@ students, social workers who primarily worked with African-American and low income students, and staff members from around the school district who were of diverse heritages themselves and/or were committed to helping students who did not have a dedicated program focused on their needs, like Asian-American students, immigrants, and others. In this context, the then-called Title IX Indian Education Program and its staff members were just one among many initiatives within the district to improve the success and achievement rates of marginalized students, which the director interpreted positively as evidence of the district's concerns and

commitment to such students.

As the funds for other programs began to dry up over the years and more and more ceased to exist, the Multi-Cultural Committee stopped meeting and the Indian Education Program began to be a bit of a lone wolf, continuing forward with a mixture of determination and anxiety as a broader network of support for minority students within the district crumbled. There is, for example, no longer an overall category or district level director for minority-related programming because there are no other such programs but Indian Education, and even necessary non-minority specific educational and social support positions, like the counselors, are overloaded with students and work. The program's archival records points to its own funding challenges as early as April of 2001 with the program director meeting with the district administrator for compensatory education to discuss funding possibilities within the district only to be referred to community-based funders instead - funders who would ultimately reject multiple years' worth of the program's grant applications. Adding that to organizational and financial precariousness was the physical/spatial precariousness that came when Trombley School was closed for good in 2002, forcing the program's space, known as the "Turtle Shell," to find a new home (Dodson 2010). Ultimately settling into rooms offered by the district in another former school, the long-term outlook for that space was only vaguely rosier, and while the program has been in its current home for over a decade now, there are murmurings nearly every year about the school district potentially needing that space for something else or just intending to close down that school like Trombley and sell it off. Consequently, this context - of bustling activity and praise, as well as constant precariousness - was present even from the beginning of this revolutionary new era and continued through my time in the field there.

## PRESENT PROGRAM STRUCTURE

### Population and Participants

One of the challenges with accounting fully for the Native American population, not only in this area but in many areas throughout the United States, is that the census process and most similar demographic overviews do not naturally manage nuanced identity situations well. Based on observations and conversations in the field, some people do not identify as Native American in their everyday lives, but would fit the legal definition of Native American for purposes of enrollment in a federal program like Title VII, which requires that they have at least one grandparent who is a member of a federally recognized tribe. Some people do identify as Native American, but more strongly as some other race or ethnicity and may not select "mixed" or "multiple" options – or, in fact, they may select mixed/multi-racial options and have that selection not then be counted as part of the Native American population. Others who also identify as Native American may simply not participate in census activities or may be re/de/classified by census workers when it comes to race/ethnicity. This leads to contradictory numbers and statistics. A grandmother in a family may identify as Native American, but her children might not. Her grandchildren, however, after becoming involved in the program might then take up the identity again as something close to their hearts. How many Native Americans then are in that family? If a sister embraces an American Indian identity, but her brother doesn't, and their parents are ambivalent or might self-identify that way in a variety of distinct situations, how then do these individuals show up in official paperwork like a census or school population demographics? How are they counted? The way these situations work in relation to the Bay City

Indian Education Program itself will be described in Chapter Five, but on a national and state level, flaws in standard demographic data regarding American Indians is fairly well-documented (Passel & Berman 1986; Snipp 1989; Thornton 1987).

If we go solely by the numbers, as of the 2010 Census only 0.6% of Bay City's ~35,000 residents were Native American, which is just over 200 people. Considering that there have been around 180 students alone enrolled in the Bay City Indian Education Program for each of the past few years this can't possibly be the case. Considering further information, learned through observations and interviews, that it is clear that there are explicitly identified Native American students in the school system who are *not* a part of the program and that there are students who *are* part of the program whose families did not officially mark them as "Native American" on any school records except the form to join this particular program (which requests information about a grandparent who is a member of a federally recognized tribe), the classification and identification processes surrounding Native American youth and their families is far more complex than the numbers alone can capture. Of course, these demographic overviews do not even touch on the diversity *within* the local Native American community and the program itself, though we know from interviews and the program's own records that student participants trace their heritage to 40+ Native nations in total.

With those complications in mind we can dive into the multilayered realities of the field site without blinders on. Indigenous identity in this context - whether aligned with race, ethnicity, culture, or nation - is fluid, flexible, mobile, and sometimes disjointed, stretching around and squeezing between parameters, skipping generations and embracing portions of families while being left adrift by others. This is the sociocultural environment in which students join or are enrolled in the program, often positioning their early years in the program as a time of

both discovery and reconceptualization, often including both their sense of self and their understanding of others.

### Staffing and Volunteers

During my time there, the program was run by two staff members – Ms. Noelle, the Program Director and the Program Assistant (who we will call “Ms. Gabby”) - along with several volunteers, though the presence of some volunteers was irregular and unpredictable. I also noted that, for a variety of reasons, volunteer participation decreased substantially between my first year there and the second year, a trend which apparently continued during the year after I left. Based on observations, discussions in interviews, and notes in the program's various historical and contemporary documents, the work of the program director primarily included: preparing the major federal grant application each year (though the school system sometimes had her work with a district-level grant writer); maintaining accurate budget information for the program's various accounts within the school system's structure; recruiting new American Indian students into the program; collecting enrollment applications along with other program-relevant legal paperwork (e.g. field trip consent forms); tracking the attendance, academic achievement, and disciplinary status of district-based American Indian students both within the program and outside it; and ultimately arranging both individual student interventions, assistance, and advocacy, as well as group enrichment activities of both a cultural and educational nature. The director took on additional tasks, however, striving diligently and proactively to stabilize and enhance the program by applying for multiple other grants each year, by designing and tracking participation in incentivized reading sub-programs (complete with before and after testing) for students participating in the overall program, by presenting to various classes throughout the year about Native American history and culture, and by organizing not only weekly afterschool



tutoring sessions/safe space and seasonal gatherings for the program's students and their families, but also putting on a major all-day event approximately every other year for any 3rd and 4th grade classrooms interested in learning about Native American history and culture.

Even with all of that already on her plate, the vast majority of the Ms. Noelle's time was used to tutor students personally, during four out of five days of each school week, following a fairly consistent schedule of visiting various schools around town and working with specific students on set days. This is a situation that seems somewhat unusual in comparison with larger Title VII programs, where a director may *oversee* tutors but does not act as one themselves, and even in the snatches of history available about this program itself, tutoring seems to have been something more often arranged through additional staff, peer tutors, or other volunteers. This allow(s)/(ed) the program head or staff to focus primarily on administrative tasks like tracking, evaluation, convening relevant stakeholders when necessary, and designing - or, at least, obtaining - the tools used in individualized interventions and tutoring sessions, including referral processes, "goal attainment surveys," academic skills assessments, packets of academic exercises targeted to specific subjects, and lesson plans that integrated multiple subjects (US Department of Education 1989, 114-115). Yet, it was exactly through her direct and regular interaction with a wide variety of students, from kindergarten through middle school (and even high school students during the afterschool programs) that Ms. Noelle built up the collection of educational materials that now fill not only a filing cabinet, but also a few storage bins, and she encourages volunteers to explore and request materials as they seem relevant to their work with individual students.

In some ways, while the historical record can only speak to us filtered through the lens of institutional and governmental bureaucracies, I would suggest that one of the key differences

between the vibrant program I encountered in the field and the program operating in obscurity during the decades before this director took over is a certain intimacy of knowledge and flexibility of application that would be harder to enact with staff members primarily focusing on the statistics, scores, and behavioral records of the students rather than on the students themselves, who might be known best through regular personal interaction and acknowledgment of them as whole (if still developing) human beings. There also historically seems to have been a strong emphasis on intervention rather than enrichment, with certain program-based actions being triggered by a certain rate of absenteeism, a drop below a C average, and standardized test scores below 50% (US Department of Education 1989, 114-115). Whereas in the contemporary program, while students in crisis or otherwise struggling regularly come to light through a mix of monitoring, counselor referrals, and requests from parents and guardians, there is an entire swath of students who already perform well in their studies, maintain average or above average grades, show well when tested, and engage in few behavioral incidents, who *still benefit from the program*<sup>3</sup> and may have had little to no contact with historical iterations of the program because they were not the veritable squeaky wheel.

The role of the assistant, consequently, is broad but crucial. It was her job to pick up a similarly intense tutoring schedule and to take on any other tasks that required delegation from the director. At times, an impending delivery meant that one person needed to be in the program's space while the other was tutoring or one person needed to pick up something while the other was overseeing the afterschool program. When attempting to address the needs of students who attend over a dozen different schools, in a district that encompasses not only the

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<sup>3</sup> One example of this is discussed in the report on reading program results examined further in Chapter 4 & 5 of this text.

city but part of the rural county outside it, some of the challenges facing program staff just boiled down to the logistics of being able to get from one place to another in time or to be in multiple places at once. The assistant was also appointed to oversee and arrange certain program activities wholly under her own steam, including working with student volunteers for certain fundraisers, taking the lead in specific culture classes, and, during my second year when the program didn't have enough money to hire a language instructor, she was also tasked with creating Ojibwe language lesson plans and facilitating language-learning with help from an Ojibwe language software program.

### Physical Spaces and Available Materials

The two rooms that currently make up the "Turtle Shell," Turtle Shell 1 and Turtle Shell 2, are set into the back/side area of an old elementary school with a large gymnasium space in the center and a set of squared offices on the opposite side of the building, an area currently used by the school district's Information Technology department while most of the rest of the building sits unused or taken up as storage. In each corner of the gym, there is a round hallway off of which there are a few classrooms, situated like spokes, and the program's home rooms are right next to each other with a nonprofit literacy organization using another room off of that circular hallway and flexible table/chair setups in the other rooms for varied use.

In the main room, Turtle Shell 1, there are two large desk areas setup for the program manager and the program assistant, each having their own space cordoned off with one wall and two desks/tables creating a kind of open cubicle, each complete with a computer and related tech. Along the wall between them is also the printer, some filing cabinets, and some shelves, all working together to designate that area as the office space within the room, though sometimes students go into that area with permission to work on the computers. These storage solutions are

mostly for the program's copies of middle school textbooks and countless folders filled with necessary forms, creative and educational handouts, and other handouts and other educational resources to support tutoring and other academic skill-building.

Filling the rest of the room are three large rectangular tables, surrounded by four to six chairs each - augmented by folding chairs on days when there is a significant crowd for homework help - as well as a smaller round table usually positioned near the sink and refrigerator and topped with snacks and drinks, often of a fairly healthy variety (e.g. milk, juice, fruit, cheese, granola bars, mini-meals like chicken, pasta, salads), though sometimes they trend more toward fun and tasty (e.g. donuts, mini-muffins, Cheezits). Along the other walls and in front of the tables serving as desks for the program director and assistant, there are also a number of bookshelves, cubbies, and a tall cabinet by the refrigerator. These are all filled with resources for students to either use on their own or to use with a tutor, including a wide variety of books for children, teens, and adults with both generally popular books and books specifically aimed at or written by Indigenous people, as well as more research-ready materials focused on Native American peoples and issues, like nonfiction histories, art books, language guides, biographies, and literary fiction. They also have a diverse set of educational games and toys, be it a quiet math quiz gadget for one or a raucous verbal skills showdown for a group, and there are arts and crafts materials too, including the usual pipe cleaners, tongue depressants, markers, construction paper, and glue, as well as beads, scrap paper, crayons, and paints, sometimes with leftovers from recent culture classes (e.g. leather, cloth, feathers, etc.) available by request.

Turtle Shell 2, on the other hand, serves largely as a storage, overflow, and gathering room. Half of its space is taken up with standing and stacked storage options, containing everything from skirts for women's drumming to beads and feathers for craft activities, to dried

medicines/herbs for smudging and other ceremonies, to the binders full of program documents that the director had put together during each year of her work in the program. In the other half of the space, there was a mixture of seating - a couch or two, several padded chairs, some wooden, some folding chairs - and a few small tables of various heights. This is the space where, on busy Wednesdays, older students were encouraged to go socialize and read, where pre- and post-testing occurred, where we all settled for the talking circle once a week, and where other cultural activities like language classes and drum circles sometimes happened.

### Sub-Programs and Activities

I have already mentioned many of the activities and programs-within-the-program offered by the Bay City Indian Education Program, but I will go into more detail on nearly all of them throughout the following chapters. In order to give you a greater sense of the temporal context within which these activities/programs happen, I put together a composite calendar below, which includes events common to multiple years' worth of the program. Keeping in mind that staff and volunteers are tutoring students during the school day 4-5 days a week, Monday afternoons after school at the Turtle Shell itself are typically open to students 6th grade and up, for homework help or anything else, and Wednesday afternoons are open for all students to come to the Turtle Shell. Wednesday evenings are therefore the prime time for culture classes, language classes, drum circles, gatherings, and other events and in between the Wednesday afternoon study session and the evening class or special event, all present students, parents, and volunteers/staff join in the weekly talking circle.

Staff and volunteers also regularly participate in the open-houses for all the kindergartens in the district, twice yearly parent-teacher conferences, presentations in various schools with an average of one presentation per month, maintenance sessions for the Medicine Wheel Garden,

and the occasional fundraising activity, either for the program itself or an affiliated cause (e.g. the literacy organization next door, a student in need of financial help with major health costs, a family in need struggling to pay for funeral services). Once every other year or so in the spring, staff, volunteers, and students also organize a large learning day for 3rd and 4th graders across the district called Indian Education Day, bringing multiple classrooms worth of students to the building and grounds where the Turtle Shell currently resides, to enjoy storytelling, exhibits, activities, dancing, drumming, and all sorts of experiences meant to inform non-Indigenous folks and shine a positive light onto Native American culture and history. BCIEP's seasonal gatherings are also open to the public, so while the focus of the program is highly targeted, it is neither truly insular nor wholly isolated.

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#### Weekly

Weekdays - Tutoring during the School Day

Mondays – Afternoon Study Session (Grades 6 and up)

Wednesdays – Afternoon Study Session (All Students)

Weekly Talking Circle (All Stakeholders)

Evening Cultural Class and/or Special Event

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#### September

Special Event - Multi-Tribal Dancer

Parent Committee Meeting

Cultural Awareness/Craft Class - Dream Catchers

Drum Class

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October

Cultural Awareness/Craft Class - Medicines

Language Class

Parent Committee Meeting

Drum Class

Special Event - Medicine Garden

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November

Field Trip - Grand Rapids Museum

Parent/Teacher Conferences

Gathering - Fall/Honoring History

Field Trip - Delta College Powwow

Language Class

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December

Parent Committee Meeting

Cultural Awareness/Craft Class - Feather Painting

Christmas Party

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January

Cultural Awareness/Craft Class - Traditional & Powwow Dancing

Language Class

Parent Committee Meeting

Drum Class

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February

Cultural Awareness/Craft Class - Wisdom Books

Language Class

Field Trip - Nokomis Cultural Center

Parent Committee Meeting

Drum Class

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March

Cultural Awareness/Craft Class - Leather Necklaces

Language Class

Parent Committee Meeting

Field Trip - Critical Issues Conference

Drum Class

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April

Cultural Awareness/Craft Class - Beadwork

Language Class

Parent Committee Meeting

Drum Class



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May

Gathering - Spring/Honor Graduates

Cultural Awareness/Craft Class - Fingerweaving

Language Class

End of Year Party

Field Trip - Sanilac Petroglyphs/Forest Preserve

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Summer

Pool Party

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## PROGRAM FINANCES AND MONEY WOES

### Valuing Dollars and Sense

Considering the amount and variety of activity involved in the program, its historic growth/shift over a decade ago at the beginning in 2000, and the frequency with which it was lauded by parents, district administrators, state-level education agencies, and even national organizations focused on Native American education, I was somewhat surprised by the way in which the program's financial challenges were a part of everyday dialogue throughout my entire time volunteering there. Acknowledging the broader economic peaks and troughs that affect a wide variety of programs and policies at the national, state, and local level, as well as the impact of political cycles and prominent ideologies, it took time to develop a clear picture of how the program's funding was specifically rooted not only within these frameworks but also larger

macro-processes like national, regional, and local discourses about Indigenous peoples. My first major aha moment – regarding the program’s extremely tight finances – occurred after I went through a few discomfiting cycles of observation, writing field notes, reviewing field notes, disbelief and uncertainty, reflecting on field notes, and more observations.

At various points in my data collection and data analysis, I reread, re-examined, and re-calculated the per-student and total budget amounts for the Bay City Indian Education Program (BCIEP), but my forehead continued to bunch with confusion or frustration nearly every time I looked at the numbers. I could read them just fine, but they diverged significantly from my own pre-field beliefs - or, perhaps, hopes - about how the world worked. The first time the per-student grant amount received from the federal government appeared in my notes, there were multiple question marks after it, my shock legible on the page: *~\$270 per student per year???* Had I misheard? Yes and no. I corrected myself later, looking at a budgetary spreadsheet shared at one of the Parents Committee meetings. The number was more like \$250 per student per year - and even that level of support was not guaranteed. All I could think was: is that really how the "unique educational and culturally related academic needs of American Indian and Alaska Native students" are valued at the federal level? For a program with annual student enrollment that fluctuates between 175-200 students, this tends to produce an operating budget between \$43,000-\$50,000, which is barely enough to cover one full-time staff member with access to basic benefits like health care, let alone a much-needed program assistant or any actual programming, whether academic or cultural, beyond staff member presence.

Yet, somehow, through extremes of perseverance, innovative activities with tight budgets, almost continual searches for and applications to external funders, and reliance on sparse, but highly committed volunteers, the Bay City Indian Education Program persists and manifests

notable educational and sociocultural effects in the lives of American Indian students and families every year that its doors are open. Financially pushed to the edge, staff members, volunteers and concerned parents often scramble to find enough external funds to ensure that the program continues to function, despite underinvestment from the federal government. But what does that federal under/investment look like more specifically?

Based on the student calendar for the 2014-2015 school year, Bay City Public Schools is in session for approximately 170 days per year and dividing the \$250 per student average across 170 days comes out to a rounded \$1.47 per student per day. Even a casual shopper would note that, one dollar and forty-seven cents does not offer much purchasing power - a pack of gum, some candy, a few erasers or pencils or pens, a glue stick, a ruler, a 2oz bottle of craft paint on sale, some tape, or a slim notebook. Not all of those things, of course, just one of them per \$1.47 available. Would it purchase an hour of tutoring? No. Looking at sites, like Wyzant.com, where private tutors advertise their skills, travel area, and payment expectations, most tutors local to the Bay City area charge between \$25-40 per hour for one-on-one academic assistance (with about a fourth of listed tutors charging even more, between \$45-85 per hour). At that average rate, \$1.47 could purchase approximately 2-3.5 minutes of tutoring per day or about 10-17.5 minutes of tutoring per week. Since private tutoring tends to be offered in one-hour chunks, however, that \$250 might cover ten sessions at the outside and less than seven with more expensive tutors. That would be two and half months of academic support at most, assuming only one tutoring session per week. Compare that to BCIEP's afterschool program, which runs for two afternoons per week for two to three hours each, and their once per week in-school tutoring program especially for the students who need it most, both of which run eight to nine months out of the nine-month school year. Consequently, just on numbers alone, the structure and passion built

into the Bay City Indian Education Program leverages its small budget in big ways, allowing it to provide three to seven (3-7) times the amount of academic support American Indian students could otherwise access through private means *if private academic support was even an option for the students in question*, which is not an assumption anyone could make lightly. In fact, while there are specific literacy and GED-oriented programs offered through the Bay County Literacy Council, few other low or no-cost supplemental education programs exist in Bay City, so the Bay City Indian Education Program stands as the only option available to many American Indian families seeking academic assistance for K-12 students with a wide variety of needs.

Early on in my time as a volunteer there, the director approached me as soon as I walked in the door and said "I know why you're here," in the style of "I know why the fates brought you to us." She had just gotten off the phone with a mother who had sobbed through much of their conversation, terrified for her 12th grade son who was a good football player but failing in math to such a degree that he might not graduate. She didn't know where else to go, the resources offered by the school hadn't been enough, and she was just at the end of her rope. "Can you help him?" she had asked the director, and the director replied, steady and supportive, "I think we can." That was hardly the only incident that highlighted the unique position of this program and the way in which its presence is felt by students and families in the area.

One afternoon, a young mother with a blotchy face was clutching Kleenex and sniffing as she watched her young son work with an educational building toy he favored on one side of the afterschool space and someone asked if she'd been to see a doctor. "No." She shook her head. A hint of a smile tugged at her lips, but it didn't shine in her eyes, like the aftermath of a joke that wasn't funny. "Can't afford health insurance," she said. "Even with Obamacare?" the other volunteer asked. "Even with," the young mother said, shaking her head again. She worked

multiple part time jobs and went to school herself at the local community college, getting great grades while still caring for her two young kids. Could she afford to seek academic help for her gifted but sometimes attention-challenged son elsewhere? No. What about the mother who'd had more than one child already graduate from the program but sometimes ran short on something as basic as gas money for the car? Or the families who struggle with food insecurity or access to school supplies in the fall and warm coats in the winter? What about the students for whom computer and internet access are luxuries not always guaranteed at home? Where can they go for help when their homework is confusing enough that it might as well be written in a foreign language? They come to the "Turtle Shell" or they reach out to the director to see if in-school tutoring might be arranged.

### Federal Funding

In this sense, the Bay City Indian Education Program is an invaluable part of the local educational landscape, consistently providing financially accessible - indeed, cost-free - academic assistance for American Indian students from kindergarten through high school. Why, then, is funding so challenging? As mentioned earlier, the operating budget of the program is overwhelmingly federally-funded and that funding is based on what is called a "formula grant," which means the budget amount shifts depending on student enrollment (DoEd 2014a; NCIDC 2016). This doesn't seem inherently unreasonable at first glance, but when we acknowledge that the actual achievement of the federal-level goals for the program are significantly challenged by the lack of a baseline amount to support appropriate staffing, program activities, and supplies, the formula structure sets up mid-sized and smaller programs for perpetual precariousness and possible failure. This not only trickles down into the opportunities available to students in the program, it places an immense amount of strain on staff and forces them to spend hours on

fundraising activities and extra grant proposals not only for new programs, but also just to continue foundational programs from year to year, whether focused on reading, American Indian traditions, or something as simple as postage for the informative newsletters that parents without internet access might not otherwise receive.

The fact that legislators chip away pieces of the federal budget line item for the overall national Title VII initiative, and related education funds, only exacerbates the financial precariousness built into the formula structure, creating multi-year conversations, especially during times of federal financial standoffs, about whether or not the program will even receive enough funding to survive another year. The school system itself, while it helped in some years, often suggested that they were under financial strain as well during every year that BCIEP itself was threatened and seeking help. It does not help that the State of Michigan sometimes actually adds to both the school system's and BCIEP's challenges with new employee requirements regarding compensation and benefit contribution levels. These policies are not inherently bad and often have logical underpinnings, as well as varying levels of philosophical support among employees, but for programs of this size, like with many of our nation's smallest nonprofits, even just a few dollars shifted in a new direction can mean the difference between a robust, sustainable program and one whose most basic functioning seems impossible without outside help.

#### Nongovernmental Funders

So, what about external funders? "God bless them," as one volunteer once said. There are certain local companies, including Dollar General and Target, who have regularly provided support, especially for incentivized reading programs and educational/cultural field trips. There is also an American Indian organization - Catching the Dream - which often approves

applications from BCIEP for both cultural and academic activities, and the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, based an hour away, has also sometimes supported the program via grants for the large event BCIEP hosts called "Indian Education Day." The largest challenge is that almost all of the grants are only for small amounts - \$700, \$1000, at best maybe \$2000 - and they tend to be event-focused or otherwise restricted to some specific subprogram or activity. In these instances, the fact that the program has run out of school supplies midway through the year cannot be addressed with these external funds. On several occasions, however, both when approaching funders for general/operational support and for targeted support, the program has been turned away based on misconceptions that are unfortunately hard to dislodge from the minds of funders, despite the facts.

*"Don't you get money from the tribe?"* It is a question that surfaces regularly for program staff in their efforts to seek support from grantmakers, both corporate and nonprofit in nature. The way the question is phrased and its constant presence are positioned within a context where the main reservation of the nearest federally recognized tribe is an hour away and where gaming/casinos remain as affixed to American Indians in everyday discourse as the feather headdresses of school children's Thanksgiving Feast plays. "No," Ms. Noelle replies, sometimes explaining that the program is "too far away." Yet this question of distance and external presumption of connection is just one snapshot of conversation that points to the ways in which this program has to fight to craft and hold space in a world where its existence is a conundrum. With students who trace their heritage to more than forty different American Indian nations and who, individually and as members of diverse families, understand their own American Indian identities in a multitude of ways, BCIEP, its circumstances, processes, and outcomes strongly fit with the kind of urban complexity that should not be glossed over in favor of prejudicial notions

that have no factual basis. Even after multiple efforts to explain the diversity of the program, funders with this mindset have not historically re-evaluated their thinking on BCIEP grants or what they think the role of the "the tribe" should be with regard to the program. This means that, in addition to simply proving that the program is needed and effective, like any other program applying for a grant, BCIEP staff members also have to navigate problematic mainstream narratives that suggest they are somehow in-line for casino money, whether as a program or even as individual stakeholders, since the vast majority of students are not enrolled members of the Saginaw Chippewa tribe.

### Last Two Cents

In a financial and sociocultural context like this, it would be worthwhile for the federal government to step-up to the plate and re-evaluate the funding structure for Title VII programs, considering not only the sheer mathematics problem posed by formula grants and the politics of federal budgets as well as the very real logistics involved in addressing the needs of the people - children and youth - whom the federal government purports to want to help. While policy-level debates continue, however, leadership from fair-minded grantmakers may be key not only to the survival and continued success of programs like this, but also to the potential lessons BCIEP can provide for replication in programs working to address the needs of similar populations. The tipping point seems to be operational support and consistency thereof. Having seen first-hand how staff members can make every dollar count, the actual total dollar amount needed to even out their baseline budget every year is often only a few thousand dollars. That would free up staff member time and energy, so they could focus on maintaining and enhancing the many aspects of the program that already regularly affect student lives in ways that will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters. Consequently, both continued study of and continued investment



in programs like this would significantly expand our pool of relevant data about what programs - supported by what policy and funding structures - best support and contribute positively to the lives of urban Indigenous children, youth, and families.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: ACADEMICS**

According to the federal policy document itself and the local program's own literature, the core purpose of the Title VII Indian Education Program is to address the "unique educational and culturally related academic needs" of American Indian and Alaska Native students with a special emphasis on those attending schools not run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. But what exactly are these "unique educational and culturally related academic needs"? There is no further specificity offered to local educational agencies (LEA's) on what educational concerns, practices, or pitfalls are either "unique" or "culturally related" when it comes to Indigenous students.

A quick overview of the literature points out that that Indigenous students as a group are struggling in a number of alarming ways. Across all ethnic and racial subgroups in America's schools, Indigenous students on average have (Ahmed 2016; Camera 2015):

- the lowest educational achievement scores, including being 2-3 grades behind in both reading and math,
- the lowest high school graduation rates, including both high dropout rates and high rates of expulsions,
- the lowest rates for earned bachelor's degrees, and  
some of the highest rates of suicide and substance abuse.

Where these challenges overlap within any Venn diagram of academic versus cultural needs is unclear, but if our ultimate focus is on improving the potential life trajectories of Indigenous students, then it would be hard to willfully ignore or unsee the interrelated nature of these issues - and the likelihood that there are contextual factors at work far beyond any educational (or cultural) program's purview.

Local educational agencies (LEA's) are encouraged to study the situation in and around their specific locations to determine which concerns are most directly relevant to their students. Yet, even if only tasked with addressing some subset of the aforementioned challenges, the Title VII policy puts onto the shoulders of a diverse array of people a rather outsized responsibility. In fact, the core mission stated above is actually expanded within the verbiage of the policy (DoEd 2014b) such that applicants for federal funding through this program are explicitly requested to:

- develop "programs and activities" to address the culturally related academic needs - as well as the "language and cultural needs" of Indigenous students;
- align said programs and activities with state and local educational plans and materials,
- develop adequately aligned achievement benchmarks,
- explain the impact of other federal education programs on the students in question,
- provide professional development for those working with Indigenous students (both staff in the schools and staff of the program itself), and
- regularly assess not only students participating in the program but all Indigenous students in the area.

All of that is to be done based on federal funds that provide only an average of \$250 per student per year to Title VII programs. Is it any wonder that these multi-layered expectations - both in terms of outputs and constraints - would filter down discursively in somewhat unpredictable ways when it comes to implementing the policy on the ground? When you especially consider the case I studied - a small urban Title VII program whose \$250 per pupil allotment barely covered the cost of paying for one full-time and sometimes an additional part-time staff member dedicated to the program - the idea that certain aspects of the program might be prioritized over others or managed in unexpected ways is hardly unreasonable. There is only

so much time in a day and only so many resources - human and otherwise - available to deal with any aspect of the policy or the needs of Indigenous students. The academic efforts of the Bay City Indian Education Program primarily focus on the following: 1) tutoring and mentoring; 2) advocacy and safe space; 3) alternative learning opportunities; 4) incentivized reading programs; and 5) cultural activities and educational adventures. This chapter will first discuss the overarching values framework that affects all of these activities and then examine each of them in turn, grappling with the discourse, practice, and materials intertwined with and implicated by each of these efforts and their outcomes.

#### PROGRAM-PRACTICED VALUES

*What you can expect from the Turtle Shell:*

1. *We will treat you with respect at all times.*
2. *We will provide a safe place for you at the Turtle Shell.*
3. *We will conduct ourselves with integrity at all times.*
4. *We will listen to you. You can talk to us and we will listen to what you say.*
5. *We will expect great things from each of you.*
6. *We will give 100% in everything that we do.*
7. *FUN - We will have a great year!!!<sup>1</sup>*

The Bay City Indian Education Program's strengths lie not only in the basic accessibility of its offered academic help (free for anyone who qualifies). They also stem from the ways in which staff and volunteers of the Turtle Shell (the physical space of the program) work to support and guide students, academically and culturally. Indeed, the *how* of the program cannot

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<sup>1</sup> From the "contract" that students sign when they attend an afterschool session for the first time at the beginning of each school year. The sheet lays out ten key rules for students to follow, as well as three levels of consequences for students who do not follow the rules, but it also features these seven things students can expect from the Turtle Shell and seven things the Turtle Shell expects from its students. The first item in both these lists is about respect - for self and others.

simply be reduced to categories of activity. The expectations<sup>2</sup> highlighted above serve as a constant undercurrent and stylistic touchpoint for all activities within the program, shaping what might otherwise seem like mundane afterschool standards into vibrant conduits for BCIEP values and, therefore, creating afterschool offerings that more effectively address what I posit as the key social project of this space: successful identity development for urban Indigenous youth.

## TUTORING AND MENTORING

While many pundits, parents, and politicians are distraught by the statistics about academic achievement, particularly among low-income students and minority students, the revolving arguments about how best to improve or alter schooling often seem to fundamentally overlook one key challenge that is built into the way that schooling is currently structured in the United States. Each grade *presumes some baseline level of understanding* and is therefore overwhelmingly targeted to students who are at or might soon be at grade level. Based on the homework and textbooks brought into BCIEP sessions, the curriculum and styles of teaching employed in the local school system often provide some review of foundational concepts, but that review offers insufficient educational support for students who did not fully understand or master those concepts during previous rounds of schooling. This means that when students who are even just one grade level behind in subject-based understanding are put into classes designed to help them get from a point they're not yet at to a point even further away from their current skill level, their struggles are not only acute, they are perpetuated, rather than mitigated, by the system itself.

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<sup>2</sup> While some of these values, especially respect and listening, were sometimes associated directly with Indigenous cultures by the program director, the list as a whole does not seem to have any specific cultural roots, like the Seven Grandfather Teachings of the Anishinaabe or anything of that nature.

When trying to explain the situation to others, I have used the example of encountering a foreign language. If I speak French only at a basic enough level to manage purchasing lunch and finding a taxi stand, I may just not have the vocabulary or handle on certain grammatical forms to be able to effectively discuss French history, economics, or the latest scientific discovery over a croissant. It wouldn't matter how slowly or carefully or how loudly you said the words, even if you illustrated them with formulas and diagrams, without a baseline understanding that comes close to the level required for the conversation, you can do everything in your power to try to communicate the information and we will likely both still end up frustrated and unsuccessful. This is what is happening to many of the most challenged students and their teachers and related school staff. Yes, we can, and should, ask hard questions about how students end up so far behind and work to mitigate whatever school-based factors are contributing to that tide of academic struggle, but these various experiments and discussions do not adequately account for or address the needs of students who are *already* behind. The school system, even if there was a fix tomorrow to ensure that every student departing kindergarten this summer would be ready for 1st grade in the fall and would never fall behind, there would still be a substantial chunk of students at every other level whom the school system is simply not structured to effectively manage.

This discussion might call to mind the question of remedial education and special education. Both of these options are available in the Bay City public schools, but they can only take on so many students and typically have very particular parameters for who those students are (or when those students become their responsibility specifically). Students can muddle through with a failed class here and there, and C's and D's otherwise, and not be recommended for one of these set aside programs. There is even a kind of middle ground program in which

counselors develop "Individual Education Plans" for struggling students, requiring certain actions from teachers and parents, like front row seating in the classroom or parent-signed homework at home, but, based both on my observations and those of certain other scholars (Bateman 2011), the variety of possible adjustments in such circumstances are mix elements often too minor to affect change, too challenging to enforce, or just too complex to combine well for the unique needs of single students, requiring a significant investment of time, effort, and expertise to affect sustainable improvements. IEPs are wonderful when done right, but very easy to get wrong. In these situations, the only potential avenue for additional educational support comes from extracurricular options. Namely: afterschool, weekend, and summer programs. Families might also be considered a potential space for additional educational support, but it's crucial to ask the question of how realistic it is to presume that home spaces and family members can manage the kind of educational assistance required by students with significant academic challenges. Research strongly suggests that the families that are best equipped and most likely to contribute positively to the academic trajectory if their children already do so, and would likely neither have students so far behind the curve, nor need cajoling in the form of a counselor-based interventions (Lareau 2011).

All-encompassing curricular reforms, such as making certain subjects more connected to everyday life or more integrated between the subjects or clearer, with more step-by-step processes, or even more varied, in terms of activities, to address different innate learning styles (all of which are much more contemporary suggestions), only go so far when a student's foundational skills walking into the classroom are only two or three grade levels behind. The core of the Bay City Indian Education Program is *respectfully, patiently, and compassionately* meeting students wherever they are on their learning journey and walking them through

whatever steps necessary (sometimes repeatedly) to help them get to where they want or need to go.

*"I am confused," says Maggie\*, an 8th grader pulling out homework to work on at BCIEP on a Wednesday afternoon. It's homework for the math class she's failing, and she's trying desperately to catch up. There is a mix of worksheets spread out and several pages open or tabbed in the math book in front of us, material which she is unsure enough about to have to check the school's online system to make sure she wrote down the assignment correctly.*

*"She's confused. My dad yelled at her," her sibling adds, not unkindly so much as, seemingly, to help me better understand the seriousness of the situation.*

*Maggie explains further, "My dad thinks I can do better, but it doesn't help because my parents don't know their math either. Well... they know math, but they don't know how to do this kind of math."*

*She's on geometry in school, but doesn't seem to understand the basics - less, it seems, because she doesn't know the answers at all and more because she is frustrated by math in general and it takes her longer than some of her peers to determine certain steps, so she presumes that she doesn't know or understand it. Early in our work together that afternoon, I say "you can reduce that," about the fraction  $30/-3$ , and she says "what? how?" I explain what it means to reduce, saying that you try to figure out if both the top and bottom can be divided by the same number and then you divide them each by that number. It took her a long moment and a bit more prodding, with questions like "what do they have in common?" for her to put the pieces together.*

*"Oh! Three!" She was excited and smiling as she figured out how to get it to  $10/-1$ . But when I said "and that's just ...?" leaving the door open for her to fill in the blank, she looked at me for a moment and then back at the problem, still not sure, her face falling. She eventually ventured, tentatively, that it was "ten," so I asked, "Ten?" She tried again with, "Negative ten?" "Exactly."*

*There was a similar challenge when she wanted to reach for a calculator to divide 42 by 6. I said, "No, you don't need a calculator for this," to which she had some semi-whined reply, but then she looked at it as I repeated the question aloud and she guessed, "Four?" I said, quiet but firm, "No, don't guess," which I often found myself saying with students working on both math and reading. "Think about it," I said slowly, "multiples of six." She said, "Well, 6 times 6 is 36 so... 7!" "Yes!" We both grinned.*

The vignette above illustrates multiple points of import - from the nudging, questioning, I-know-you-can-do-this style of interaction common between tutors and students to the role of



parents and the challenge of students working to build on cumulative knowledge that is often shaky. Maggie\* (not her real name) was in 8th grade and working hard to understand, but still failing her geometry class. Why? Because in addition to learning the entirely new and unusual vocabulary of geometry, its formulas and its practices of diagramming, she also struggled with foundational math skills from previous grades - multiplication, division, fractions, and negative numbers. This made it such that problems her teacher meant to only take 10-15 minutes might take her 30-60 minutes to complete correctly. Her efforts to catch-up weren't, and really couldn't be, managed within the standard school classroom, nor through repetition of the 8th grade material (which is what would be offered by the school system if she actually failed the class), and her parents, while wanting her to succeed, couldn't help her figure out how to do so. Through a mix of her own desire and her parents' efforts, she continued to come to BCIEP's afterschool program as much as she could and was one of the lucky few who could also arrange for some before and after school help from a math teacher. Even so, the path to passing that class and then to greater academic achievement was arduous for her and required *intensive intervention and assistance*, something schools are simply not well-equipped to provide for all struggling students, especially when other challenging circumstances (like transportation, teacher availability, and student-teacher tensions) are taken into account.

The story above does not exist in isolation. Many students came into after school and in-school tutoring sessions confused, struggling, or just academically disorganized, in need of assistance and encouragement, and BCIEP staff members and volunteers would help those students focus, get and stay organized, strengthen existing skills, and, more often than not, ultimately improve their grades, their self-confidence, and their pride in their own academic work and worth. When a student, especially one who, unlike Maggie\* above, only receives

tutoring through the program, beams a 100 watt smile at you from across the room as they wave their latest math quiz, which proudly bears a giant "A," you know you've found a program that makes not just a difference but a *big* difference. What BCIEP offers, along with academic help, is a space where staff and volunteers believe *every student is capable of succeeding* and where that belief is made manifest in every interaction with students through a combination of *patience and challenging expectations* - a fulfillment of the promises laid out in the social contract signed by all.

The schools are working hard to help these students too - I would never suggest otherwise, having seen and heard first-hand, the ways in which teachers, counselors, and administrators worked to support struggling American Indian students while I was a volunteer at a local middle school and an elementary school. In a climate where everyone in the school system was financially strapped and overloaded with more students and responsibilities than they could reasonably handle, and combined with individual students' complex personal circumstances, it was hard to facilitate the kind of intensive intervention and ongoing academic support that certain students required. Teachers who could make time for before or after school to meet with students individually or who offered tutorial sessions for a group on certain days, might find that the student most in need of assistance couldn't stay later or arrive earlier than a set time because of public transportation schedules or childcare responsibilities at home. Some students also just found themselves in interpersonal conflicts with certain teachers or classmates in ways that wouldn't improve with increased contact, so the need for external assistance was critical both to their academic achievement and for smoothing out classroom interactions, even if only temporarily while counselors and other specialists thought carefully about alternative approaches to the students' academic challenges. Other students needed less subject-intensive intervention

and more organization-oriented support and/or someone to keep them on task and to ensure that they were keeping up with their assignments, a role better suited to a tutor/mentor than a subject-focused teacher. Even school counselors recognized BCIEP's role in the system, one answered my question "what happens to students who don't qualify for this program?" with tired honesty: "They mostly just fall through the cracks."

## ADVOCACY AND SAFE SPACE

As part of its work to address academic achievement and related cultural needs, staff members of the Bay City Indian Education Program also provide educational advocacy services. In this way, BCIEP helps families navigate the school system, deal with problematic student-teacher interactions, fight for fairness and second chances in disciplinary conversations with administrators, and even help facilitate GED and college/scholarship application processes for students who are exiting or graduating from the school system. The priorities of *respect, safe space, listening, and great expectations* do not go away when students or families don't fit neatly into the school system's existing structures.

One moment reflecting this mindset particularly stands out. After a behavioral issue during school hours and on school property with a pair of male students who regularly walked the line between a little mischief and truly inappropriate behavior, a school administrator asked Ms. Noelle if she was going to kick the boys out of the program. The look on her face just recounting the story was full of shock. "No," she said slowly, "These are exactly the sort of students who need to be in the program." The idea of giving up on any students - *basically ever* - was nonsensical to her, but especially in the case of students who were most challenged by situations both at school and at home. Even when one of the two boys in question joined a gang and the director worried the other might be recruited, she still encouraged them to come to the

program, to participate in any cultural activities and events that interested them, and to continue to re/evaluate their behavior and their association with gangs and other problematic peers. No child is considered a lost cause in the Bay City Indian Education Program. Staff and volunteers are ever-prepared for the return of prodigal sons and daughters. Perhaps that perspective is not surprising at all, considering how many times people involved with the program say things like "we're family" or that everyone in the program is "like family," and how often the program staff refer to the students as "our kids."

The students understand the specialness of the program and its space as well, with one girl I interviewed saying, as her very first comment about the program, that "you know you can always go there and get help" and that "there's always someone there to help you." This was echoed by her mom whose first word about the program was rather emphatically "consistency," explaining that what this program offered most to participating students was consistency, a kind of security and evidenced belief that this was a program that was always open and welcoming to them, a place where staff and volunteers cared about them and not only wanted them to succeed, but would go out of their way to help that success happen.

Based on my observations and interactions with students often labeled by school staff as "troubled" or as having "behavior" or "anger management" issues, I also think there is some visceral experience and acknowledgment of the difference between institutional/official school spaces and BCIEP spaces because students I was told to be especially alert around, due to these supposed issues, almost never displayed any of these issues while working either with me or with other BCIEP volunteers, whether one-on-one in school settings or in the BCIEP's designated afterschool programs.

In fact, during my first year with the program, I saw a particular middle school male student regularly attend the afterschool program. He was quiet, rarely spoke and never raised his voice even when he did, often using the building/engineering toys when he didn't have or had already finished his homework. He only interacted with a few of the other students, an older or younger boy here and there, but there were never any altercations or even obvious misunderstandings. I never once saw either the staff or any volunteers have to pull him aside or call out his behavior. If I had been considering a list of some of our best behaved students, he would have been on it.

At the start the next year I was greeted with news that he'd switched schools and I would be tutoring him. It didn't concern me even a little and I was very sure that we would get along just fine. His counselor, though, made sure to speak with me about his "anger management issues" and put her hand on his file, which was seemingly thick with commentary about his behavior, his need for special supervision, perhaps even a contained classroom, etc. From her conversation, I honestly wasn't sure if we were talking about the same student, but apparently we were. The situation baffled me enough that I just asked the student outright, within a few weeks of our first tutoring session, about why he switched schools. He, rather mature and unruffled in a way that I had a hard time connecting with his reputation within the system, just calmly explained that he actually lived closest to this new school, but this one didn't have the special classroom they had originally thought he needed, and that he used to have anger management issues, but had grown out of them. I accepted his explanation and thanked him for sharing it with me, but I could not help wondering about that assessment. It left me with questions that only grew stronger after talking with BCIEP staff members who had worked with the boy for several years, and had little to no trouble with him either.

Did he really have innate anger management issues or was there something in the school environment that affected him so negatively that he really was like a different person in his classes than he was with BCIEP? Was there something built into the program itself that guarded against or even counteracted whatever led to the incidents that had marred his record and led to a file in the school system that painted him as some nearly wild child, someone from whom to expect erratic behavior and of whom to be wary? Maybe the file itself was part of the problem, baggage carried from grade to grade and never truly expunged? I wondered about this last piece because in BCIEP, while staff could access the files of students enrolled in the program and volunteers might do so through program staff or school counselors, those stacked official facts about students were only minor aspects of our interactions with students. We read over their work and helped them correct it, asked them questions about school and life, listened to their stories of home, coaxed out talk of their goals and dreams, and only referred to their files to determine what subjects or disciplinary situations might require our assistance the most. The students were always so much more than their accumulated files.

When that same student, with that thick of a file, who had done fairly well all year long, got suspended at some point late in my last year of volunteering, supposedly because he'd knocked over a jar of markers and refused to pick them up, I couldn't help but think back to BCIEP's promises of respect, safe space, listening, and great expectations. How might that scene - and its consequences - have played out differently in BCIEP space? Benefit of the doubt? Stepping into the quiet room to talk about what might have upset him? Letting him sit and breathe for a while? Giving him a craft to work on, something to do with his hands, that might help him refocus? The relentless bustle of schooling, combined with preconceived notions about who is likely to be "trouble," may simply not allow for as deep a check-in that some students

may need. BCIEP can and does offer that, can and does give them space to be seen for who they are in the moment and to have the complexity of their situations acknowledged, whether that's a rough day, an assignment they don't understand, a death in the family, or anything else. BCIEP staff and volunteers make time and make a commitment to support even those students whom other educational figures find most challenging, or even downright exhausting. Students can tell the difference, and it seems to *make a difference*.

The ethos and practices of the Bay City Indian Education Program also make a difference to parents and even to school administrators themselves. One parent told me in an interview that she explicitly prefers her daughter to make friends within the program and tries not to let her hang out too often with students who don't participate. Why? Because this mother considers the kids in the program to generally be a "good crowd" (as opposed to the "bad crowd" her daughter might fall in with otherwise). They're not perfect, of course, and she knows that, but they try to be respectful and nice and do their school work and not get into any real trouble, nothing criminal or dangerous or even just inappropriate. They spend two out of five school day afternoons with at the Turtle Shell and are often otherwise at one or another's houses, on a field trip with the program, or even volunteering at the request of program staff who encourage students to participate in charity events for neighboring nonprofits, historical re-enactments, nearby American Indian powwows and gatherings, and even just lively local parades.

The school system itself recognizes the kind of space and students BCIEP works to cultivate, allowing students who have been suspended to meet with their school-appointed tutor in program spaces, even when such students are not otherwise allowed on school property. This helps build an additional layer of accountability for those students, with staff and volunteers noting when they come and do not come (and when the tutor does and does not come) to their

pre-scheduled meetings. I would also note that this is one of the ways in which the kind of authority wielded within the BCIEP is most starkly set against other forms of authority. There was a bit of a joke, actually, when the director called out to a suspended student's retreating back as he headed towards another room to work with his tutor. "Pull your pants up," she said, because he had the waist of his jeans sitting quite low in some version of the modern urban fashion. He replied back, without looking over his shoulder, "Can't. I had hip surgery." Which was, of course, patently untrue. The director just replied, with a firm tone that still managed to hint at laughter, rather like a mother or grandmother: "That's great, but pull your pants up anyway." He said back, already on the verge of laughing himself, "I'm serious," but, of course, he did pull them up, letting a little smirk play along his lips. It was as if the point of the exchange was not really about trying to ensure his jeans hung as low as possible so much as that almost familial push-pull interaction, that demonstration of attention received and care taken, both firm and forgiving. This special arrangement, forged through BCIEP's advocacy for students being disciplined within the system, also creates and builds on existing connections between those students and the program itself and its staff and volunteers, letting them glimpse and sometimes even still participate in aspects of the program, and giving them activities and events to look forward to if they stay on track.

The result of this model of advocacy, compassionate authority, and welcoming safe space ensures that multiple levels of stakeholders see, feel, and believe in the commitment of BCIEP staff members and volunteers to support *all* American Indian students, *without exception*.<sup>3</sup> This

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<sup>3</sup> Wherein "all American Indian students" encompasses all students who qualify for the program. Depending on your definition, this may not adequately address the complexities of identity and its intersection with past and present political bureaucracy. In which case, there may be a few



cultivates a framework for participating students and families in which failure is neither inevitable nor permanent, and both progress and ultimate success are more than ideas, instead taking on the weight and heft of real possibility. Multiple alumni of the program have said, both in interviews and just in conversations with program staff, that they would not have graduated high school were it not for their involvement in the program, and more than one felt that, even beyond a high school diploma, they are in a much better social, psychological, spiritual, and economic situation because they participated in the program. These self-assessments are vital on their own, but they weren't made in a vacuum even within each alumna's own life. Often these alumni speak explicitly about how their life turned out in comparison with siblings or other family members who could have been more involved in the program but chose not to be, or peers who didn't have access to the program at all and therefore lacked the influence of its structure and values in their lives. In this way, one of BCIEP's most enduring legacies is the way it not only provided a springboard for many alumni to continue forward as college students and rising employees in local businesses, but also the way staff and volunteers fought for every student to have a pathway to success, even if that meant crafting something from scratch, so that students who committed themselves to the program could ultimately build lives they had not previously thought possible.

#### ALTERNATIVE/ADDITIONAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

It is important to keep in mind that the educational aspects of the program are not solely confined to the urgency of tutoring, with homework troubles, preparing for tests, writing papers, and developing projects that have imminent due dates. There is a stream of activities and

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exceptions - not because of what staff or volunteers want, but just because of who counts or doesn't to the federal bean counters.

resources within the program that have a seemingly much longer horizon for impact. At the Turtle Shell, there are multiple cabinets and shelves full of educational games and toys which include items most people would recognize, like jigsaw puzzles, but also more innovative educational creations, from pre-K level ways to fish for foam numbers and letters to single-player electronic math games with advanced options available at the push of a button, and from lively verbal recall games for teens to the quiet concentration and occasional squeak of surprise born from building/engineering toys that fascinate kids from first to eighth grade. These activities are not explicitly linked to a student's schoolwork, but they do provide additional intellectual conditioning, a workout for the mind (Goldstein 1994; Gredler 1996; Kamii & DeVries 1980; Roskos & Christie 2000). In some cases, that comes about through repetition, encountering the same math problem multiple times or the same word, concept, or geometric shape. Sometimes it comes through the enhancement of problem-solving skills, with students estimating how best to reposition some portion of their latest Rube Goldberg marble-delivery machine or deciding which move to make with their pieces in a strategy game. In still other situations, the game or toy content actually is in line with some element of the students' curriculum but may not become prominent until well after said students encounter that information through games and toys. This may especially be the case in terms of the science-focused activities, which teach students about the life cycle of a chicken egg/baby chicken, for instance, or the arduous but exciting process of excavating dinosaur bones.

It would be challenging to trace the long-term effects of this kind of play on BCIEP students specifically without an identical control group of students who didn't have access to any games or toys like that, but numerous studies suggest that games and toys of this nature have both immediate and long-term effects not only on the academic, but also the social-psychological

abilities of students (Goldstein 1994; Gredler 1996; Kamii & DeVries 1980; Roskos & Christie 2000). In many ways, even when all the homework is done or there is none to do, the afterschool program in particular (and sometimes an occasional in-school session as well, if a tutor is prepared) becomes something like a learning laboratory, with fresh ideas percolating, unusual questions arising, and new solutions sought.

These mind-expanding activities also include various other resources that are available through and supported by the Bay City Indian Education Program. There are arts and crafts supplies and writing materials. The past several years' worth of students were encouraged to start a journal, which stays at BCIEP, and are encouraged to write their thoughts, stories, poetry, whatever they want, and are sometimes offered a prompt to help them get going. This particular practice is most common with students who have either finished homework early or didn't have any homework, an explicit attempt to work on writing/literacy and communications skills, as well as to help maintain the overall focus of the program on academic pursuits, rather than as a place to play.

What is perhaps even more common than these freeform writing exercises is the use of worksheets to engage especially younger students in an even wider variety of intellectually stimulating game-like educational activities - whether as word searches, fill-in-the-blank stories about upcoming holidays, color-by-number sheets where you have to use math to figure out which color goes where, or any number of other handouts sourced by program staff from online. These are especially worthwhile when students are known to be struggling in a particular area in school but the school homework alone is not providing enough practice or review, and over the years, the program has collected a wide variety of fun handouts for elementary and middle school students, in particular. Through this mix of play and educational content, students

continue to learn and grow in a number of academic areas, regardless of whether they are focusing on school-specific challenges or just participating in the other everyday opportunities available through the program.

Among the resources most used by students in the program are two computers, internet access, sometimes an iPad shared by a staff member or volunteer, and numerous books in the ever-expanding library. While computer access is mostly restricted to students who need to do internet-based research, type up papers, or otherwise access or complete schoolwork, students with no other work to do are often strongly encouraged or, indeed, requested to read for a little while before jumping into the games and toys. The BCIEP library, while small in comparison with even an elementary school classroom, is a highly targeted collection with depth in certain key areas. A good portion of the works focus on the historical and contemporary experiences of Native Americans, their diverse geographically-influenced cultures, the dialects of their languages, etc., and the other large chunk of the library, set up in its own little reading nook, are the fun-oriented fiction and children's nonfiction, which students often pick up either when working with tutors on reading or when reading for pleasure. This diversity of options ensures that students can explore topics of interest at their own pace and access resources for school projects that may not be otherwise available (in school or public libraries), including CDs for listening to music and storytelling or DVDs for viewing feature-length documentaries and series on Native American history, spirituality, or arts.

Given that many students, when asked, have said they might choose to do something other than read during free time at home or at school, like play outside, hang out with friends, or watch TV, students at BCIEP read during downtime more than I might otherwise have expected. Sometimes they struggle, especially the youngest readers, and can become frustrated, even while

working with volunteers, but most students at least try to get some reading in while present at the program if they do not have other work to do (and sometimes even then). I believe this orientation toward reading is due in large part to three key elements: 1) access to reading assistance for struggling readers, 2) access to a wide variety of intriguing, cost-free books, and 3) the reading-focused incentive programs developed and run by BCIEP, which reward students in various ways for reading a significant amount, reading regularly, and reading different sorts of books.

### INCENTIVIZED READING PROGRAMS

There were three distinct incentive-based reading programs utilized during my two years volunteering with BCIEP, but the core aim remained the same. Supported by three separate small (under \$1500) grants from nongovernmental funders (e.g. Walmart, Build-a-Bear Foundation), the idea was to increase the amount of reading students did - whether in number of hours, pages, or books - and thereby improve students' reading skills as well as their interest in reading and confidence with it. The incentives themselves were also always very concrete and varied, not cash but toys, games, school supplies, books, media, and technology, though occasionally gift cards to local and online businesses were in the mix.

In my first year, the program was called the "Reading Tree Program", and the students who read earned points for the number of pages they read, their names going on construction paper cutouts of leaves for each pre-determined chunk of pages (e.g. 50 pages read). Those construction paper leaves were attached to the sprawling form of a tree that had been built from paper on the BCIEP wall, a tree I helped a few students design and build during my early time volunteering with the program. I recall, in particular, being assigned the task of drawing and cutting out a squirrel, for which my efforts were lauded and then affixed to the intricate tree. (It

would turn out later that the tree kept falling down, so it was moved to another wall and reconstructed by my next visit, but it still had the spirit of the original student-built tree, as well as my squirrel.) This provided a visual representation of student progress, which students, parents, volunteers, and staff all remarked on at various points throughout the first half of the school year while the reading program was operational. There were even some moments where it seemed to spur some element of friendly competition between students as they raced to put more leaves "on the board," so to speak.

During the Reading Tree program, students who earned enough points could then trade them in for prizes in a sort of prize marketplace with options like "a pillow pet, drawing sets, books, science kits, duct tape kits, origami kit, etc.," as a reminder pointed out on the BCIEP Facebook page. I also distinctly remember gift cards and certificates, because one student was very keen on earning the \$25 gift certificate to Amazon.com for instance, even if she took a little while to decide on what she actually wanted. In addition to being able to trade in points toward prizes, the leaves themselves (or their equivalents) were also put into the grand prize drawings after the program had ended and everything had been properly counted. Those prizes were more expensive and tended to be technology-focused, namely "a laptop computer, digital camera, Kindle Fire and iPod Touch." Both prize-oriented elements of the program garnered attention from students, and some from parents as well, but in discussing the program later, one staff member noted that some students only read just enough to earn the points needed for a specific prize and then were less interested in the process. This thinking led to two very different prize structures during the reading programs that followed, seemingly based on a desire to experiment to see which incentive process encouraged the most student participation.

It is also important to look at how those programs actually functioned in an everyday sense. Students, whether at home, during in-school tutoring sessions, or while at the afterschool program, could read any book they found interesting - alone or by reading aloud, taking turns with friends - and then record how many pages they'd read on "reading logs." Alternatively, if they had run out of room on one of those sheets or didn't have one available, they could write it out on a blank sheet of paper (lined or otherwise). The program staff just wanted to know the date, the title of the book (and the author, though this was sometimes overlooked), and the number of pages read. There was then an additional column for an adult's initials or signature, attesting to the fact that the student had read as stated in the rest of the information on that line. Once a page was full - or sometimes if a student wanted to make sure to get credit for points quickly or before a certain date - they would turn in their reading logs and the director would review them to add points to their record on her computer.

Usually the director preferred that they turn their reading logs in and then give her some time to go through them - Monday to Wednesday or Wednesday to Monday - but, depending on what else was going on, she might do the tallying when they turned them in or if they were especially excited to get a particular prize they thought they had enough points to "buy." Often at both the start of an afternoon session and the end of it, there would be a few students, especially young elementary school students, who would do an anxious-excited waiting dance as they stood around her desk or looked over the prizes, many of which were out on a table near the Reading Tree exhibit so students could look them over.

While many times these reading log submissions went smoothly, with logs stacked on other logs and then inputted into the system later for students who were "banking" toward prizes that "cost" more than they currently had "earned" in points, sometimes there were glitches.

Typically, these glitches came in the form of students turning in reading logs without adult signatures by their purported records of reading sessions or it seemed like the reading sessions were somehow fabricated or altered to earn them more points. In some of those instances, it was clear that a student had just misunderstood, forgotten, or something seemingly innocuous, but there were two or three students whose reading logs regularly came under scrutiny for being suspect. In all cases, these were students who evidenced tendencies toward manipulation at other points during their involvement with the program, even if it was subtle, like choosing books to read that were below their reading level, or something more blatant (though perhaps less obvious to people who did not know their individual situation) like lying about grades when such things were shared in the group. In this way, students were clearly positively incentivized to produce reading logs in order to garner prizes, even if a few of them tried to take advantage of the system by falsifying their reading records. Since few of these false documents passed muster, the lesson was that if you wanted to get prizes, you had to *actually* read.

The other two incentivized reading programs created by BCIEP learned from this earlier one and took on new dimensions. Book Bingo was structured with randomized bingo sheets that students could fill in by reading different sorts of books. Examples might include Native American history, science fiction, a book about food, a book about animals, and a mystery. Students were not only encouraged to read many books, but to try to read books that would fulfill strategic spaces so that they could get a Bingo and turn in another card. This was less about pages and more about exposure and exploration and non-cumulative monthly prize drawings, which meant that even if you didn't read a lot you could still win something if you read enough to get at least one bingo card in the box before the drawing - and if you did read a lot, your chances of being chosen went up rapidly with every bingo card you could complete. While this



structure seemed to create significant excitement among students, with at least a few rushing from one book back to the shelves to find the next genre or topic on their bingo book list, I observed more than one student reading books that were below his or her reading level as long as the book fit the bingo niche, so I'm not entirely sure if this was as productive a process as hoped.

The third iteration of the reading program I observed was called "Reading Adventures" and began with the installment of a massive foam art piece by a mother of one of the alumni. She was always the go-to person for decorating gatherings or creative fundraisers or, as in this case, big art pieces that were likely beyond the range of student capabilities. It was a huge, craggy mountainside made from foam, paint, and tissue paper, complete with colors and textures that seemed quite fitting, and as students filtered into the afterschool program, they were encouraged to take a template of climber, a piece of construction paper, and then draw and cut out the outline of their very own climber. Each climber was then given a flag designated with the student's name and they were affixed to the bottom of the mountain, prepared to scale the cliffs one page at a time. The Reading Adventures model went back somewhat to the Reading Tree structure, with students tracking the number of pages they read instead of the variety of books (like in Book Bingo). The difference, however, was that a different set of prizes opened at each tier of accumulated pages, so students weren't just working toward some personal high point so they could "buy" the prize they wanted with their "points" (i.e. pages). If they wanted certain prizes they had to keep up with objective monthly goals so that they and their climber were on the right tier when prize-drawing time came around.

I initially worried that this would become discouraging for some of the students who struggled with reading, but the nature of the prizes inspired several unexpected students to push themselves more than I thought they would. Unlike previous years, the prizes for Reading

Adventures weren't toys or games, electronics or books, but experiences - baseball tickets for the whole family, an overnight stay at a resort up north, a bowling party for the student and ten friends, two hours going anywhere in a limousine, a day pass for the family to a water park, etc. The kids went wild for it, with many setting their eyes on one adventure in particular and doggedly ensuring that they were in every drawing until they got it or something equally exciting. The fact that the director decided to have a final bonus drawing for everyone who participated regardless of their tier at completion also helped, allowing some of the students who had fallen a bit behind to still have a bit of hope and excitement in the end too. One of them even won an entire work of art made out of candy and he could be found carrying around his prize at the Spring Gathering, beaming like he had won the real lottery. Consequently, with the exception of incentives as a basic concept, the only thing these reading programs had in common was the accountability mechanism of before and after testing that BCIEP used to help make the case for such programs to their external and federal funders.

#### Pre- and Post-Testing for the Reading Program

The reading test in use at BCIEP was the Slosson Oral Reading Test (Sort-R) by Richard L. Slosson, which asks students to read aloud from multiple lists of words, one at a time, allowing them to skip words that give them trouble. When testing students, the general practice at BCIEP was to start at a list 2-3 levels down from wherever the tester thought the student might be, which meant that the testers needed to have some basic sense of the student's reading skills. There was also a built-in buffer in case the testers were less accurate than expected when guessing the student's level. This also typically allowed students to become somewhat comfortable with the process before advancing into levels where they might have less fluency with or comprehension of the words they were reading. The other standard practice was to cover

up the higher level lists so that students didn't pre-read or otherwise prepare for the next list while reading the current one.

Students approached the test in a variety of ways, with a few students rushing through with apathy, a few students rushing through like race car drivers determined to prove something, most students treating it casually (but with respect), and some students taking it fairly seriously (sometimes having interest in their results), and almost no one seemed visibly stressed, as if it was a major test in school. Perhaps this was in part because both staff and volunteers repeatedly stressed that it wasn't for a grade and that we just wanted to see where they were in their reading so that they could officially join the reading program. Since the reading program every year included some form of incentive for students to read more and to read different sorts of materials, almost all students wanted to be involved in the reading program in order to have a chance to win or earn points toward prizes.

As students read down the list of words, the person administering the test would mark a shielded copy of the test, noting any word the student struggled with or skipped entirely. If a student stumbled over more than three words, the test administrator would typically let them finish that list (unless it seemed to only lead to frustration) and end the test there. Often that was followed by offering some supportive words by thanking the student and/or telling them that they did well, and then asking them to send in the next student. Their reading levels were calculated based on a combination of how many errors a student made while reading each list as well as the top level of word list the student attempted. According to conversations with the director and the instructions for the Slosson test, when a student struggled with three or more words in a list it suggested that that equivalent grade level was the student's learning level. A student beginning

fourth grade, for instance, should be able to navigate List #3 with two or fewer errors, but may struggle more (3+ errors) with List #4.

In terms of its ability to affirm and reveal who is struggling most, who is keeping up, and who is truly excelling in reading, this test seems effective within the context of the program. I did have a few concerns during the three rounds of testing I partially proctored (Spring 2013, Fall 2013, Spring 2014). My first concern was the oral nature of the test. As a heavy reader from a family of readers, I know quite personally how one can read and even understand a word, but not know how to pronounce it aloud and a part of me worried about a certain bias against students who primarily engaged with language through silent reading rather than reading aloud or in conversations. I also worried that some students might have seen or heard words, but would not be able to understand those words in context. For those reasons, I might have, just as an example, suggested a follow-up question on what certain words meant - whether the student stumbled on them or not, perhaps choosing five out of twenty of the words on every list to ask about. Scholarly critiques of Slosson's test raise similar concerns, with some noting that compared to benchmark and assessment systems that test reading more comprehensively students are more likely to score somewhat higher on Slosson since phonetic awareness and fluency often precedes semantic knowledge and skills (Heinemann 2012). Ultimately, since the main point of the test was to show growth over time more so than strict comparisons with students' grade levels, it was accurate enough to provide needed insights.

I was only able to dig into a single year's worth of data from the test, but it revealed a few interesting things that I wrote about in a report for the program (Jenkins 2014), which I will briefly summarize. At the start of the 2013-2014 school year, students' reading scores varied wildly with no grade-level related pattern. Some high school students were right on track while

some were as much as four grade levels behind. Some middle school students were a grade or two behind while others were right where they needed to be. Likewise, some elementary school students were a grade or two behind while others were even a grade or two ahead.

Approximately half of the tested students (48.3%) scored below grade level while the other half (51.7%) scored at or above grade level.

There were a few notable trends in the data and one pattern that stood out immediately was the *size of the gap* between students' scores and the grade level in which they were enrolled. Based on my calculations, 85.7% of students who initially scored below grade level were *more than one grade level* behind and more than half of those students (46.4% of all students in the "below grade level" category) were more than two grade levels behind. An astonishing 21.4% of that group was three or more grade levels behind in reading. Of the students who scored at or above grade level, half (50%) were at grade level or within rounding error range above it (e.g. a grade level score of 3.4 or less for a 3rd grader). The other half (50%) of students scoring at or above grade level, often scored significantly higher than required by their grade level with 66.7% testing more than one and a half grade levels ahead (e.g. 5.5 or higher for a 4th grader) and 26.7% testing more than three grade levels ahead (e.g. 8 or higher for a 5th grader).

These were just the statistics for the initial, start-of-the-year scores, however. In order to understand the impact of the reading program as a facet of BCIEP - and within the context of other literacy programs – it is important to understand these scores in relation to end-of-year scores. By the end of the year, even students in the "below grade level" group initially had improved their score by at least one grade level. This is what would likely be expected (though not necessarily brought into fruition) just by virtue of their participation in school, but students who actively participated in the reading program - by not only reading but also documenting

their reading and having it verified by an adult - were more likely to improve their reading scores and their reading grade level during the course of the program than non-participating students. This suggests that, despite schools' best efforts, students would actually fall behind if their literacy activities weren't buttressed by this program. Participating students also saw larger improvements than non-participating students in both their reading scores and their reading grade level. This trend remained applicable whether students initially tested below their grade level or at and above it. What this suggests is that the incentivized reading program propels *both struggling students and those already doing well* to not only read more than they would otherwise, but to also improve their reading skills through this conscientious increase in reading activity.

In fact, students who read more than a thousand (1000) pages during the course of the reading program (i.e. high-volume readers) improved their scores significantly, with students who initially tested below grade level improving even more than students who were already at or above grade level. In both the "below grade level" and the "at or above grade level" categories, high-volume readers improved their scores by an average of one and a half (1.5) grade levels. This level of progress is on par with other lauded literacy programs, such as those run by the Family Learning Institute in Ann Arbor and various others programs found around the country, many of which have notably more structure for students and training for volunteers (FLI 2012; Little, Wimer, & Weiss 2008). In this sense, BCIEP, perhaps in part through its leveraging of incentives and innovative point-based models, has found a way to ensure student excitement and productive engagement even with a rather freeform reading program.

With that additional half grade worth of progress in mind, if a student was one grade level behind, participation solely in a program like this (which provides assistance 8-9 months

out of each year) would likely mean they could catch up within two years. If a student was two grades behind, however, a program like this might take as many as four years to bring them up to speed with their peers. By that time, many students have become frustrated, have struggled in a wide variety of courses and topics, and may not have the hope or drive to become more academically successful. For this reason, in part, I find the commonplace rhetoric of "student motivation," especially intrinsic motivation, to be highly problematic and, in many ways, highly detrimental to students facing the biggest challenges to their academic success, both short and long-term. The fact that the Bay City Indian Education Program employs none of this rhetoric is both refreshing and suggestive of their deep understanding of students' real needs, which is not just a *shift of mindset*, but the adoption of an *enhanced skill set* so that they feel more confident and comfortable in academic situations. Their reading program strongly aligns with that philosophy, enhancing students' association between reading and good things, as well as their exposure to the written word and diverse texts that both fit within students' comfort zones and challenge them.

## CULTURAL ACTIVITIES AND EDUCATIONAL ADVENTURES

Beyond tutoring, advocacy, and the reading program, additional learning opportunities abound, including field trips, conferences, gatherings, and culture and language classes, almost all of which have both a strong cultural focus and academic interest. It is important to acknowledge that any divide between studying culture and other forms of educational pursuits is an arbitrary and, really, imaginary one, both in the case of this program and in a broader sense. As I pointed out previously, BCIEP infuses its approach to educational support with (at least vaguely referentially Indigenous) values like respect and listening to others, and its culture-focused activities are no less fundamentally steeped in those same elements.

The amount of history and natural science learned through trips to places like the Grand Rapids Public Museum, the Seventh Generation Cultural Center, and the Sanilac Petroglyphs is significant. Students often receive handouts with information, read placards at exhibits, and listen to cultural teachers who can explain everything from the symbolism of ancient writing to the way the geography of the area has shifted over time, with river banks in slightly different places and fire altering the woodlands. When speakers come, they speak about such topics as how traditions of dance get passed from grandfather to grandson in the present, as well as how and why the forced assimilation found in American Indian boarding schools from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s have affected multiple generations and nearly all tribes. Out of town conferences allow high school students who have earned enough volunteer service points with the program the opportunity to not only discuss American Indian culture and meet like-identified peers, but to also visit college campuses and consider what their next steps in life might look like.

There is also something to be said for the ways in which both language and craft-oriented culture classes present students - and interested family members - not only with a way to connect with American Indian cultures, but also with alternative ways of viewing and interacting with the world: ways to arrange linguistic elements differently than in English, strategy games you can make from scratch with minimal materials, the idea that every craft piece is supposed to have at least one mistake because none of us are perfect and that is as it should be, etc. These are not only cultural lessons; they are life lessons that help students build a kind of intellectual elasticity so that they might approach everything, including their schoolwork, with more openness to new ideas, more ingenuity in problem-solving, and more resiliency in accepting and forgiving their own faults and those of others. To accept that some of what BCIEP does is about education and



some of what it does is about culture would be to accept as separate what is actually a Venn diagram with substantial overlap. Culture and education are interrelated and interdependent aspects of this program and its successes. Consequently, it is important that we examine the cultural and identity-focused elements of the program before examining the ways in which the program might be interpreted as successful or not - as well as *alternative* or not - and by whom.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CULTURE AND IDENTITY

### INTRODUCTIONS TO IDENTITY?

*"How many of you are Native American?"* The students had finally settled into the audience seating section of the room at the cultural center, many of them, especially the youngest, sitting on the floor while some of the older students sat with the adult chaperones on chairs behind them. At the question, most present raised their hands, some more quickly than others. Ms. Noelle stepped in, though, clarifying easily that they were "all Native students." The person serving as a kind of host for us at the cultural center nodded, unsurprised, but the presence of the question itself stayed in my mind. It became all the more prominent in my memory when, upon a later review of my notes, I realized that I had overheard a conversation the director had with another volunteer just the week before about how this cultural center was going to do a totally different set of teachings than they usually did because this wouldn't be a "mixed group," but would be all Native students.

Was there something about the composition - look or otherwise - of our group of students, parents, volunteers, and staff that inspired doubt? Was the question more meant to spark something in the students, to prime them to connect with the lessons to come? I cannot say for certain what the employee at the cultural center was thinking when she asked this question, but the somewhat variable answer nudged at a thread of thematic tension that seemed to run through my notes, sometimes fragile enough to make me uncertain, but present nonetheless. Namely, how did Indigenous identity *work* within this context? How was it constituted and how was it intertwined with students' academic success and personal growth? What did it mean to be "Native American" or "Indian" in a program where students were sometimes only just beginning to learn "what Indians do," as one young student put it? And how could you predicate a program

to address the cultural or culturally-related needs of students still in the process of discovering and deciphering their connection with that culture?

After spending two years volunteering with the Bay Center Indian Education Program, in a city with two key constraints - small enough not to support a dedicated American Indian cultural/community center and geographically distant enough from Indigenous tribal territory for students not to have regular access to other major cultural activities - I posit that what I refer to as “sustainable, successful identities” are the core project of this sort of program and that the cultural elements of the program provide positive building blocks (or, as I'll discuss later, recipes and ingredients) with which students can craft those sustainable and successful identities. This process of developing and shaping identities within and through both the cultural and academic aspects of the program is not without moments of tension or rupture, particularly when students encounter the world outside the program or bring the world outside into the program via reference, but those moments also reveal the challenges faced by program staff and volunteers working to navigate the complex waters of culture and identity, even with students' best interests in mind. What follows is my attempt to show some of the ways in which culture and identity-related practices flow through the program, affecting stakeholders in sometimes unexpected ways.

#### DECIDING TO IDENTIFY WITH/FOR THE PROGRAM

Beginning at the beginning for any participant, there is something to note about program entry, because it involves the active claim - on the part of the guardians of a student, if not the students themselves - to a certain sense of Indigenous identity, culture, and belonging. Each year the BCIEP puts on open houses at each of the public schools for parents who are considering enrolling their child in the following year's kindergarten class and each year, Ms. Noelle and the

assistant (or two volunteers) attend the open houses with a trifold poster or two on Indigenous cultures and the program itself, as well as a laptop to show off pictures from various years' worth of the program, and they sit and answer any questions parents might have, sometimes handing out flyers or application forms. As a volunteer who sat through one of those open houses, I recall the way most parents looked at the posters, the information, and us behind the table. Many, if not most, were interested, curious about Indigenous cultures, but, when asked, most said they weren't Native American. "What about a grandparent?" No, not that either.

The guardians of students in this program first have to vault the same question, saying "yes" to the idea that their child fits the program's definition of "American Indian," which means that the child, a parent, or at least one grandparent is a member of a federally recognized tribe.<sup>1</sup> What is interesting about this moment of claiming is that there are students who are part of the program who are not designated as "American Indian" within the demographic data of the school system, and there are students marked as "American Indian" within the school system whose guardians never enroll them in the program. There is clearly something about the program itself

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note, here, that this particular method of determining, in an "official" sense, who is "Indian enough" to qualify for the program is deeply rooted in the problematic federal structures under which Indigenous nations are "dependent wards" and only receive recognition as valid tribes based on criteria set by the United States government. Consequently, there are occasionally complications when a student arrives who, say, traces their heritage back to a tribe that is only state-recognized. We even had one student who was Indigenous but from a Mexican Indigenous group and her application was complicated both by a lack of recognition for non-U.S.-based indigeneity, as well as concerns about the cross-border legal standing of certain of her grandparents and whether or not an audit of program records would endanger her family. Assimilationist adoption practices might also be relevant here as many Indigenous youth have been adopted into White families over the years, often with little to no verifiable documentation about their tribe of origin and/or their ability to become members thereof. Because these cases are so rare, however, there is little talk about the ways in which this application process might be exclusionary and whether that matters (and to whom) with regard to program functioning and its connection to the diverse local Indigenous community.

that both pulls some people into picking up an identity category they might not otherwise have taken up and yet, at the same time, does not draw interest uniformly.<sup>2</sup>

What is especially interesting about this identity claiming process is that it is not only uneven between families, but also *within* families with certain siblings identifying and participating more with the program and their Indigenous ancestry than others, often leading to very different life outcomes. One parent that I interviewed spoke about the way the program had intersected differently with the lives of her five children, the eldest joining the program midway through elementary school, but never really connecting deeply with the program, while her middle child took it up wholeheartedly, forming a bond with her peers so strong that even to this day they are all some of the best of friends. That same parent early on brought a literal baby in a handcart to the program and that child, the youngest among the siblings, all but grew up in the program, forming friendships much like her older sister did and attending regularly, even as the brother between them stopped attending fairly quickly when given a choice. When I asked this parent why she thought the program had affected her children in these diverse ways, she thought about it but ultimately was not sure. Maybe the eldest had been too old when first introduced to

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<sup>2</sup> As a note on some of the consequences of this dual (or perhaps dueling) conceptualization of self/identity happening within some of the families in this school system, the fact that not all program participants marked "American Indian/Native American" as an ethnic or racial category during school enrollment generally means that it is often a tedious process to find their data within the school system's data storage programs. Program staff regularly spend time trying to track and mark and maintain an accurate list of participating students, but the school system's database makes that a logistically challenging process. Likewise, the lack of that broader marker of identity means that there may be many other families who enter the school system, especially after kindergarten, who never receive information about the program but have children who would qualify and might benefit from the program. And, of course, it is always a wonder why families who *do* note that their children are "American Indian/Native American" to the school system in general might regularly resist enrolling their children in the explicitly free Title VII program. An entire research project could be developed just on working to understand how, when, and why families are choosing to take up or apply these identity labels and, relatedly, choosing to enroll or not in Title VII programs.

the program? Maybe the youngest growing up in the space meant familiarity bred a sense of comfort and safety? But then what about the children in between? Two uninterested and one who discovered, through the program, not only a family-like social circle, but also a love of dance (Indigenous and otherwise), something she continues to study to this day as she works on her college degree.

In this sense, it is important to understand that identity, developing in this context, is fractious - unruly, unpredictable, and uneven - not necessarily dividing families, but creating families that (or just highlighting the ways in which some families) seem to straddle cultural lines. One participant can graduate with a speech in which they say they are a "proud Cherokee woman," living a life that includes regular powwow dancing and returning to volunteer in the Indian Education program. Yet, for the siblings of that individual, those who faded out of the program at one point or another, the Indigenous facet of their identity may be set aside and rarely discussed.

Even the family of the director, herself, evidences the ways in which encounters with the program can create moments of tectonic shift within families, with respect to identity. Her own mother, so deeply affected by boarding schools and anti-Indigenous discrimination didn't actively identify as American Indian/Native American, despite being "card-carrying," so it was something Ms. Noelle grew up knowing about herself, but not in an active way. She described it as something that "always seemed to be there at the back of [her] mind," but it was only once she'd been offered the job with Title VII that she began to delve more deeply into her own cultural heritage, in part inspired by and in part supported by the program. Since, by then, she was already a grandmother a few times over, she had largely raised children for whom Indigenous identity and culture was just "not their thing," neither a substantial part of their lives

nor of their self-concept. When their kids/the director's grandkids became eligible to join the program, however, some did so enthusiastically. This leads to a fascinating hill and valley situation in terms of the uptake of Indigenous identity across generations, such that in gatherings for the women's drum group, for example, it is a grandmother and her two granddaughters who commune through that shared cultural activity. When she promised to hand make them each a rattle and a drum if they participated regularly, while the rest of the family was generally supportive, the weight of the meaning carried by all her hours of beading and the strength it took her elderly hands to stretch the hide over the drum form? That seemed to be shared most profoundly between the two generations who had decided this aspect of their identity is especially important to them, a process that was - and continues to be - facilitated by BCIEP in a way that would not have been available otherwise.

It is this dynamic and sometimes unusual unevenness that I think BCIEP manages well. There is no presumption that students come to the program with any specific collection of cultural or identity-oriented understandings already in place. Instead, it effectively opens the doors to a wide variety of opportunities through which students can discover for themselves different aspects of various Indigenous cultures, determining what values, philosophies, histories, practices, and skills mean something to *them*. In this sense, I believe that the program is enacting a very contemporary and even future-focused approach to culture and identity, aligning in part with Gerald Vizenor's (1998, 15) concept of "survivance," which conceives of Indigenous survival in part through a willingness to adapt and stand as an "active presence" within spaces of modernity or postmodernity as well as with Scott Richard Lyons' (2010, 80) theory that Indigenous identity is more about "doing" than "being" *without* the need to make that "doing" fit

within the rigid parameters of an essentialist traditionalism that denies the diverse ways that one can “do cultural things.”

## PROGRAM-PRACTICED VALUES

As previously discussed, the "contract" that students are asked to sign when they start attending the afterschool program creates an understanding that students should expect program staff and volunteers to uphold the following values: respect (for self and others), providing safe space, integrity, really listening, high expectations for students, giving 100% in all activities, and supporting fun. Other values surface along the way as staff and volunteers interact with students, but many - compassion, fairness, forgiveness, persistence/never giving up, etc. - can largely be boiled back down to those core written values. Although there were no official documents within the program explicitly tying any of these values to specific Indigenous cultures or even Indigenous lifeways in a broader sense, there were several moments when program staff and volunteers would point to "respect" in particular as a value with strong cultural roots, followed closely by "listening." One of the ways these values surfaced most prominently was through the weekly talking circle.

Each Wednesday, for half an hour between the end of the afterschool tutoring session and the start of the evening activity, staff and volunteers would round up all students and any arriving parents or other family members to go into the program's secondary space where we would form a circle with chairs and the singular couch and patiently wait our turn to speak. The specific origins of the talking circle and the talking stick concept were not discussed during my time volunteering with the program, but a general explanation was sometimes offered for new students and visitors noted that the talking circle was a way for Native people to gather, to share what was on their minds (good and bad), and to really listen to one another. The stress was



always on the fact that the person with the talking stick had the floor and was to receive everyone's focus until they passed along the talking stick. While total silence wasn't enforced, reactions were typically quiet, brief, and supportive or were answers to questions the speaker asked (answers usually offered by an authority figure in the room). The main exception to that kind of reply was a round of clapping and calls of praise that happened when someone in the circle achieved something really positive, like getting a good grade on a test or passing a class they'd been worried about failing or finding out that they'd won an award or finally found a new job.

As safe spaces went, if one could measure the sense of safety by how much people seemed willing to share both their successes and setbacks, the talking circle seemed to be a space of real comfort. When it came to respect and really listening, there were very few - less than a handful, I'd say - of incidences where Ms. Noelle or another volunteer had to actively refocus the students back to the talking circle. The students largely understood what it was for and treated the space with due seriousness, even when they were especially excited to share something. One of the most memorable moments of this notion of respect and listening wasn't just meant to apply directionally from youth to elders was the case of the young granddaughter of one of the program moms and regular volunteers:

*Mia,<sup>3</sup> a visiting two-year-old, held the talking stick, given to her by her raven-haired grandmother, and blinked wide eyes at the quiet circle of people looking back at her. Most of us smiled, several clearly on the verge of laughter because she was incredibly adorable and seemed very intent on understanding this new power she seemed to wield even before she opened her mouth. "Did you have anything to say Mia? Something you learned in school today?" Her grandmother nudged her verbally, but made no move to reach for the stick. Mia didn't really go to school yet, but she had been visiting the afterschool sessions of the Indian Ed program for a little while and really enjoyed all the educational toys and games, not to mention getting to hang out with the big kids. So when she said she wanted*

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<sup>3</sup> Not her name. Changed for protection of her identity.

*to go to "school" she meant Indian Ed. Mia nodded and then just... started talking. It wasn't quite any version of English the rest of us could understand, her shift from baby talk to big girl speech not quite complete, especially at such a high speed. But we all watched and listened and nodded when that seemed right and offered encouragement when she seemed to be seeking some reply. She stopped in full, once or twice, and the director and her grandmother asked if she was done, but then she started talking again. And we listened. She did, as little children sometimes do, keep the stick for a little longer than most of the adults would have considered strictly polite, but no one worried about that, no one chided or bothered her for it. We listened to her stories, trying to decipher them or at least to look supportive while she spoke. Then we waited patiently until she answered affirmatively that she was done, even though we hadn't fully understood all of her words, and we let her pass the stick to the next person.*

The power of these values at work was found in everyday moments, but also in more extraordinary moments like this, when a two-year-old could command the attention of a room not by any misbehavior or strange secret talent, but just because the agreements of that space say she is due as much respect in that moment as any elder and she has every right to share her story and be heard.

These values are woven into most aspects of the program, sometimes more obviously than others, but I would say that what some alumni have called the "right path" presented by the program is very much about helping students focus on the right sorts of things, such as being in the right relationship with other people and the world around them via respect and listening, for example, and on being in the right relationship with themselves through personal integrity and working to live up to high expectations, academic and otherwise. It is also imperative to note that these weren't just values espoused by the program, but also by the program's staff and volunteers as well as the very structure of the program itself. The program, with sessions at regular intervals, in predictable patterns of focus on academics and cultural activities, are meant to support all stakeholders in upholding these values and manifesting them in the world, so students were never to be left to flounder.

When an alumna I interviewed about the program explained its impact in her life, she had this to say:

*I feel like if I had not been in this program, I would not have graduated. My older sisters - I have two older sisters, one of them is 23 and one is 26-27 - both of them are high school dropouts, both of them had children at the age of 18, and I feel like if I had not been in this program, to guide me down a better road, then I would be where they are, honestly. Because I just see that rippling down, because my mom dropped out of high school and she was 18 and pregnant and she went back to school and got her diploma or GED or whatever and that's exactly what both of them did. They had to drop out because they got pregnant and my older sister, she was I think 16 or 17 and she ran away, got into a lot of trouble and came back with a felony. And I feel like if I had not had this program in my life, to guide me to good people, to a better life, to staying out of trouble, a safe place, then I would be in the same position they were in. I don't think I would have graduated. I mean, I always knew if I needed help I could come here. And my sisters didn't have that kind of outreach where they could go and be safe and get help with whatever they needed.*

In fact, multiple alumni felt like they made better choices about their lives because they had been involved in this program, encountering within it a *values system* as well as a support system that would stand them in good stead going forward. Maybe they weren't professionals making six figures nor even on that path, but they lived largely safe, stable lives with jobs, apartments, and sometimes college classes - and they could all point to family members or peers almost within arm's length of them, who they felt they had done better than. Their depth of involvement in the program had ensured a life for them that others couldn't access because they either couldn't participate in the program or had just never committed to showing up regularly enough to really feel the impact of the program.

One of the natural questions then might be what other programs, groups, or activities might draw students away from this program and, unfortunately, in this largely post-industrial urban environment, there are few positive options available. When I asked counselors about additional programs I could refer students to, I was shocked to find that

they had no ideas in a moment when I was expected to receive a list of community-based afterschool or weekend programs that I could encourage students to attend. The story of the alumnus above is chillingly common in a way. With the exception of students who join extracurricular teams, particularly school sports or music groups, some portion of the students who fall out of touch with the program every year seemingly do so in part by becoming involved in forms juvenile delinquency or with local gangs. Program staffers are very clear with these students that they are always welcome back – they can't wear their gang colors in BCIEP space or use arts and crafts to make gang color-related adornments – but they are always welcome to continue to participate in any aspect of the program they would like to attend. While this open-armed stance did not bear much obvious fruit during my time in the field, it certainly did not seem to do any harm either, and I cannot help but feel some level of both hope and confidence that the program's track record of compassionate and respectful presence and support will mean that that the currently gang-oriented students who want to make a change in their lives at some point down the road will believe in the sincerity of Ms. Noelle's words, so they can "come back."

## CULTURAL OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to the weekly talking circle, other key cultural elements of the program include drum circles (one each for men and women), craft skills or cultural knowledge classes, and language classes on a largely monthly cycle. On top of those options, there would usually be a Fall and Spring Gathering, the occasional speaker, and several field trips. While students were always welcome and encouraged to take full advantage of the program's eclectic library, featuring both fiction and nonfiction of relevance to Indigenous issues, histories, cultures, and

arts, it was typically through these more interactive pursuits that students engaged most with culture, in an explicit sense.

To give readers a sense of what those cultural activities looked like on the ground, men's and women's drum circles largely focused on Ojibwe language songs and those using related vocables, the language classes (when available) were focused on the Ojibwe language, and, while the craft classes explored activities as varied as painting feathers, fingerweaving, creating rainsticks,<sup>4</sup> and building Konane<sup>5</sup> game sets from around-the-house resources like cardboard and beans, when it came to discussing cultural knowledge, that also tended to skew in an Anishinaabe direction (e.g. Medicine Wheel teachings). It reminded me rather significantly of research I had done some years before on Indigenous charter and independent schools. One of the questions that inevitably arose, understanding the likely diversity of Indigenous peoples in an urban setting: "Whose culture (is most prominent)?" In the case of my previous research, the trend strongly seemed to be toward the cultural roots of the school's director, Ms. Noelle - and that certainly might be the case in a small, urban Title VII context as well. Given only so much funding and only so many other resources, it is likely perfectly natural to teach what you yourself know. Or, even if you are attempting to address the needs of the largest concentration of culturally-similar students, what kind of flexibility and support is offered for students who fall outside that spectrum?

I would posit that while there is still room for improvement on the challenge of diversity, there are a number of opportunities through which all students can and do harness a spark of

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<sup>4</sup> Rainsticks, which the director admitted later to me privately were originally more African than American Indian, but still fun to make and learn about.

<sup>5</sup> Konane is a Native Hawaiian strategy game typically played with stones in a wooden board. Not so dissimilar from Checkers or Go.

interest or connection to build on their own cultural understandings with support within the program. For one, there is a lot of room for students to do research into any aspect of Native culture or history that interests them and students regularly ask program staff to help them find books in the program's library to help them write reports for school or just to read for their own interest. Two, while the core non-English language - for both speech and song - being learned is Ojibwe, no one is excluded from attending and that may, in fact, trigger interest in exploring the languages of other Indigenous groups, not to mention exposing students to alternative ways of thinking as linguistic elements are arranged differently in English and Ojibwe with notable patterns emerging over time as one learns more words. Three, the speakers (no matter who) and the field trips (no matter where) provide students with a wide range of new perspectives - about nature, history, science, arts, crafts, careers, plants, animals, even activities like fishing which can be used both for sustenance and recreation - all embedded within cultural frameworks that provide counterstories and alternatives to some of what students might have heard about in school or through popular media sources. Even if these are perhaps not identifiably Sioux or Diné or Seminole in essence, they present stepping stones away from mainstream thinking into worlds of thought that might not otherwise be accessible to students in this context without the program. The worth of these kinds of programs can therefore not solely be stripped down to a question of a one-to-one matchup between students' specific tribal cultures and those examined explicitly by the program. The kind of elasticity of mind these cultural opportunities provide allows students from diverse tribal heritages to benefit either way.

## IDENTITY AND CULTURE IN COMMUNITY

*A girl with fair skin, freckles and long straight light brown hair recounted to me a story about visiting Disney World. She smiled as she spoke, but there was frustration in her voice. She and her sister had gone into a place where they dressed the girls as Disney princesses, which was exciting, but they turned her*

*sister into Pocahontas and dressed her as Belle from Beauty and the Beast. "I wanted to be Pocahontas too," she said with an emphatically flung hand and eyes holding mine so intently that I could only nod, fully supporting her annoyance.*

*Her sister had the darker coloring, though, she explained, and the darker hair. She assumed that I knew what that meant, and I suppose I did, that her sister looked more like the images and imaginings that most people associate with Native Americans. The student understood, and said so, as if moments of misrecognition were just a part of life, but she also said she didn't like it, didn't think it was fair, that they just assumed she wouldn't want to be Pocahontas or whatever they'd assumed to make Belle seem the better choice for her.*

*She didn't have to tell me "I'm just as Indian as she is," because she trusted me to understand and I did.*

In my entire two years with the program, I never heard a single person ask anyone else "how much" American Indian they were or how much "Indian blood" they had. Not once. In fact, the only two times the issue came up at all was in reference to people outside the program either questioning someone who was present or questioning someone in the media (e.g. Scott Brown vs. Elizabeth Warren). Through BCIEP, this student, whom Disney employees understood as little as they likely understood the real Pocahontas, found a place to be seen and understood as the American Indian girl she sees herself as, a place where she just *is Indian* and doesn't have to define it, defend it, explain it, or perform it for someone else to believe it and respect that part of who she is. And, at the same time, it is also a place where she can still safely *learn (more) about what being American Indian means*. Her identity may be in-development, like her knowledge of and connection with her culture, but the process and its outcome are much more in her hands, with her explorations and self-selections well-supported, because of this program.

This turned out to be similarly the case around issues (or lack thereof) related to colorism or concerns around phenotype. While one of the darker-skinned male students in the program who was regularly playing the jokester/trickster archetype to the hilt, could audaciously say "why you always gotta be down on the Black man?" in reference to himself, the comment could

only be funny in the context of the program exactly because no one was paying any attention to his color and were, instead, “calling him out” for his disruptive, if largely playful, behavior. The looks of students in the program ranges from deep brown skin with dark eyes to blond hair and blue eyes, and from cream-in-coffee toned skin with kinky light brown hair to olive-toned skin with straight black hair. There is literally a whole rainbow of colors and a similar diversity of facial features, hair textures, heights, body shapes, postures, manners, and ways of moving, and at no time did I hear any student or adult say or suggest that anyone “looked” or “seemed” more Indian than anyone else. It was simply not a topic of conversation. Everyone present was accepted as they were and anyone officially enrolled in the program was accepted as Indian, period. No other questions about that were apparently necessary.

The Bay City Indian Education Program, perhaps because of this largely unmitigated inclusiveness, serves as a conduit for students and their families and friendly community members to have local access to relevant cultural and historical resources, along with support structures, like the weekly talking circle, which is open to all, where new milestones are met with praise and shared joy, while setbacks and losses are met with empathy and words of encouragement. This means that while students themselves are developing as American Indian youth, they are at the center of a community woven together through BCIEP, whether people come to support presenters at gatherings, volunteer to tutor students, share their storytelling skills, provide artwork for the reading program, help with fundraising, sing in one of the drum circles, or join in during one of the craft classes. No matter how far they might be from other official models of community, BCIEP and the space of its "Turtle Shell" home mean that neither students nor their families are alone.



I think it especially important to note the significant presence of women as leaders in and contributors to this community space. When I first noticed this particular gender-related trend, I approached it almost clinically, noting that staff members and regular volunteers were almost exclusively female, though there were stretches of time when one or another of the male alumni came back to help out and spend time with the kids. One or two father-figures also spent an afternoon or two with the afterschool program, though they both interacted primarily with their own kids. There were also at least a few male speakers throughout the year, as well as male authority figures who volunteered to help with field trips or to sing with the men's drum at gathering. This trend in the division of labor often meant that students' most consistent interactions were with adult females. I did not inherently see this as a problem, but my initial reading of the situation was to see it as a lack or absence and, viewed from that perspective, I took special note of the ways in which male students often gave male volunteers an intense amount of their focus. It was not so dissimilar from the dynamics I observed between younger students and older students (of whatever like gender), one taking cues from the other, one adjusting their own ways of doing things to copy or please the other, and thus my first instinct was to suggest the need for more male volunteers.

I considered whether the presence of more and more regular male volunteers might provide additional role modeling, character development, and both academic and cultural support for the young men and boys in the program. Since, based on both observations and interviews, male students are more in danger of disconnecting from the program and more likely to become involved in juvenile delinquency when they do, perhaps this increased positive adult male presence within the program could have a substantial effect on everything from male student graduation rates to criminal records. All of that may be very cogent and useful, but after

continued analysis and consideration, I realized that I was overlooking female *presence* in the space as if either that gendered trend or gender equality were natural defaults in a setting where I was not supposed to take much of anything as a given. I had presumed the importance of male absence while ignoring the importance of all the women in sight.

How, then, could I think about these women? Were they simply nurturers? No, that didn't quite feel right - it didn't encompass the ways that they not only cared for, educated, and enculturated the children in the community, but also shaped and supported the community itself. These were the people who made things happen – small businesswomen, the director of the program, the leader of the women's drum group, the women who made regalia and taught traditional dance, and women who, whatever their circumstance, were always open to helping someone else. Perhaps there were no protests or powwows in town during my tenure there, but I would not have been surprised at all to see these same – or other women – at the forefront of those major actions. Maybe this was not the kind of activism or community organizing that most people think of when using those terms, but these women were the people who made the Indigenous community – as a community – possible in Bay City. With that in mind, when I revisited the concept of “urban clan mothers” in Susan Lobo's article in *Keeping the Campfires Going: Native Women's Activism in Urban Communities* (2009), I felt like I had emerged from a lake with a sudden breath of understanding.

The women so present in BCIEP's everyday workings are the urban clan mothers of Bay City, the female leaders of key households in the area whose resources and interactions make belonging possible in this space. The fact that there aren't more men involved with the program is not an anomaly at all, but, rather, a parallel or continuation of how many women “do activism” and “community-building” in urban Indigenous communities across North America. They care

about and support their communities in very literal, very hands-on, person-by-person, family-by-family ways. Ms. Noelle, herself, has provided food and clothes for some of the neediest families in the program, including actually taking them shopping on occasion. One of the moms, who is a constant presence in the afterschool program, took in one or two of the girls who were friends with her daughter and had rough home lives, and it was done so definitively that there were even conversations about whether she was guardian enough to sign field trip forms instead of making the girls track down technical guardians who were often unavailable for problematic reasons. Another woman often ferried children to and from the program, and while I thought for a long time that she was related to at least *some* of them, it turned out that she was not. She just happened to have a van and knew this was a thing that she could do to be of help. She was also the person who stepped up when another mother in the group was having serious car trouble and basically said “you know what, we were going to try to sell our spare van, but why don’t you take it until you get back on your feet.” As a final example of this very notable female presence, the mom of an alumnus – not even someone still in the program – continues to be actively involved, including sharing her time and creative talents on art and decorations for gatherings, fundraisers, the reading program, etc., and, as a local small business owner, she also provides products to the program at deep discounts, offers volunteer opportunities to kids willing to help during parades, and has even served as an employer to some of the alumni looking for work.

Clearly, these are not women who have been relegated to this program by default, and the program itself is not in a state of “lack” because they are there with so few men. In fact, BCIEP is in a state of abundance in many ways exactly because of their primary presence in the space. BCIEP is an active avenue for their cultivation and maintenance of the local Indigenous community. Why is this style of community-building especially important? Because urban

Indigenous communities are often dispersed and fluid, consisting more of a network of relations than of fixed geographic spaces, which is certainly the case in Bay City. It is really those relationships that need to be nurtured and the networks that need to be flexible enough to meet the needs of people trying to navigate that web of relationships. That is what urban clan mothers do.

Indeed, when all that context is brought to light, BCIEP seems to facilitate the centralization of a community which might not otherwise function *as a community* without that central space. It is the place where these cross-family supports, intergenerational interactions, and shared moments have both the physical and social foundations needed to come into being in the first place. Elders have space to share their wisdom, youth grow into role models with even younger eyes looking up to them, families without enough food find enough to take home with them, students with struggles at home gain a sense of safety and being sheltered with care, people who do not even have children of their own learn new ways to contribute positively to future generations, and the heartbeat - the music, the dance, the art, the spirituality, the traditions, and the strength - of American Indian cultures continue on, steady and local and real, all because of the Bay City Indian Education Program. It is, in many ways, quite literally *a place to be (Indian) (together)* in a city that does not currently offer any other concrete ways for local Native Americans to weave that sense of community into being. Consequently, the program's many moments of precariousness, due to funding shortfalls and other challenges, like transportation or continuing access to its own dedicated physical space, have more widespread and varied effects than might be noted at first glance. BCIEP has helped weave the local American Indian community together and that community's presence both facilitates and extends the supportive environment found within the Turtle Shell itself.

## THEORIZING THE WORK OF CULTURE IN SMALL URBAN TITLE VII PROGRAMS

When I initially read about, and considered approaching a Title VII program for volunteering and possible dissertation research purposes, much of the literature about such programs situated them as a form of "culturally-based education" (CBE) working to counteract a sense of cultural discontinuity. In this way, these CBE programs were, at least theoretically, meant to act as a "bridge" for their students between presumably distinct ethnic or racially-centered "home culture" and a separate mainstream American "school culture" (Adams 1995; Cleary & Peacock 1998; Gay 2000; Huffman 2010; Klug & Whitfield 2003; NIEA 2011; Philips 1983; Powers 2006). However, after two years with the program, this analogy seemed *incomplete*, if I were to be generous, and flat-out *inaccurate* and *problematic*, if I were to offer my most honest assessment. The elements of the program, both academic and cultural, are not primarily about mitigating what many scholars refer to as "cultural disconnect." Most BCIEP students are not struggling with school because some form of Indigenous upbringing has taught them not to look teachers in the eye as a way to respect their elders or to trend toward cooperation rather than competition in line with traditional communalism or any other blatant clash of cultures situation.

Indeed, when asked where they learned about American Indian cultures and histories, *a few* students and alumni of BCIEP mentioned a relative, a father or grandmother or aunt, who had talked about that part of their heritage, taught them a few words in their Indigenous language, or invited them to activities on a reservation they still called home in some sense. *Most* students and graduates of the program, however, including some of those aforementioned students with relatives they could theoretically learn from, experienced *most of their early exposure* to American Indian cultures and histories through BCIEP. This disrupts any viable

presumption of a clearly Indigenous "home culture" to bridge anywhere. Note how in the following vignette, for instance, one student presents a very different sort of cultural dissonance:

*During a field trip to a nearby cultural center, the potential for the identity-in-development or culture-in-discovery process to create friction, tension, and/or confusion seemed especially pronounced when one of the very first questions - rather loudly and inappropriately timed, in fact - came from a young boy in the back of the room before the first speaker even had a chance to say much.*

*"Do you live in tipis?"*

*I wasn't the only adult who shifted or made a face or just generally seemed uncomfortable, if not downright mortified. There was so much about this theoretically innocent question that suggested problematic realities no one really wanted to confront. Tipis, along with bows and arrows and feather headdresses, are often the hallmarks of Native Americans in popular media and in the everyday imaginations of much of the populace. Was this student, who purportedly participated in the program, though young, exposed to so little of Indigenous life and culture that this was the first thing he thought to ask about? And what about the othering of the speaker? If all the students were themselves Native American and the speaker was too, why assume that he (and possibly Native Americans like him in general) lived so different a life? Living in tipis while the student lived in a house, apartment, trailer, or other modern residence?*

*To his credit, the speaker took the question in stride and answered it honestly and informatively, saying both that no, he lived in a house, but even in olden times when Indigenous people in that area built shelters of their own, they were wigwams and were structured differently than tipis. The momentary awkwardness seemed to fade, for the most part, but the incident was remembered and recounted with raised eyebrows at least a few times after that trip.*

The purpose of that illustration was to highlight the very real challenges facing a program that respects, but which cannot presume, any prior cultural knowledge among its participants. This suggests a very different model for understanding how culture can and does work in these spaces than the theories presented by previous scholars.

As previously discussed, with the geographic context of Bay City being what it is, the physical journey needed to access most relevant cultural activities or family members who can support tribally-specific growth may be out of reach most or all of the time for many of the

students involved in the Bay City Indian Education Program. If we add into that context that the city is small enough so that it cannot sustain a dedicated American Indian community center or cultural center, like Chicago or Detroit, it is not hard to begin to see the powerful position in which a program like BCIEP might find itself. Further, when we note that Bay City has been the focus of multiple American Indian organizations over the years, especially since the 1970s, but there are currently no such organizations active and functioning in the city (the last seeming to have faded 5-10 years ago), BCIEP emerges as the sole beacon of American Indian culture and community in the immediate area. with that in mind, I considered briefly if "cultural revitalization" might serve as a more fitting theoretical model for the role of culture in this Title VII program, but that didn't quite seem to fit either. Most cultural revitalization efforts are highly tribally or culturally specific and this program is working to provide academic and cultural support from students who trace their heritage to approximately 40 different Native nations. No, I determined that I needed new language.

The idea of "alternative social worlds" (most recently and relevantly used by anthropologist and Indigenous Studies scholar Elizabeth Povinelli, 2011) is not new, though it might resonate more with some under other names, but it was new to me. When I use it here, I largely just mean a distinct liminal space, seemingly set apart from (but, of course, still embedded within) the normal everyday world. My research strongly suggests that the Bay City Indian Education Program and, likely, other similarly situated programs develop, maintain momentum, and cultivate success as truly alternative social worlds, often distinct both from students' home lives and from their experiences at school.

While there continue to be serious issues with Indigenous representation in K-12 curricula, as well as ongoing discussions about the effects of Native American mascots, for the

most part BCIEP students are struggling in many of the same ways and for many of the same reasons that other students struggle in schools, but with an added layer of marginalization, whether personally experienced or compounded down from generations before them. They are struggling just to *be* (to ensure their survival in what can sometimes be a hostile world), to *be someone* (someone worth knowing, worth caring about, worth spending time with), to *be successful* or at least good at something, to have friends, to feel safe, and to fit in the world in some way that comes with good things - joy, respect, comfort, hope, maybe even a future brighter and steadier than some of the futures into which they have seen others fall. It is with these things in mind that I posit that by creating this unique space, this alternative social world, which is influenced by but also often unlike students' homes and schools, BCIEP provides both educational and cultural building blocks with which students can holistically craft and recraft positive identities for themselves in whatever shape they need - to succeed in school and in life.

#### ALTERNATIVE ANALOGIES FOR CULTURE-MEETS-EDUCATION

The strength of BCIEP, in the way its cultural elements and its educational ones combine to provide alternative foundations upon which to build sustainable positive identities, becomes especially clear when speaking with alumni. Alumni/ae, both male and female and pursuing varying life paths, repeatedly point to the ways in which they and their lives are different - especially from family members who didn't participate - because of the program. They made different choices about their personal lives because of values they were steeped in during the program, they took up traditional arts and crafts that they still take pride in, they appreciated having somewhere they could find like-minded people and, not just tutors, but a whole academic cheer squad encouraging them forward, and they all felt like their times with the Bay City Indian



Education Program were some of the best times of their lives. Most truly thought they would be totally different people, and not in a good way, if they had not been a part of BCIEP.

Consequently, if I were to suggest a fitting analogy to BCIEP's work, it wouldn't be a bridge or even a revitalization/reclamation effort, so much as... *a cozy kitchen*, maybe belonging to a grandmother, an auntie, or a neighbor who has known you since age six or well before. Students come in with varying levels and types of knowledge - academic, cultural, social, psychological, spiritual - and they find in that cozy kitchen friendly adults who are willing to help, recipes both ancient and modern, and all manner of ingredients, equipment, and tools to help make something good to eat, something they will be proud of, something that is ultimately uniquely them and yet features within it flavorful hints from the skill, knowledge, and experimentation of people who have come and gone before them. Their presence helps make the space what it is, affects the arrangement of items in the room and the interactions between others who come through, and as students grow older, they become an increasing part of the group looking out for and helping the young ones who can barely reach the knobs on the cabinets and who start out painfully shy or bold to a fault.

When you are there, as I was, in the middle of the bustle, it can be hard to know exactly what's cooking, how every student's individual project-of-self will turn out, but the air is humming with questions and answers and laughter, and every surface is warm from contact with people making the best of what is available to them. It is not the kind of place most people want to leave and no one is surprised - though they are always delighted - when the ones who have to leave come back when they can. It is almost always a brand of homecoming, when that happens, like extended family arrivals during the holidays, full of hugs and exclamations, broad smiles and rapid-fire catching up. Ms. Noelle had been with the program for over a decade when I left,

so it was very much her kitchen and I can only hope, in transitioning the program to a new era of leadership under her assistant, Ms. Gabby, during the second year after I left the field, that the coziness and the grand welcome, for both newcomers and program veterans, will remain strong and warm.<sup>6</sup>

By extending that analogy even just one step further, we can begin to consider the program's impact and influence beyond its students, especially its impact as amplified *by* its students. No one lives full-time in this kitchen, no matter how cozy and comfortable, homey and secure and helpful. In the style of a pie taken over to a neighbor or a family recipe shared with a friend, some of what is done inside the program is in preparation for the outside world, and as an effort toward making that world more amenable to and helpful for the program's most important stakeholders, its students. With the exception of a very straightforward do's and don'ts pamphlet for teachers of American Indian students, and the occasional challenging conversation about Thanksgiving holiday lessons or local mascot imagery, most of the BCIEP's work that is more public, whether in schools or for the Bay City community more broadly, situates program staff members and students as experts and ambassadors of American Indian culture and history. While this is a challenging position, for both students and staff, and different people respond differently to said challenge (including an outright preference not to take on the potential exposure and responsibility), many students are excited to show more of who they are, what they have learned, and what they are a part of because of their involvement with BCIEP. Many are also just excited to volunteer and help with something so interesting.

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<sup>6</sup> Through this analogy it is easier to see how one could support children and youth in pursuing the kind of flexible, postmodern approach to culture and identity that Lyons (2010) discusses in his book. Provide them safe space to “be” Indian while also providing the experiences, resources, and guidance that will help them learn how to “do” some of the cultural things that will ultimately constitute their Indigenous identity even more than “being.”

An older student might help with research or the poster for a presentation on treaties led by a staff member, a young butterfly dancer might get to dance or sing with the program director in front of her classmates when her teacher requests a presentation on Ojibwe culture, and when the program needs all the hands it can get for the 3rd and 4th grade culture-and-education-fest known as Indian Education Day, every single student who wants to participate gets a job to do, whether that is spooning out cups of wild rice soup, leading class groups from station to station, cleaning up the snack room, soaking corn husks for doll-making, or any number of other tasks, large and small. This is the culture-and-education mandate of the program put to work in improving student achievement, not only through student engagement in educating others, but also through cultivating change within the school system and its many non-Indigenous participants. By this mechanism, students and teachers outside of the program gain exposure to American Indian cultures and histories from Indigenous perspectives, supplementing both curriculum and popular media representations - which do not often include much diversity of perspective, even if Indigenous peoples are discussed. For students whose heritage, communities, and identities are so often misunderstood and misrepresented by others, the efforts of BCIEP to increase knowledge and cultural competency among non-Indigenous people - especially teachers and fellow students whom BCIEP students might encounter - is an important part of its overall work, helping American Indian students succeed, academically and otherwise.

## CONCLUSION

While still leaving some questions up in the air, this discussion was meant to grapple with how identity and culture actually work in an urban Title VII program in a small city like Bay City, Michigan, how the pieces fit together and how they affect students, families, and the communities in which they are embedded. I could not share every nuance or interesting

discovery, but I laid out examples and explanations enough to support the core themes that I believe rise to the surface most strongly in the data. The program may not explicitly present its purpose as the crafting of sustainable, successful identities, but that is so much of its ultimate work - helping students understand themselves and the resources and options available to them in ways that allow them to choose better paths than they might have otherwise. This is done through a shared values system, put to work in the program every day, and through varied cultural opportunities, including new ways of seeing the world, and, finally, all of that work is done within the safety and support of a community for which the program itself is the heart.

The Bay City Indian Education Program may not map well onto previous theories about culture-based education, but hopefully that will lead to a retheorization of culturally-infused education programs and toward a reconceptualization of what a diverse array of marginalized students might need to become successful even in mainstream academic settings. If culturally-based education programs can be successful not by mitigating dissonance/discontinuity or by focusing in on a specific tribal/ethnic culture to revitalize, but instead by cultivating and/or helping students craft belonging and identity from varied cultural materials and alternative academic approaches, then there are dozens of new pathways to student success we need to explore.

## **CHAPTER SIX: THEORIZING THE PROGRAM AND ITS LIMINALITIES**

Beyond just understanding at a baseline level how the Bay City Indian Education Program works, this research has been centered on questions seeking to understand the many potentially overlapping, intersecting, or even clashing social projects at work in the space. I tried not to presume that all actions were driven by explicit goals or produced expected outcomes, instead noting how discourses, practices, and materials flowed into aggregations that seemed to take on observable trajectories. The idea that the heart of the program is "helping students craft sustainable, successful identities" is, therefore, both an outgrowth of my attempts to re-theorize the role of culture in this educational space and a culmination of thought with the framework of social projects in mind. Consequently, what I want to discuss in this chapter are the ways in which understanding BCIEP as an alternative social world, constituted or intertwined with alternative social projects, reveals or helps make legible certain forms of success and marginalization, often brought on by persistent liminalities whose related structural origins that are not within the program itself, but outside of it.

### **SOCIAL PROJECTS AT WORK**

If I were to make a list of what I perceived to be the key social projects at work in the Bay City Indian Education Program, some of what I would list would likely ring immediately true to anyone who had read the previous few chapters. There is, for example, a strong project bound up in the large tutoring apparatus, aimed toward "American Indian academic success," which is largely marked by good grades, individual student progress, and eventual high school graduation. There is also an effort to develop and support what I might call "American Indian resiliency," the ability to overcome hardships and mistakes or wrong turns, as well as a sense that "the American Indian community can provide safety, understanding, and support" as modeled

and facilitated by the program. The advocacy aspect of the program provides much of the momentum in last these two directions, as does the highly inclusive, multi-generational approach to gatherings and cultural activities. Even more than that, though, the open arms policy of the program, allowing students back at any time as long as they are willing to abide by the rules, regardless of past infractions or other problematic affiliations is critical.

Other social projects that have prominence on site include the aim to show how "learning can be fun" and about more than just grades or test scores. This project is at work in the space in a way that, while perhaps seeming mainstream on the surface, is often actively alternative to students' - especially middle school and high school students' - experiences in local public school classrooms, where education has largely taken on the form of reading, note-taking, repetitious homework, and tests that require memorization. While this model of schooling is occasionally positively interrupted with field trips, interesting demonstrations, or fun projects, the amount of time, proportionally, that students in BCIEP sessions spend engaging with educational games, reading for pleasure, arts and crafts, and fun learning events - whether in-house or via a field trip - tips fairly strongly in BCIEP's favor. It is notable that almost no one turns down BCIEP opportunities that happen during the school day in favor of remaining in regular school classrooms.

I would also say that there is a strong current within the program aimed at "developing a (whole) person who will be a positive presence in (any/the) community." While not explicitly pointed out - and therefore never directly placed in the education or culture categories of the program's more obvious aims - this project seems like a pervasive shadow within the program. Fortified by the values that are both regularly discussed and practiced within the program and by the way stakeholders, especially stakeholders with more power, react to different kinds of

personalities in the long-term, cultivating this kind of personhood might be a manifestation of what Levinson, Foley, and Holland (1996) would say it means to be an "educated" or "cultured" person within the community or something more specific. Perhaps these are just the unmarked, but successful products, of the program itself.

The idea that "nurturing one's cultural self is important" seemed present as well, social project-wise, but it was difficult to encapsulate. I considered a number of ways to phrase the trajectory born from aggregating the program's cultural activities, its commentary about culture, and the ways that stakeholders interacted with each other with respect to cultural topics, and this is the phrasing that seemed most fitting. Why? Primarily because while exposure - and the intent to increase exposure - to cultural knowledge was persistent, the extent of recall and application of that cultural knowledge was almost always framed as a *personal choice*, rarely tested or requested. I could not really imagine the aim as "you should know your heritage" or any more blatant imperative. Even when the young child replied "we learn what Indians do" in response to a question about what she liked about and learned at BCIEP, the functioning of the program, with its diverse approach to culture, strongly suggests that these cultural lessons aren't all things that everyone *needs* to do (to "be Indian," for example). Rather, these were among the many things one could *choose* to do, knowing/acknowledging oneself as "an Indian."

Similarly, there is a certain, rather elusive social projects at work in the space that I might call "we all belong," an aggregation of inclusive discourse and practices, as well as flows of shared materials, that situate ethnic identity as largely "either/or" and not a matter of degrees. If you are in the space, especially as a student, you are not only presumed Indigenous until (and sometimes even after) you say otherwise. The only allowable questions about heritage tend to be whether or not you are Native and what kind of Native you are, not about blood quantum or

ratios based on how many parents or grandparents are Indigenous or members of federally recognized tribes.

Among the perhaps less obvious social projects I saw come together, in trying to fully understand the qualitative outcomes of the reading program, I realized that the incentive structure seemed to shift student focus, at least somewhat, from reading itself toward reading as a means to an end. Without debating the relative merit or problematics of that shift, I might situate the social project and silent aim attached to the reading program as something like "the ability to achieve goals with enough time, effort, and focus/commitment." While, yes, students absolutely read more books, more varieties of books, and improved their reading levels on multiple metrics, they also learned how to strategize going after a prize they wanted and often had to consistently work hard over multiple weeks to achieve their goal. That may be a habit equally worthwhile to help students develop, like reading itself, since much of life, whether in school, work, or other situations, is predicated on our ability to strive toward some desired future.

Ultimately, while interesting, these social projects rarely proved surprising or profoundly revelatory in and of themselves, but when combined with local and national macroprocesses, including federal policy, we can begin to see how the program butts up against and otherwise interacts with a world largely structured to undermine and alter its value, effects, and even its very existence. This unexpected mix of understandings and outcomes is best seen in the multiple ways that success and struggle are conceived and experienced by stakeholders and by the program itself.

## SUCCESS, PROGRESS, AND FAILURE

One of the most intriguing interplays of social projects, policy, and other macroprocesses on the ground in the field site was the varying measures of success, progress, and failure.



Fulfilling reporting requirements for the federal government was distinct from doing the same for nongovernmental grantmakers, and both of those also diverged from the program director's sense of how students were doing and students' own sense of how they were doing. Alumni and parents offered additional perspectives - and pressures - on how to think about the effectiveness of the program, often grounded in both nameable goals and once-thought improbabilities. As an observer in the space, there were even ways in which other potential approaches to evaluation seemed to rise to the surface, presenting patterns or trends that weren't articulated by any of the aforementioned stakeholders in quite the same way. This is not a simple question of fact of reporting scores or average grades or numbers of graduates. If we accept that much of the work of the program is shaped by the social projects discussed in the previous section and additionally affected by macroprocesses that may be hostile to aspects of the program, the program as a whole, or to core stakeholders related to the program, then success, progress, and failure cannot help but be complex and varied.

This section is fundamentally about the messiness of measurement, about the fact that even thoughtfully designed program elements can have side effects, and about how policy can at once shape the conversation and become a joke within said conversation. There are a number of interesting insights that grew out of my most recent time in the field, but one realization was that in talking about success and its relations, we must acknowledge that success is not an objective line in the distance that we can speak of in some decontextualized way. In fact, I posit that success is "crafted" in this context through a combination of processes on the ground level of policy implementation and that this crafting process leads to effects on stakeholders that are multilayered, uneven, and sometimes unexpected.

## Policy and Funding

Considering the varied demands placed on the shoulders of the Title VII program through the language of the federal policy that supports it, it is not unreasonable to think of those reports to the federal government as the first lens through which what counts as success is filtered and comes to have material effects. Program managers are required, as part of their grants and follow-up reports to explain how they plan to address the various required elements of the program based on whatever basic formula funding was or will be available to them.

Communicating the program's effectiveness within the specific discursive framework of the Title VII policy was a skill the director had to develop over time and teach to her protégé during her final years with the program. This skill was so important that when the director was asked by the school district to work with a new district-based grant writer to complete the application one year and the grant writer's mistakes cost the program several thousand dollars, the school district itself filled in the gap from its own budget once it recognized how profound their error had been.

With all the language in the policy about "unique needs," "culturally-related academic needs," and just plain "language and culture" needs in reference to Indigenous students, you might be surprised - or perhaps just resigned - to learn that the actual discursive forms that have the most impact at the federal level even of this clearly worded policy are not centered on culture at all. Rather, agents of the federal government overseeing the national workings of the Title VII program have often sought much the same kind of box checking and quantitative/statistical "evidence" requested by the rest of education policy handlers in this accountability-oriented neoliberal era. While interviewing Ms. Noelle, she relayed the following odd story to me, for the second time:

*They used to - back when there was more money - they used to send a representative to the conference we're - hopefully - going to go to. They would*

*have a Title VII workshop, before they had a website with all their information, which was great. We'd talk about the difficulties we were having meeting their requirements of the grant... to meet the unique needs, cultural and academic, of Native students .... But everything we have to do, we have to prove, but... This is our mission, to meet their cultural needs, so if we can't give you data on the medicine wheel how are we supposed to prove-- what are we supposed to do? And they said, "well just take the culture out of it and just make it about math, make it about reading." And we're going, "What? What?!" So, honestly, when I write that grant and I'm talking about a field trip, I talk about what we can do that's reading, how can we bring math into it, and really they've changed how I think about what I want to give these kids. You know? And it's laughable that he actually said "well, just take culture out of your program, just make it purely academic," and we're all just sitting there, not even knowing what to say to him because we're all hard-working, under-paid people trying to bring culture to these kids in these school districts and he's saying "just take the culture out of it." So then somebody said "well then, why would you call it Indian Education?"*

The director gave me examples at other times about this kind of wording, about having to fit the effectiveness of the program within parameters imposed, either by the bureaucracy of policy or by the accountability-affected (or possibly accountability-*infected*) grantmakers that the program applied to even outside the government.

It is certainly the case that reading the placards on exhibits at a museum is an example of reading and, it is also true that math can come into play, everywhere from beading and weaving, to constructing a full board and stone set for the Native Hawaiian game Konane from scratch, a game rather like Checkers. The fact that these, often quite robust, moments of cultural discovery and exploration were sometimes discursively reduced to elementary skills when recounted, however, seems to fundamentally undermine some of the strengths of the program in a bizarrely vicious cycle. If it is not a primary focus on math and reading that make this program successful, but rather its distinct and policy-mandated focus on culture and whatever Indigenous students' needs are considered "unique" enough to require special handling, then what could we *prove* by putting something like real Medicine Wheel teachings, which carry a certain weight with students and their families, into this kind of discursive simplification black box and coming out

with discussions about colors, geometry, and the movement of time? It is not that this would not be an interesting input-output function or not worth examining for potential teaching moments, but if what helps students be more successful in school and in life is the program's activities as presented in the moment - as *cultural* activities whose value comes from their connection to Indigenous communities - then the requested discursive transformations tell us less about how success is achieved in the program and more about how success is contested. In a way, the government middlemen standing in that Title VII workshop some years ago and the related bureaucrats who read these applications each year are taking a stance that suggests a fundamental *disbelief* in the intrinsic value of cultural aspects and activities in supportive educational programs like Title VII, regardless of the wording provided by the original policymakers themselves.

Nongovernmental funders are sometimes just as bizarrely positioned. It is standard practice for some grantmakers to provide grant applications and reports with a "score" and, in trying to achieve a higher grade (and hopefully more stable funding), Ms. Noelle asked me to help her with an upcoming grant report, which I was happy to do. Looking over the data she provided, I got to work modeling it in a variety of ways, looking for patterns and drawing out what I considered fairly standard and worthwhile statistics about how different categories of readers improved their scores in different ways and by how much. It turned out that she liked the report I sent to her so much that she just included it wholesale in her own report without any modifications. As discussed in the chapter on academics, the reading program does produce a number of positive effects on student reading capabilities and has its strongest impact on students who were behind grade level. This would seem, at least to me, to be good news and cause for continued support for such a program, but when Ms. Noelle received a response about the report,

she had been graded similarly to previous years with a percentage score that would translate to something like a “C” grade in most high schools and universities. When she told me this, she just sort of blinked and shook her head, then smiled, shrugging. Whatever the grantmakers wanted - whether a differently-structured report or grander outcomes - they remained vague enough to perpetuate a level of financial uncertainty and anxiety around funding for the next year's reading program. This often led to conversations about trying out new and different things with how the reading program worked, and ideas for where else to look for grants just in case this one didn't go through. In this way, both governmental and nongovernmental funders create this strange situation of precariousness for the Bay City Indian Education Program and, even more than that, contribute to a liminal reality so oddly constrained that the program's genuine expression of its own successes and worth are neither fully permitted nor fully accepted as truth enough for material stability - or perhaps as truth, period.

### Administrative Perspectives

Policy and funding are far from the only arenas affecting what counts as success for and within the program, however. The school district, which might have been an additional layer of bureaucracy to manage, has largely had a hands-off approach to the program, providing space when possible and some administrative assistance, but no explicit<sup>1</sup> internal requirements to add anxiety to the director's job. It is really the program director herself, by both shaping the program and looking out upon the program through an evaluative gaze, that brings in the next layers of complication around what success means in this context.

*I don't go by data. I go by when I see them getting stronger. You know what I mean? There's a narrow view of data in policy/budgetary circles. What about all*

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<sup>1</sup> See: The section on “Challenges and Unexpected Insights” to learn more about possible implicit requirements and related pressures and effects.

*the understanding of culture and using cultural things to navigate life? How do you measure that?*

From her perspective, success wasn't something so easily encapsulated, not by numbers, perhaps not even by words. That kind of success was something you saw and felt, and there is evidence to suggest that while her method of assessment would be challenging to replicate, it is to some degree accurate.

One of the things the program did, in some ways subtle and in other ways more explicit, was intertwine a values framework into the program. Through cultural activities, common mantras, and other more nebulous things like the "student contract" that participants in the afterschool program were required to sign at the start of the year, students were regularly encouraged: to come prepared, to respect property, adults, and peers; to not use inappropriate language or gestures; to help clean up; and to embody things like integrity, hard work, responsibility, cooperation, and peacefulness. They were also taught that these values applied to everyone and they should expect that the staff and volunteers would respect them, listen to them, provide safe space, give 100%, embody integrity themselves, and have high expectations for all participating students. Work with crafts that did not turn out perfectly even offered repeated moments to remind students that no one is perfect and that is okay, that sometimes mistakes will happen and our reaction to them is often even more important than the mistake itself.

When alumni, like the woman with wayward older sisters featured in a previous chapter, point to the ways in which the program taught them "about walking a straight path, a good life," something they "wouldn't have gotten at home," it is Ms. Noelle's method of understanding success that has the highest likelihood of catching the full picture, rather than the simplified facts revealed by numbers alone. The impact is something that results in notable outcomes, like graduations, yes, but it is also a *felt* impact, success manifesting as a student's - and ultimately an

alumni's - sense of being cared for, encouraged, and supported while surrounded by culture and community. Recounting his experiences with the program and its importance, one alumnus pointed to exactly that, saying:

*I didn't really like to do homework and sometimes I didn't study, because it was hard and I just didn't care enough. But this place really made me care, really motivated me. ... [The director] she really holds a place in my heart. She's really the one who pushed me to graduate. I was on the verge of just going to an alternative school or getting my GED... she really pushed me, though, and I got through it... because everyone encouraged me. They care about people, truly and genuinely, here. ... Without the program I wouldn't have graduated. ... It's not like another afterschool study program where they just shove a book in front of your face and if you need help you raise your hand. It's someone who honestly cares what you're working on and wants to help you in every way they can. And it's something that's going to teach you about your heritage. That's not something you're going to learn anywhere else, unless you go to the library and dig and dig and dig for hours, and even then, it's not the same. I mean, this place really hands-on teaches you about your culture. ... This program needs to continue. It's not a want. It's a necessity.*

### Student Perspectives

This raises the question about where students' own perspectives on success fit and this is, perhaps, the messiest space of measurement. Why? Because students are the most diverse category of stakeholders discussed here. Older, younger, artistic or mathematical, readers or engineers or both, coming from tightly-knit or distrustful families, etc., in both observations and interviews, students were concerned by and focused on a wide variety of different end goals, in both the short and long term. In the weekly talking circle, academic achievements often came to light as people one-by-one shared how their week had gone, ups and downs, while everyone else in the room listened quietly. Often at least one student, and sometimes more, would talk about getting an "A" on something, a test or a paper or, occasionally, a report card, and some would sigh happily about getting a "B" on a really tough assignment. In all cases, everyone in the circle would clap and smile, supporting and praising them in a way they couldn't get anywhere else. This process

came with complications, though, in different ways, exemplified here by the stories of Nora\*, Darren\*, and Lorraine\*.

*When it was her turn to speak in the talking circle and she had the decorated stick in hand, Nora\* (not her real name) said "I got a C+." She wasn't exactly enthusiastic, but tentatively positive, her tone lifting upward slightly at the end of the phrase like she hoped others would see it her way. "So I was happy about that." Several people around the circle clapped and nodded. I had only been in circle a few times by then and didn't know Nora well, but I was very aware in that moment of a contrast between her experience right then and my own. If most of my friends had said that to me, I wouldn't have clapped so much as leaned in to commiserate, saying "oh no, what happened?" But as I saw her smile and cautiously accept the praise, my reticence mixed with an echo of that pride and that joy and I thought, "Maybe that C+ was really a struggle for her, an achievement. I want to be among those supporting and uplifting her."*

In this way "success" was regularly framed in a relative sense, with an eye to students' own previous work, various life complications, and sense of their own abilities and efforts. There were even a few students whose home lives were so problematic and complicated that the Ms. Noelle told me just to focus on getting them involved in anything educational. The fact that they attended sessions of the program and tried to make any progress at all was, in itself, a huge step worthy of commendation and additional support.

There was a young man, Darren\* (not his real name), who often came to the afterschool program either without his homework, with it half-crumpled up, or with a certain refusal to work on it by saying it was finished when that clearly wasn't possible. There were always things he could work on, however, including reading and writing and educational worksheets, as well as more playful or creative options like crafts or educational games and toys. From Ms. Noelle's perspective, his home life was so awful that she herself had called Child Protective Services at least half a dozen, if not a dozen times, even though it seemed to change nothing at all, so when she engaged with him she was just focused on "try[ing] to keep him occupied," because



ultimately the boy was "doing the best he can, given everything," to even just show up and engage with any of the material in a way that might lead to learning, no matter how rudimentary. This is not to say that he was not nudged to be more engaged, that he did not get the same speech everyone else did when they did not bring their homework or actually refused to work on said homework, but we did not pretend his home life did not exist or that vaulting the effects of violence and lack of sleep would be easy or even just feasible every week. So, sure, he rarely had anything positive to share academically in the talking circles he attended, his stories more likely to focus on getting something he wanted or winning out over his brothers for something. But, for him, the bright spots of the program were more physical and experiential, his questions rapid and his excitement palpable during several field trips. In addition to learning new facts about culture and history, he was always glad to have things he could brag about seeing to his brothers, who often skipped out on BCIEP activities. In this sense, success for him within the context of the program was about presence and about having experiences that other people didn't have.

This mix of publicly-oriented and relative/individualized measures of student success did create some interesting circumstances, including the peculiar case of young Lorraine\* (not her real name). Lorraine was one of the only students who regularly attended the Bay City Indian Education Program whose classroom placement I seriously questioned. Specifically, it seemed like she had been placed in an average-paced classroom, but she seemed to not only be lagging behind in a common sense, she seemed to be developmentally challenged in a way that might benefit from a dedicated special education environment. I did not, at any point, feel like it was my place to suggest such a shift, presuming that the program staff and tutors who worked with her more regularly would be better positioned to make that decision or had already had that discussion with

her counselors, teachers, or guardians. She came from a large family and was already being outpaced by some of her younger siblings midway through her elementary years, which worried me even though she didn't seem upset about it in any way I could immediately recognize. We got along well enough during the times we worked together - reading simple books, filling out worksheets, and working on art projects - so I was not entirely surprised when she leaned close one day during an afterschool session to share something semi-secretly with me. The content of her whisperings did surprise me, though:

*"Are D's good?"*

*"What do you mean?" I was trying to determine if this had something to do with a project we were working on or something someone had said within earshot, but it was still early in the session and most students were just eating their snacks.*

*"Like on your report card. Are D's good? Because I got all D's."*

*"Oh." I mentally floundered for a moment, wholly unsure of what to say. I didn't want to lie to her, but I also didn't want to deliver soul-crushing news when she had asked the question without any hint of either concern or guile. "Well... they're not very good, no, but you can work to get better grades next time." I could feel my face scrunch and shift as I said the words, their taste on my tongue unpleasant but accurate enough to pass muster.*

*"Oh." She accepted the news remarkably well, it seemed, not running off to seek a second opinion or pouting about it or doing anything else especially demonstrative. Indeed, in the way of children, the finality in her voice - and the fact that she started working on something completely unrelated shortly thereafter - made me think that she had largely moved on.*

*Later, however, during the talking circle, Lorraine smiled in a way I retroactively classified as secretive, looking down and then back up at her rapt audience and said that she "got all A's this week." Praise came quickly, clapping and encouraging words sparking around the room, deepening her smile as she passed on the talking stick.*

I tried to determine how best to handle this situation with care, because I certainly did not want to embarrass the girl or even really get her in trouble, but every time she mentioned a good grade in circle after then, I was suspect. I ended up stammering through half of an

"I'm not sure that's really true" conversation with the director, who just sort of tipped her head and shifted her eyes, her smile small, but telling. She already knew the situation and was choosing to let it go, which.... perhaps made sense. This was, as I said, a student I considered really unfortunately placed within the school system. Maybe this was the only space where the girl was lauded at all - for small "real" things, like finishing a worksheet or art project well, but also for big things, like the grades she wanted to get, even if she wasn't actually getting them.

### Non-stakeholder Perspectives

In 2011, the program won an Excellence in Education Award from the Michigan School Board Association, largely for its improvement in graduation rates among Indigenous students. It was also praised by the National Indian Education Association (2011) shortly thereafter. With commentary on its improved student engagement and parent involvement, connections between students and tribal elders/teachers, partnerships with community organizations, and students learning about their language and culture, as well as the diverse listing of activities and services offered to participants, some of that praise seemed almost to be awe and pride in how much the little program could do, like an ant carrying a slice of watermelon fifty times its size. In this way, the program's success was fulfilled by a metric about completion and by a focus on its ongoing multi-functionality, but what did either of those really look like on the ground (and not just in the stripped down discourse of a policy brief)?

Here are the numbers as quoted by the program and referenced by others discussing the program (NIEA 2014): "100% of Native students who regularly attend [the Bay City Indian Education Program] have graduated [high school]." This is a subset of all participants signed up

for the program, of course, and it would be easy to try to classify this subset as existing go-getters, but that simply isn't true. It only takes a moment to recall the stories of some of the alumni discussed in the past few chapters to know that at least some of those graduating would not have been on track to do so without the benefit of guidance and support from the program. Yet, there are some patterns I saw emerging, distinct paths out of the program that might add nuance to this picture of grand graduation rates.

From my observations, the graduation rate is highly variable from year to year because the number of students eligible to graduate each year fluctuates wildly (the Native American population is so small that birth year cohorts do not fit an easily noted range). Sometimes there are three seniors, sometimes seven. One year recently there were more than a dozen seniors potentially graduating. Of those seniors, in any given year, not only will not all necessarily graduate (though many do), while all graduating seniors who are enrolled in the program are honored at the Spring Gathering, not all of those graduating seniors have been regularly attending BCIEP activities before then. How the director codified "regular attendance," therefore, is not exact, as far as I know, but historically attendance at after school tutoring sessions was heavily tracked, so that likely makes up the bulk of what counts for "regular" attendance with additional points for participation in other field trips, activities, and events. With that in mind, there seem to be a few common streams of interaction regarding the program for students flowing toward senior year.

Group A: Students who, for a variety of internal and home-based factors, are on track to graduate seemingly with or without the program. They clearly accept and appreciate help from the program, but sometimes also become involved in extracurricular activities that take them away from the program, leading to a question about prioritization and need regarding the

program's place in their lives. (No one is upset, for the record, that students in this group are branching out to other positive hobbies and explorations, but they are a bit like baby birds who have already flown the nest. We are less worried that they will not make it/graduate and figure they will come in if they need something.)

Group B: Students who struggle and have been struggling to make positive progress through school, and may or may not be resistant to help or to devoting the time necessary to keep up in school, and eventually graduate. The program works to repeatedly reach out to and draw such students back in, to maintain their interest and commitment, but it is not always successful. These students also often find other things to do with their time, prioritizing hanging out with non-program friends, participating in juvenile delinquency, playing video games, or even joining gangs.

Group C: Students who, like two of the alumni I interviewed, were on some level driven to work hard and to do better but who also struggled - both academically and personally. These are the students who most benefit from the program and make up the bulk of that 100% graduates-among-regular-participants statistic, because it is - by their own words - only *because of* their intense involvement with the program that they were able to graduate and choose a different path for themselves. These students tend to have their strongest friendships with other program students, and in many ways center their lives (and, later, the narratives about that part of their lives) around the program. They study, grow, socialize, debate, party, and strongly identify with the program and its people. Many of these students also come back to visit and volunteer or even work in the program, and when they do, it is very much like a family reunion, complete with the recounting of old, embarrassing stories.

The alternative space created by the program seemingly allows participants to acknowledge and accept influence from multiple spheres of life, including home, school, and popular culture, but it also offers them an additional bundle of resources and references, allowing them to position themselves differently from both non-participating family members and school peers. These resources and references include both the academic and cultural facets of the program, everything from culturally designated skills, like beadwork, dancing, or drumming, to tutoring support, incentivized reading, and values meant to be a part of students' everyday lives within the program. This means that students who commit themselves to the program can ultimately build identities and lives that they might not have previously thought possible, or even imagined at all, and they can do so within the context of a community that accepts them for whom they are and genuinely wants to see them succeed, almost regardless of how specifically that success is defined.

## CHALLENGES AND UNEXPECTED INSIGHTS

Though the Bay City Indian Education Program engages in numerous effective academic and culture-related efforts, it also faces challenges that are addressed with varying degrees of success. This section offers a brief examination of the shape of these challenges, noting theoretical underpinnings, as well as practical food for thought that might enhance the work of the program and offer new solutions to ongoing issues. In an overall sense, however, many of these challenges seem to arise from the fact that the program, by its nature, both struggles to provide an alternative to the status quo, addressing the needs of a marginalized (and often wholly invisible) group, while requiring access to mainstream recognition and resources in order to function. Consequently, I think the challenges below go a long way to showing the ways in which my work aligns with (and possibly extends) Povinelli's theories on the liminal nature of

alternative social worlds. Despite all the good within it, the program is a world fighting daily to resist its own erasure and collapse.

### Funding

This challenge requires extensive discussion, which was why it received several pages worth in Chapter 3 (see: "Program Finances and Money Woes"), but the crucial point is that federal funding is not structured to ensure an adequate amount of baseline funding for smaller Title VII programs, and both tribes and local funders are constrained by notions of responsibility that leave programs like the Bay City Indian Education Program drawn outside their lines of support. Since, in an ideal - or even *just* - world, these funders would likely be their strongest supporters, this lack of understanding must, at least in part, be a reflection or further manifestation of urban Indian liminality in a broader sense. For most people, Native Americans in cities are a nonexistent or otherwise overlooked category of persons. In studies, they are often lumped into undifferentiated black holes of data under the label "Other," and when considered in a contemporary sense, they are presumed to live "elsewhere," perhaps especially in a place like Bay City, where there is no prominent urban community center or other institution publicly dedicated to Indigenous needs.

One of the most common questions I received from anyone I mentioned my research to who lived in the region, but had no direct contact with BCIEP always went something like: "Oh, there are Indians here/over there?" Or, equally telling, though in a somewhat different way, "Oh, I didn't know there was a tribe here/over there." The idea that there could be enough variety among local Indigenous residents to trace heritage back to forty or so different nations continues to be shocking. Why? Most people probably do not understand that there are hundreds of Native nations in this country, an unfortunate artifact of highly problematic engagement with

Indigenous issues in most K-12 curricula. But, even more than that, the concept of Indigenous *urbanity* is not something most people have ever been introduced to or otherwise confronted. It is surprising, confusing, and practically surreal that the majority of Indians live in cities like everyone else nowadays. Of course there are no protocols for handling what seems like an impossibility, situating programs like BCIEP in a veritable financial no man's land with everyone assuming it is someone else's job to support the surreal/impossible program. Few can hurdle the cognitive dissonance of its presence long enough to ask how well the program is working and whether or not a sizable grant would contribute positively to the lives of two hundred bright Indigenous students. Ultimately, it further emphasizes that these urban Indians, at least, are a people without territory. Unclaimed by the nearest tribe and equally unclaimed by the local community foundation, they live in the place but are never allowed to imagine a full sense of stability or understanding there.

In a practical sense, this odd positioning requires doing the deep work of applying for multi-year grants and/or developing partnerships, either with a specific funder or a coalition of funders who can help "stand in the gap" between what the federal government provides and how much the program actually needs just to continue its basic functions with two staff members. While a little money can go a long way and program staff demonstrate that every year, finding a means by which to bring consistency to the baseline operating budget needs to be a high priority. It is likely the only route to a sustainable financial solution. Making that feasible, however, will require finding funders who can cut through the cacophony of how the world is imagined to be, in order to see how it actually is, accepting the program and its stakeholders as they are, and not presuming that their struggles must be someone else's problem.



## Transportation

After funding, transportation was the most commonly discussed challenge faced by the program. Not transportation for major field trips or conferences, as those could often be covered by small event-focused grants, but everyday transportation, particularly getting students who want to attend the afterschool program from their various schools to the main BCIEP site.

Depending on the year (because bus routes shift from year to year and sometimes even during an ongoing school year), anywhere between one and three school buses stop near the building that houses BCIEP. These tend to address the needs of certain high school students, but they do very little for most elementary school students or for the students who live and attend schools on the far edges of the school district. One of the local middle schools is in walking distance, so those students tend to come by foot, but everyone else is largely left in the lurch, leading to a mixture of family member drop offs, the occasional ride with a volunteer, and a lot of missed opportunities.

Is the program situated somewhere that is geographically obscure? No. As a former elementary school building, there must have been bussing maps in previous years that included the building. However, once it was turned over to the district for administrative use there was no need for buses to stop there, except in the general way of getting students to common stops near enough to put their homes in walking distance. Yet, these bus routes were not reconsidered with BCIEP in mind when it was offered space in that building. If BCIEP was a community program, like the Bay City Literacy Council, which uses the room next door to them in the building, it might make sense that their fit within the district's transportation network would be irrelevant, but the Indian Education Program exists directly under the auspices of the Bay City Public Schools using their information systems and reporting financial changes weekly through their

varied filing mechanisms. Why, when the program is lauded by the state and even by employees within the district, is it outside the realm of imagining for the school district itself to make a more proactive effort to bus students to the program?

Commentary within the program about this problem always points to the fact that the district has its own financial problems and that school buses are not cheap, but I would be remiss if I did not ask about school district priorities. Multiple people within the district noted the way that counselors were overloaded, that students were falling through the cracks, that even BCIEP sometimes gets called in "too late to do anything" (ending up watching students end up suspended, expelled to the local alternative school, and then eventually out of the district entirely), so the idea that there is not enough additional support for students - Indigenous or otherwise - is hardly novel. Surely, minor adjustments to the bussing system would be a cost effective way to get at least *some* students connected to supplemental education services like those provided by the Bay City Indian Education Program. On any given day, some buses are tasked with moving students from school buildings closer to home spaces and other buses are tasked with carrying competitive groups or field trip groups to places around the county or beyond. Under those circumstances, it seems a bit strange, perhaps even far-fetched, that it would not be possible to devote one bus - or even just an hour of bus time - on one afternoon a week to pick up elementary students from multiple schools and bring them to the Turtle Shell. Ideally, there would be two buses in the mix, one picking up the elementary students in town and one going out to the edge of the school district to retrieve some of the older students who also do not have transportation to the program, but even this does not seem like much of a stretch when the likely benefits are weighed against the costs. A major hurdle to realizing this change is,

unfortunately, the vicious cycle of the program's precariousness and its effects on program staff's willingness to be assertive in certain contexts.

No one talks much about the role of the school district in supporting BCIEP. They have provided some fill-in-the-gap funding during certain years for varying reasons, but generally what they have provided most recently have been a physical space to use within the district free of charge, and access to leftover resources when other programs and buildings have been shut down. BCIEP acquired many of its bookshelves, cubbies, tables, chairs, and even toys from the skeletal remains of programs whose funding did not last or whose program no longer aligned with the district's intended direction, including a local Headstart program. Whether or not the way the power dynamic in this relationship developed was intentional or not, this quiet scrap-based pseudo-dependence has led to a distinct reticence among program staff to make any waves within the district or otherwise call attention to themselves in any way that suggests they might be asking for something. This means that if something stops working in the physical space, they try to fix it themselves or work around the fact that it's malfunctioning (e.g. no hot water, broken light, ceiling leak, etc.), and I think the minimal amount of advocacy for more transportation is rooted in this same "don't want to bother the landlord/boss" kind of mindset.

Is there some way to effectively reconfigure the unequal power dynamics between the program and the district, re-situating the program as the shining and well-supported example it should be, rather than some Cinderella holding her breath in the broom cupboard hoping not to be seen? Or is this just another example of the tension between the desire for recognition/resources and the harsh reality of trying to provide a space alternative enough that it counters the mainstream - for good reason - and yet, in so doing, pushes away (from) the very people and processes that have the power to provide social capital and material support? Frankly,

it feels daring and dangerous even to ask these questions within the bounds of these ink and paper walls, so perhaps that suggests I knew the answer all along.

Since that sort of advocacy seems so bound up in other challenges, the logistics of addressing this particular issue are daunting. There have even been half-joking, circular discussions about needing to buy a van and then pay for gas and then think about insurance and what about maintenance and who would drive it? Etcetera. Perhaps that is too literal an approach, but there might be others. Would it be possible to contract with the local public bussing system, the Bay Metropolitan Transportation Authority, for example, to arrange for what is largely known in the region as "Dial-a-Ride," a service that uses small buses for more customized routes, or a Bay DART flexed-route service to pick up at least some set of students after school (especially those currently without transportation access) and then bring them to BCIEP's building? That would likely cost less, accommodate more students, and be more sustainable long-term than a dedicated van, since there would not be ongoing complications to deal with or a replacement to worry about a few years down the road. The funding for that would still have to come from somewhere, so I would suggest that the first step to addressing this challenge would be a thorough needs assessment. How many students who genuinely want to come are unable to primarily because of transportation issues? What are the academic and general life circumstances of these left-behind students? With more specific data about students who are less than fully involved in the program, it might be possible to present a compelling case to funders regarding outreach to these largely peripheral students, beginning with transportation as the first step in creating more equity of access within the program's structure. I would like to hope that the school district would consider assisting with the costs in such a situation, but as

noted above, it might be too tumultuous to even ask, considering that the district has done little to address the issue in the past.

### Space

It is, unfortunately, largely outside of the program's control whether it stays in its current space or is asked to move to another within the school system, but there is regularly an imminent (rather than theoretical) question as to whether the school system will allow them stay in their current building and *when* (not if) they might be asked to leave. This introduces a level of uncertainty that is palpable and clearly stressful for staff, though they only on rare occasions discuss the issue with other stakeholders - perhaps to shield them from that same level of anxiety and concern. As I noted in the last chapter, the physical space of the program is, in many ways, also the physical center of the local Indigenous community, which is not something that should be underestimated, but neither can we forget the imbalanced power dynamics between the program and the school district itself who currently lets them use the space for free. As discussed previously, this state of affairs has led to a "make do" attitude that mostly involves dealing with whatever the physical space throws at them. This is not an inherently bad approach, considering their situation, but it does emphasize the very real landlessness of these urban Indians and it makes any plans to try to change that situation without a substantial influx of funds rather complicated.

It might be worthwhile to consider if there is some mechanism by which the program could better solidify its continued access to some specific physical space (even if not the current one), perhaps through *proactive* negotiations with school district's management. A longer term option - preferably with some commitment from said upper management - might require moving to a different building than where the program is currently housed, but, as painful as that process

might be, being able to make a decision with the backing of the Parents Committee, and then creating a plan and following through on a timeline that is of the program's own choosing, might ultimately save some heartache, contain logistical snags, and minimize confusion among participants. In opening up proactive negotiations, would that open a bag of worms regarding rental fees or using space in district buildings at all? Are the program staff well-reasoned in their fear of poking the bear? Does the district really think so little of the program and/or is it really so resource-constrained that a conversation would lead to negative consequences? I can present these options as possible routes to take, but I cannot fully predict the ramifications. Perhaps there is a better time to be bold or a better way to approach things, but the current situation is not sustainable and some form of plan going forward would likely be beneficial.

I have worked to gain some perspective on Bay City Public Schools financial situation relative to other school districts in the state, and there is nothing to suggest that it is especially under-resourced (Michigan Department of Education 2015; MDoEd 2016). In fact, it seems fairly average in its resources (Michigan Department of Education 2015; MDoEd 2016). Are we to then take the marginalization of this program as an unfortunate side effect of everyday office rhetoric about there never being enough to go around? Or is this another way that discourses shape both expectations and material flows such that a program like BCIEP and its staff learn just not to ask and, if asking, to do so from a place of such deference that any offer presented should be accepted, regardless of its problems or inability to work for them long-term?

I do not, here or elsewhere, mean to suggest that anyone in the local school district is actively maligning the program in any way. Rather, I am pointing out the ways in which problematic dynamics and uneven access to resources can occur even without any individual's conscious malicious intent, in part simply due to the way that institutions and policies are

structured. In this case, the poor financial footing of the program via its inadequate federal grant likely contributes as much to this dynamic and its in-built wariness as anything the school district itself has ever said or done.

### Human Resources

With all the moving parts of this program, the amount of people actively involved in making everything work is - by necessity - always going to be more than the two people hired by the school system to run the program. In particular, patient, compassionate, respectful, culturally-competent tutors who are comfortable with a variety of subjects always seem to be in short supply. The vast majority of tutors during my first year volunteering were moms with students in the program, plus one or two members of the community and one or two alumni. That shifted somewhat during my second year, with fewer moms being available and alumni coming in more sporadically, but those gaps were not proactively filled by program staff seeking new volunteers. They almost seemed to be waiting for previous volunteers to return (or, perhaps, for appropriate new ones to just show up), which may suggest a multi-year cycle of active and fading participation in such things, though I was unable to see much evidence of that during only two years there. There is something especially positive about having volunteers who are intimately connected with the program and, as I discussed in the previous chapter, the family-like community network perpetuated through connections within the program, particularly among women, affects the stability of many Indigenous people in the Bay City area in ways that reach well beyond BCIEP itself. From the way staff and volunteers alike responded to the dip in volunteers, however, this remained the pool of folks most likely to be targeted for more volunteering if requests were made at all and this did not seem to be a particularly effective

tactic. I would note, however, that primarily drawing volunteers from these community categories may have some problematic as well as positive effects.

Subject matter competency, while rarely a high priority in any specific sense, was typically outside the bounds of most mom/alumni/community member type volunteers. These volunteers were overwhelmingly most comfortable working with younger students on reading, writing, some basic math, and a variety of learning games and toys. Once students got to the middle school level and began seeking specific afterschool homework assistance with higher levels of math or science, these students were inevitably referred to or taken on by staff members directly or by me, the lone outsider, but also the lone educational specialist. That is not inherently a problem, especially when there are only one or two students seeking advanced support. When that number expands to three or more, it becomes difficult for staff and even an extra volunteer to address these students effectively, especially if one of the staff members needs to maintain some focus on the overall flow of the program. The observed effects of this kind of bottleneck include delayed assistance due to the splitting of volunteer or staff attention among multiple students, some students choosing to forgo asking for help even when they likely need it, and even, on occasion, incorrect or simply inefficient advice given based on hastily gathered information or a distracted frame of mind. Supporting these older students more consistently with an additional tutor who feels comfortable with advanced science and math, especially, should be higher on the program's priority list.

I have previously suggested developing a partnership between BCIEP and a local university, like Saginaw Valley State University (which has a School of Education), to help supply college students to serve as tutors and the idea seemed to be well-received. If such a partnership were to develop, I feel confident that BCIEP would be strengthened by it, with



students benefiting both directly, from energetic new tutors, and indirectly, from staff members being freed up to address other aspects of the program instead of scrambling to cover all, or nearly all, the tutoring slots on their own. While this might require a period of adjustment, new structures for orientation or training, or just working to find a balance between community-cultivating stakeholder-volunteers and volunteers whose presence is truly more about educational expertise, I believe it would ultimately serve the program well.

Since so much that makes BCIEP successful is its blend of culture and education, as well as its respectful approach to supporting students, an explicit way of helping non-stakeholder tutors get into that mindset would be some form of orientation and/or training. The process need not - and likely should not - be anything cumbersome, but it could highlight some tips for engaging students, especially when they seem frustrated or apt to disconnect, and could help tutors become more comfortable with their role in the program. Depending on its structure, an orientation/training module might even be beneficial to the parent/alumni/community member type volunteers who would like to gain more confidence in working with middle school and high school students, even if they feel unsure about their specific subject strengths. Some training attendees might even take those tips home to help them more effectively assist the students in their own lives when they can't be in BCIEP spaces, further spreading the benefits.

Above all, program staff will need to keep an eye on the feel of the program and the dynamics within the program simply because so much of BCIEP's successes build on its family-like environment, a context that is quite distinct from other supplemental education programs. It would not do at all for that substantial strength to be stripped away and replaced by an ambiance created more by outsider-volunteers than those within the Indigenous community itself. One might even find that since some of the reason for the program's success is on the urban clan

mothers discussed in the last chapter, that other kinds of volunteers are far from equivalent even if they come from within the Indigenous community. What may be necessary to seek out or cultivate is an especially deep ethos of care, a willingness to go out of one's way to provide support to community members. However the next steps are envisioned, there will always need to be an acknowledgment of the social-psychological and genuinely material weight of urban Indigenous women as anchors for the program and the community, so any others - male or non-stakeholders alike - will need to be compatible with a structure in which these women are the pillars holding everything up.

### Internal Diversity

One of the realities of a program with students who trace their heritage to forty or more Indigenous nations is that, while many American Indian cultures share similarities, there are also a multitude of distinctions between them. Addressing all those distinctions directly on a daily basis would likely be quite challenging and possibly confusing and/or overwhelming for both students and staff. But there are subtle ways in which the leaning of the program toward Anishinaabe, and especially Ojibwe, culture(s) can put non-Ojibwe students in awkward positions, discouraging some from participating in certain aspects of the program - language classes, in particular, were mentioned, but also some culture classes. Because Michigan is overwhelmingly Anishinaabe country and Ojibwe culture tends to be the strength of most staff members and volunteers, its predominance in the program is not unreasonable, but more explicit and proactive efforts to support cultural connections for students who are not Anishinaabe would likely be beneficial.

The current approach to the internal diversity of the program fits somewhere along the spectrum between eclectic and haphazard with students learning the Ojibwe version of the Four

Directions and their related medicines, as well as how to finger weave in a Cherokee style, or how to build a Native Hawaiian board game, all with less explicitly tribally specific crafts like leather work, feather painting, and beading mixed in with the rest. The discourse surrounding these activities and the existing diversity in general is somewhat different from the pan-Indianism many scholars of urban Indigenous communities describe. While, yes, most of the students and other stakeholders regularly refer to themselves as "Indian" or "Native," there is no sense that these terms require an amalgamation of cultural traits under one umbrella, like a style of pan-Indian powwow dancing that takes aspects from multiple tribal styles. Rather, in the context of the program, there is an acceptance of Indigenous diversity as commonplace, even if not readily apparent, accessible to those interested even if not emblazoned in neon lights. This allows for students and alumni to varyingly say "as a proud Cherokee woman" and "if I wanted to know more about my specific tribe, I'm sure they'd help me," depending on their personal preference.

It is a kind of "Indian multiculturalism." As strange as that might sound at first, consider the full chapter prior to this wherein I outlined how culture and identity are simultaneously so fractured, uneven, and individualized and yet only developing safely because they are embedded within this community context. While some, scholars and Indigenous activists alike, may find it challenging to consider, the modular nature of Indigenous cultures presented by BCIEP allows students to determine for themselves how they are going to "be Indian" (or Ojibwe or Cherokee, etc). The program is not without flaws, and the challenge of diversity remains a sticking point, but there may be ways to make this flexible approach to culture and identity even more productive for students.

Ms. Noelle at one time talked about using a pre-designed Indigenous curriculum, especially with older students, and while that would expand the diversity of perspectives students would encounter, the structure, depending on its rigidity, might negatively impact the natural flow of the afterschool program, which seems to be functioning well. I might again suggest a needs assessment, a check-in especially with students and families from non-Anishinaabe backgrounds, and perhaps a few brainstorming sessions - with them, among staff (and maybe volunteers), and in a Parents Committee meeting - to consider ideas for how to better support cultural connection, discovery, and growth for students who are not Ojibwe.

One idea might be to facilitate more independent cultural study with adult mentoring, especially on topics being explored through an Anishinaabe lens within the program. While a staff member or volunteer might not personally know much about Diné (Navajo) spirituality or Tsalagi (the language of the Cherokees), they may have a better sense of where to look for answers and can, if nothing else, serve as an interested party, sharing in the joys and struggles of each cultural learning journey while keeping the students encouraged. With an idea like that in mind, it might also be worthwhile to acknowledge the hard work and personal development of students who pursue this sort of independent cultural study, maybe with an annual poster exhibit or as part of a gathering. Students, many of whom are used to earning points and prizes through the Reading Program or video games with "achievements" to win or even scouting for "badges," might especially appreciate a chance to earn some lasting evidence of their efforts and success, possibly based on categories of study (e.g. language, history, spirituality, present-day governance, etc.). This model might even offer alternative modes of cultural connection for students who are Ojibwe. While this model might be an oversimplification of a more natural or traditional cultural learning journey, it would make explicit some of the identity-in-development

processes that are already in motion within the program, likely strengthening them and making them more accessible.

One aspect of this kind of "Indian multiculturalism," deserves a special level of consideration. Throughout the many lessons, discussions, speakers, and even field trips organized by BCIEP, I noticed that nearly every one of them was steeped in history. This was not surprising in itself, since history is long and much of it is unknown to many of the students, especially early in their time with the program, but as I consider this program in comparison with other Indigenous-run education programs I previously studied, I cannot help but notice a certain absence, an unexpected gap in the program's content with regard to contemporary Indigenous issues. Most students in BCIEP are distant enough from tribal news sources to know little about ongoing land claims or fishing rights struggles, about tribal councils or tribal courts, or even about contemporary takes on Native American art or music. But I wonder if the limited nature of exposure to those modern realities through BCIEP, as it is currently structured, is doing students - and American Indian cultures - a disservice, creating a mindset that suggests that said cultures and communities are ahistorical, frozen in time.

What might it mean for BCIEP students to engage more explicitly and consistently with a world where Ojibwe drum circles and Diné (Navajo) rock bands like Blackfire or Cherokee rappers like Litefoot coexist, where making your own regalia by hand is still highly respected but Indigenous people also don suits and participate in diverse forms of tribal enterprise (like the Seminole Tribe of Florida owning the world-famous Hard Rock Café chain)? What do BCIEP students think when they hear words like sovereignty or self-determination? These topics not only did not come up in conversation during program hours, they were barely mentioned in culture classes or gatherings. If nothing else, one of the challenges of this so-called Indian

multiculturalism is its depoliticization, becoming a way to acknowledge diversity but to do so unmoored from the full breadth of specific instances of that diversity in the present. Is this an outgrowth or manifestation of the push-pull dynamics of recognition again? About the ways in which being *identifiably* Indian butts up against the realities of just *being Indian*? Would a culture class focused on commercial real estate businesses in new tribal economies be acceptable? What about contemporary Indigenous abstract sculpture or slam poetry from urban Natives out West?

I do not know these answers, but I do believe that students' experiences with BCIEP could be enriched and enhanced by integrating more contemporary Indigenous content into BCIEP's regular programming, even if that complicates questions about culture as imagined-to-be-static tradition versus culture as necessarily-changing-if-slowly shared meaning. My understanding is that, during the years since I left, there was a Native American rescue worker who came to BCIEP to speak about his experiences helping in New York after 9/11 and I hope that presentation offered some of what I mention above, by acknowledging the past, while speaking to the present (or even the future). Perhaps that sort of event, combined with time taken to consider some of the previous questions or brainstorm ideas, might lead to adjustments in the program that would both energize more of the youth and even help cultural values, traditions, and arts find purchase in new ways.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

The scope of this study was constrained by a number of things, not least of which being that all observations and interviews had to be managed and filtered through both the schedule and the mind of a single individual researcher. There were almost certainly rooms I was not in, conversations I did not hear, significant looks I missed, and a wide variety of other moments, small and large, that I could not catalog or analyze here, simply because I was not cognizant of their occurrence at all. Other things I caught a glimpse of or heard secondhand or thought I understood a snatch of, but was ultimately left without enough content to build a picture I felt confident drawing from in my final analysis. Still, after spending multiple days a week with program stakeholders and related school district employees for two full school years, I know there is something here, that my pages upon pages of detailed – if sometimes rambling – field notes must have something to offer to the field of Anthropology and to studies of relevance to many of the diverse elements of this research.

I set out, most of all, just to understand how a program like the Bay City Indian Education Program *worked*, what all of its moving parts were and how they fit together to make a whole, and I have answered that here. I have even uncovered some of the less obvious and less explicit social projects at work in and around the program, as well as some of its challenges and complications. While functioning largely as a beacon of difference in ways productively distinct enough to affect the very natures and life trajectories of some urban Indigenous students, the program remains caught in various forms of liminal precariousness. It wobbles, like a ball rolling around the edge of a basketball rim but never quite falling into the abyss, as staff members and volunteers perpetually reach for access to improved funding, space, transportation, and acknowledgment of the program's real strengths. In many ways, I see this precariousness

paralleled within the lives of BCIEP's students who are walking the rather indistinct path of urban Indigeneity around what looks and feels like a geographic and historical void – despite the city's deep Indigenous roots.

Everyone enters the program with a different sense of their own footing, with different resources at their disposal, and it is the job of the program to facilitate the kinds of experiences, connections, access, knowledge, and environmental safe space, for those youth to build a foundation they can not only comfortably stand upon, but use as a platform to step out into new futures. The unevenness that might negatively affect experiences of belonging, as well as other cultural and educational outcomes, are mitigated by the program in part by situating belonging as a given (i.e. inclusion, once given, is not rescinded) and as an individualized reality within the collectivity of the program (i.e. belonging as a personal good). In this sense, from multiple angles, the belonging within the program is a reality co-created by the many stakeholders who choose it to be so. Indeed, the program and that well-rooted belonging help mediate student (and even other stakeholder) interactions with external resources, an act that requires the kind of focus and flexibility that a targeted program like BCIEP can manage in ways that a larger institution like a school cannot.

Ultimately, that is what I think is most worthwhile in this study, that recognition of identity-in-development as a process of construction that both utilizes and mediates cultural and educational social projects within and beyond the program in ways that are deeply rooted in the Indigenous community but also fundamentally individualized when successful. The alumni who “made it” are not solved Rubik's Cubes with all the same colorful sides. They are each finding their own distinct way in the world. What they have in common and what students, parents, and other stakeholders echo, however, is that the theoretically distinct (but really quite entwined)



aspects of the program that staff are often being called to account for separately – culture and education, anecdotes and evidence, community and students – are, *as a whole*, what make student success possible.

Through its efforts to persist and provide alternatives to the normative social projects that regularly marginalize some students, is it true that the program, at times, both challenges *and* reinscribes some of the uneven distribution of goods and harm? Yes, of course, but it cannot really avoid doing so. In order to *survive* to offer what it *can* to students and other stakeholders, it sometimes needs to play itself into certain roles, especially to fit whatever parameters are necessary to access resources, and some of those roles constrain its options and therefore those of its students. There is nothing in that revelation meant as personal criticism of BCIEP staff or even staff of the local school district, but it remains a reality in need of acknowledgement and, hopefully, disruption. This perpetual dance on eggshells between radical alterity and the need to be legible – and acceptable – to people and organizations in normative social worlds is exhausting, counterproductive, and, in many ways, oppressively unjust, but when measured in pragmatics, it does allow the program *just enough* of what it needs to continue to function, at least for another little while. In that sense, it is both undoubtedly worth fighting for and never quite allowed to settle into uninterrupted peace.

The Bay City Indian Education Program, and, likely, other programs like it in small cities across the U.S., provides a space where students can learn how to recognize, shape, and grow into someone they can have pride in, someone who can overcome challenges, and someone who can ultimately win at life in ways worth working toward. That is not just about homework or beadwork or actualizing one's potential through manifest personal integrity. It is about growing up and becoming a whole person, and hopefully doing so in circumstances free enough from

trauma that one can focus on cultivating a *quality* life for oneself and not just on surviving. That is what BCIEP does. In the unpredictable, uneven, and constantly shifting sociocultural, political, and economic terrain faced by many members of urban Indigenous communities, especially youth, BCIEP provides the stability, resources, and support needed to both *imagine* a future and then become the kind of person who can *live it*. The fact that policy pressures, bureaucratic factors, and problematic social imaginings about race and Indigeneity mean that a program like this can never truly be free to function at its highest potential – without utilizing strategic performativity to fit constraining parameters or navigate unending resource-related anxieties – therefore, points to some very deep, but ultimately *fixable*, flaws in both our education system and American society.

If we care about ensuring the best possible outcomes for the greatest number of our Indigenous and otherwise marginalized students, then we must actively resist the need to press programs like this into a shape of our own making – cognitively or materially. Instead, we must respect that they do not fit into normative boxes for good reason. Every statistic we know shows us that mainstream models *do not work* for many minority students. Here we see some structures that *can and do work*. We just need to learn how to top up their fuel and get out of their way. So, for the benefit of those seeking to reference this research in making practical adjustments to programs working with Indigenous and otherwise marginalized youth, here is some food for thought:

1. Intensive academic intervention and assistance is critical, but it is *not enough*.
2. Staff and volunteers (even more than students) must commit to uphold the kind of core values that lead to *consistent, respectful, compassionate care*.

3. Safe(r) spaces are ubiquitous with youth programs these days. Consider, instead, how to craft a model of *sustained inclusion/belonging* (e.g. open arms) for that safe space, so that even those who leave (for whatever reason) always feel they can come back.
4. Make relevant cultural opportunities and resources available in large quantities and diverse forms, but do not require participation or related assessment. Let *students choose for themselves* what aspects of their own cultures most resonate with them in the moment – including none at all.
5. Proactively *acknowledge multiple measures of success* and progress, understanding that purely quantitative measures cannot show the full picture.
6. Ensure that, however your program is structured, it has *fully adequate and sustainable funding*. Financial precariousness shapes a lot more than one might expect.

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