
**“Let His Voice Be Heard”:
A Community’s Response to Inclusion of an Indigenous
Counter-Narrative in the District Curriculum**

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ABSTRACT: Curricular counter-narratives can affirm the experiences of marginalized youth, but, given their complexity and unfamiliarity, they can also generate discord between community members. This case study analyzes documents, observations, and interviews to explore ways an Indigenous counter-narrative can create space for multicultural education within a Montana school district. The findings demonstrate both positive and negative community responses to the focus novel, the importance of teaching about context and multiple perspectives, and the potential for student agency and social action. The results also provide cautionary notes about the complexity of critical pedagogy and the importance of community consultation.

KEYWORDS: Indigenous, *Indian Education for All (IEFA)*, counter-narrative, youth voice, social action

[Montana’s *Indian Education for All*](#)
[Theoretical Support for IEFA and Counter-Narratives](#)
[Methodology](#)
[Findings and Discussion](#)
[Conclusion](#)
[Notes](#)
[References](#)
[Author Contact](#)

Perhaps more than any other factor in schools around the world, curriculum influences how students learn—or do not learn—about power, culture, and ethnicity (Sleeter, 2016). Unfortunately, in countries with a history of settler-colonialism, curricular narratives continue to exclude and misrepresent the experiences of Indigenous Peoples¹ (Hickman & Porfilio, 2012; Padgett, 2012; Sleeter, 2016; Stanton, 2014). Such marginalization promotes stereotypes and inaccuracies, trivializes Indigenous epistemologies, and neglects the contemporary experiences of Indigenous peoples (Calderón, 2014; Loewen, 1995, 2010; Sanchez, 2007; San Pedro, 2015; Shear, Knowles, Soden, & Castro, 2015).

Curricular “racial silence” also diminishes enthusiasm for learning, particularly for students of color who do not see themselves in the curriculum

(Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 8). To resist this racial silencing, Indigenous scholars encourage integration of counter-narratives—stories and histories expressed from marginalized points of view—throughout the curriculum (Brayboy, 2005). However, it is not enough for educators merely to include counter-narratives in lessons; to build deep understanding, they need to help students make connections, consider multiple perspectives, and engage in social action (Banks, 2014; Sleeter & Grant, 2009). Curricular policies such as Montana’s *Indian Education for All* can provide access to resources needed to support teachers in these efforts (Carjuzaa, Baldwin, & Munson, 2015).

The purpose of this article is to investigate the potential for an Indigenous counter-narrative (Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*) to create space for multicultural education. Specifically, we consider two questions:

1. How do community members and youth respond to inclusion of Indigenous counter-narratives in the curriculum?
2. How do teachers and youth use counter-narratives to advance multicultural education and social action?

To answer these questions, we conducted a case study of one community’s response to the inclusion of Alexie’s controversial novel in the school district’s curriculum. We frame the study’s results using Montana’s *Indian Education for All* (1999) policy and Banks’ (2007) levels of multicultural curricular integration.

Montana’s *Indian Education for All*

Montana’s *Indian Education for All* (IEFA) is an “unprecedented reform effort 40 years in the making” (Carjuzaa, 2012, p. 4). According to Article X of Montana’s constitution, “The state recognizes the distinct and unique cultural heritage of the American Indians and is committed in its educational goals to the preservation of their cultural integrity” (Montana Constitution, 1972, Art. X, §1.2). To enact this constitutional charge, legislators developed IEFA, which requires educators to teach Indigenous and non-Indigenous students about the experiences of Montana’s Indigenous peoples (Mont. Code. Ann. tit. 20, ch.1, pt. 5 § 1, 1999). Shortly after IEFA was passed, leaders from Montana’s 12 tribal nations gathered to write seven *Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians* (see [Table 1](#)) (MOPI, 2001).

Table 1
Indian Education for All Essential Understandings (MOPI, 2001).

1	There is great diversity among the twelve tribal nations of Montana in their languages, cultures, histories and governments. Each Nation has a distinct and unique cultural heritage that contributes to modern Montana.
2	There is great diversity among individual American Indians as identity is developed, defined and redefined by entities, organizations and people. A continuum of Indian identity, unique to each individual, ranges from assimilated to traditional. There is no generic American Indian.
3	The ideologies of Native traditional beliefs and spirituality persist into modern day life as tribal cultures, traditions, and languages are still practiced by many American Indian people and are incorporated into how tribes govern and manage their affairs. Additionally, each tribe has its own oral histories, which are as valid as written histories. These histories pre-date the “discovery” of North America.
4	Reservations are lands that have been reserved by the tribes for their own use through treaties, statutes, and executive orders and were not “given” to them.
5	There were many federal policies put into place throughout American history that have affected Indian people and still shape who they are today. Many of these policies conflicted with one another. Much of Indian history can be related through several major federal policy periods.
6	History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller. With the inclusion of more and varied voices, histories are being rediscovered and revised. History told from an Indian perspective frequently conflicts with the stories mainstream historians tell.
7	Under the American legal system, Indian tribes have sovereign powers, separate and independent from the federal and state governments. However, the extent and breadth of tribal sovereignty is not the same for each tribe.

Early IEFA implementation remained sporadic, due largely to a lack of curricular materials and teacher training. It was not until 2005 that the state allocated funding for resources and professional development to enhance classroom-level implementation (Carjuzaa et al., 2015; Carjuzaa, Jetty, Munson, & Veltkamp, 2010; Juneau & Smoker Broaddus, 2006). At that point, Montana’s Office of Public Instruction expanded its collaboration with tribes to develop materials and lesson plans that integrate Indigenous experiences and worldviews throughout content areas (e.g., English language arts, social studies, math, science, etc.) and across preK-12 grade levels. For a complete timeline of events, see [Table 2](#).

Table 2
Timeline of Events

Date	Event
1972	At the constitutional convention, Montana acknowledges the importance of American Indian heritage as an educational goal (article X).
1999	Montana House Bill 528 strengthens IEFA as part of a quality education.
2006	IEFA receives state funding as result of legal action. Resources and training become more available through Montana's Office of Public Instruction.
2007	Sherman Alexie publishes <i>True Diary</i> and wins the National Book Award for Young People's Literature.
2010	<i>True Diary</i> is protested and retained in another urban school district in Montana.
2011	June - <i>True Diary</i> is proposed and added as one option to the sophomore curriculum in Sapphire by an IEFA literature selection committee.
2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • January/February - The Director of IEFA in Sapphire mandates a three-hour professional development for teachers focusing on IEFA Essential Understandings. • <i>True Diary</i> is protested and retained in another Montana county. • Spring semester - Sapphire teachers begin teaching <i>True Diary</i>.
2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May - A parent requests <i>True Diary</i> be removed from required reading due to profanity, sexual content, and negative depictions of American Indians. A Review Committee votes to retain the novel. The parent appeals. • November - The appeal is discussed during a school board meeting. At the hearing, parents, students, and community members, many of them Indigenous, speak in support of <i>True Diary</i>. Three complainants argue for clearer opt out procedures rather than removal from required reading. The school board votes unanimously to retain <i>True Diary</i> and review opt out procedures.
2014	The district's Board of Trustees and school librarians are awarded the Montana Library Association Award for Intellectual Freedom.

Since the mid-2000s, Montana has been viewed as a leader of culturally responsive education, due to IEFA (Carjuzaa, 2012; Carjuzaa et al., 2010). Proponents note that IEFA positively affects Indigenous students by reflecting their histories and experiences within the curriculum (Carjuzaa, 2012; Juneau & Smoker Broaddus, 2006) and reducing anti-Indian bias (Carjuzaa et al., 2010). Furthermore, IEFA "improves education for ALL students" (Carjuzaa et al., 2015, p. 203) by focusing on skills needed for critical thinking, such as recognition of the ways that multiple perspectives and contemporary issues affect local contexts. For many Montana schools, IEFA has expanded counter-narrative inclusion, such as

the young adult novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, written by Spokane-Coeur d'Alene author Sherman Alexie (2007).

Theoretical Support for IEFA and Counter-Narratives

Montana's educational leaders looked to Banks' theory of multicultural education (Banks, 1993; Elser, 2010) as they developed IEFA. Banks' model has four levels of curriculum implementation, beginning with a shallow *contributions approach*, in which discrete cultural topics such as heroes and holidays are added to Eurocentric lessons in a tokenistic manner. The *additive approach* adds multicultural content to the curriculum in more substantial ways, but fails to modify the curricular structure significantly. Through the *contributions* and *additive* approaches, multicultural content remains separate from Eurocentric content, so the resulting message is that such content is not as important as the mainstream curriculum. Banks notes that the third level, the *transformation approach*, is the first level to begin *changing* the curriculum. In this approach, multiple perspectives are interwoven throughout the curriculum, thereby modifying the overall structure. Banks' most advanced level, the *social action* level, urges justice-oriented pedagogy. Through this approach, students are taught to "view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspectives of diverse ethnic and cultural groups" (Banks, 2014, p. 54) and then respond through civic engagement.

The model offered by Banks is useful for analyzing the ways that the curriculum represents the histories, experiences, and perspectives of Indigenous peoples. Previous research demonstrates that such resources have—at best—typically supported the *contributions* and *additive* approaches to multicultural education. To advance the *transformation* level of Banks' model, scholars emphasize the need for counter-narratives that transform Eurocentric curricula through integration of the voices of people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Milner, 2008). Within Indigenous contexts, honoring counter-narratives demands attention to both content and epistemology of story. Brayboy (2005) encourages educators, scholars, and policymakers to recognize that "stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 430). In sum, Indigenous counter-narratives disrupt images of the White man's Indian by creating space for Indigenous peoples to define their own identities, in their own terms.

Banks' *social action* level encourages students to challenge injustices. Social action can stem from participation in decision-making, but it can also be enacted through vocal (e.g., public protests) (Tuck & Yang, 2013) or silent (e.g., refusing to read inaccurate texts: Covarrubias & Windchief, 2009; San Pedro, 2015) forms of resistance. Unfortunately, youth are rarely afforded formal opportunities to voice educational concerns or make decisions related to curricula (Beattie, 2012; Mitra, 2008). Today's schools continue to "privilege and promote certain bodies of knowledge that reflect the dominant culture" while excluding or limiting counter-narratives and youth voice (Quijada Cerecer, 2013, p. 602).

Indigenous youth voice (and/or silence) proves a particularly important form of resistance to curricular misrepresentations of Native peoples (Covarrubias & Windchief, 2009; San Pedro, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2013).

Methodology

Research that honors Indigenous perspectives and experiences focuses on building relationships, centering counter-narratives, and incorporating voices from multiple community members (Archibald, 2008; Brayboy, 2005; Wilson, 2008). For this study, we endeavored to privilege both the curricular counter-narrative and the stories of youth and community members. We applied case study methodology (Creswell, 2013) to investigate one community's response to the local school district's decision to include Alexie's novel in the curriculum. In particular, we were interested in the potential of the counter-narrative to engage youth in *transformation and/or social action* approaches to IEFA.

As a methodology, case study is well-suited when the single event, place, or group under study is complex, bounded, and of "special interest" (Stake, 1995, p. xi). This case serves as a "bounded system" (Stake, 1995, p. 2), given its unique topic (i.e., *True Diary's* potential to cultivate opportunities for curricular transformation and social action), definable timeframe (i.e., a span of 18 months; see [Table 2](#)), and context (i.e., a specific Montana community charged with adhering to IEFA). Use of diverse data sources allowed us to synthesize multiple community member perceptions while seeking to understand the broader case.

Background of the Case: *True Diary* as an IEFA Counter-Narrative

Our study focused on the Sapphire² district's decision to include *True Diary*—a popular but controversial young adult novel written by Spokane-Coeur d'Alene author Sherman Alexie (2007)—as a counter-narrative. Specifically, we evaluated the potential for the novel to engage youth in multicultural education and social action.

Written in the voice of 14-year-old Arnold "Junior" Spirit, *True Diary* tells the story of a boy who straddles two worlds, the Spokane Reservation and a White school in the bordertown of Reardon. The novel is praised by critical scholars and educators as a vehicle for teaching social responsibility through awareness of injustices (Wolk, 2009). Bruce, Baldwin, and Umphrey (2008) claim that "to teach Alexie's work is to agree to do anti-racist work" (p. 129), as such teaching requires attention to the violent legacy of settler-colonialism and the responsibility of non-Natives to work towards social justice and reconciliation. At its core, Alexie's novel deals with the issues of identity through interrogation of complex challenges facing today's Indigenous communities, such as inadequate education, health care, and employment opportunities, as well as racism, violence, and the deaths of traditional

knowledge keepers. As *True Diary* is a “stunning autobiographical novel of a boy dealing with the plight of alcoholism, poverty, and hopelessness on his contemporary American Indian reservation” (Wolk, 2009), it offers a counter-narrative to the typically romanticized texts that confine Indigenous peoples and experiences to the distant past.

In 2007, *True Diary* was awarded the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature. Proponents credit the book’s contemporary lens, young and diverse target audience, and potential for teaching social responsibility through recognition of the difficult realities of reservation life (Wolk, 2009). Despite its critical acclaim, the novel is no stranger to controversy, earning a place on the list of most frequently challenged books of the 21st century (American Library Association, 2016). Opponents believe it potentially reinforces stereotypes through negative depictions of reservation life (Washburn, 2014) and/or they challenge the novel’s “frank discussions of sexuality, substance abuse and other touchy stuff” (Shiffer, 2015, p. 2B). While most cases of resistance come from non-Indigenous parents, in some instances, opposition has come from within the Indigenous community (Washburn, 2014). Prior to the case described in this article, parents/guardians in two predominantly White Montana districts had challenged *True Diary*’s inclusion in the curricula. In both cases, the novel was successfully defended and retained.

In 2011, *True Diary* was reviewed by a committee of teachers and added to the curriculum in Sapphire, although district policy allows parents and students to “opt out” of reading a required book and request an alternative. While the city of Sapphire and its schools are predominantly White (approximately 10% of the district’s 16,000 students identify as Indigenous), the community is geographically situated near American Indian reservations. Towns and cities that are proximal to reservations, like Sapphire and the fictionalized town of Reardon in *True Diary*, face higher rates of discrimination against Native peoples than communities located on or distant from reservations (Estes, 2014; Perry, 2009). Therefore, the central goals of IEFA—to reduce prejudice and empower historically marginalized peoples—are particularly important in contexts such as Sapphire.

After *True Diary* was added to the curriculum, the district’s Director of IEFA mandated a three-hour professional development workshop for tenth grade teachers who would be teaching the novel (Baldwin, 2012). The workshop focused on IEFA’s *Essential Understandings*, contemporary issues facing Montana’s tribes, and controversial topics related to the novel (e.g., alcoholism, sexuality, bullying, etc.).

In late spring of 2013, a concerned parent, Eileen, launched a formal challenge to *True Diary*’s inclusion in Sapphire’s curriculum after her son read the novel for his English class. Eileen’s written remarks noted two major concerns: (a) a belief that the novel perpetuated negative stereotypes about Native peoples and (b) disapproval of some of the content and language.

Our Positionalities

Milner (2007) encourages researchers to reflect critically on their own positionality, and such reflection is especially important when the researcher is White and the focus is on (re)claiming space for counter-narratives of people of color. Ideally, researchers should have the cultural insight needed to design studies that align with community interests and effectively interpret data (Milner, 2007).

Glenda: I am a White female teacher with 27 years of experience in three urban high schools in two countries, all of which have had significant Indigenous populations. Native community members asked me to serve as Interim Director for Indian Education for Sapphire's district during the spring of 2014. As a teacher and mentor, I had pre-existing relationships with several of the participants in this study, which helped establish trust. In particular, I invited students to attend the school board hearing, and I supported student activism and leadership in response to Eileen's challenge of *True Diary* during an academic skills course I taught and as an advisor for the school's Native American club.

As a former English teacher at one of Sapphire's high schools, I wrote the original proposal to add *True Diary* to the curriculum. That role introduced a risk of bias in the case study. To increase the trustworthiness of the case study research, I actively sought discrepant data from opponents of the book's curricular inclusion. Additionally, I asked Christine to review elements of the study and verify the results.

Christine: Like Glenda, I am a White female educator. Prior to my current position as a teacher educator and scholar, I taught for over a decade in reservation and bordertown communities. I also served as an instructional coach for a reservation bordertown district, where one of my primary responsibilities focused on enhancing culturally responsive education. During this time, I began working closely with Indigenous leaders, who encouraged me to pursue a career as a social justice scholar. Since then, my work has focused on critiquing curricular representations of Indigenous peoples and (re)claiming spaces for counter-narratives.

As both a teacher and teacher educator, I have taught *True Diary*. Like many of the participants in this study, my students have generally valued Alexie's work. My own experiences with the novel made me curious to learn about the potential for a counter-narrative to support IEFA and community-level action. It is important to note, however, that this project is the result of Glenda's vision and relationships with community members.

As White educators and scholars, we recognize that when we engage in conversations about culture and race with our White colleagues, we are less likely to be labeled as having a personal agenda than educators of color who strive to engage in similar work. That said, we also note that while we are able to learn

from cultural mentors with whom we have trusting, pre-existing relationships, there are culturally unique perspectives we cannot access.

Participants

Purposeful sampling resulted in identification of seven participants (one parent, three students, and three teachers). Around 10% of Sapphire's students identify as Indigenous. Statewide, there are very few Indigenous teachers (about 3%), and although Sapphire is one of the largest school districts in the state, there were no Native teachers of high school English at the time of the study. Despite this, we recognize the importance of hearing perspectives from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders, so we purposefully identified participants with diverse perspectives and prominent roles throughout the events surrounding the book challenge.

Eileen is the White parent who launched the complaint about *True Diary*. Joe, who led the student resistance to Eileen's complaint, is an enrolled tribal member who lives on a reservation close to Sapphire. Two additional students (Casey and Sinead), both White, were vocal participants during a public hearing dedicated to discussion of Eileen's concerns. Two White teachers, Molly and Andrew, were selected due to their experience teaching the novel. Dee, who identifies as Indigenous, has been an elementary teacher in Sapphire for five years. See [Table 3](#) for more information about the participants.

Table 3
Participants

Pseudo-nym	Role	Descriptive Information
Eileen	Parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies as White Initiated challenge of <i>True Diary's</i> curricular inclusion Son read <i>True Diary</i> for 10th grade English class Spoke at hearing and participated in media interviews
Joe	Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies as Indigenous (enrolled tribal member; lives on a reservation near Sapphire) 12th grade (read the novel in 10th grade English class) Led student efforts to support novel's curricular inclusion Spoke at the hearing, participated in media interviews, initiated a petition to retain <i>True Diary</i> in the curriculum
Casey	Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies as White 12th grade (read the novel in 10th grade English class) Spoke in support of the novel at the public hearing Provided print version of testimony shared at the hearing

Sinead	Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies as White • 12th grade (read the novel in 10th grade English class) • Spoke in support of the novel at the public hearing • Provided print version of testimony shared at the hearing
Molly	Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies as White • Teaches <i>True Diary</i> in 10th grade English classes • Has taught for 7 years at High School A in Sapphire • Leader in professional development network devoted to integration of IEFA and social justice education • Attended and spoke at the public hearing
Andrew	Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies as White • Teaches <i>True Diary</i> in 10th grade English classes • Has taught for 21 years (10 at High School B in Sapphire) • Attended and spoke at the public hearing
Dee	Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies as Indigenous (grew up on a reservation; is qualified to teach her Indigenous language) • Has taught for 5 years at an elementary school in Sapphire • Experience teaching in reservation and urban schools • Worked as a state level educational leader • Has read, but not taught, <i>True Diary</i> • Did not attend the hearing or participate in events surrounding the challenge

Data Collection

Documents, observations, and interviews contributed data to the study. To establish an understanding of the broader community's response to the novel's inclusion in Sapphire's curriculum, we analyzed a variety of publically available documents, including Eileen's initial letter of complaint, newspaper articles, written testimonies, petitions, and district policies.

During the three-hour-long public hearing dedicated to discussion of Eileen's concerns, Glenda compiled field notes to document speaker information and arguments. Prepared statements from Casey and Sinead were compared with the spoken testimonies the students provided at the meeting, and the official minutes of the meeting were used to further organize and verify notes. Glenda also observed a meeting held one week after the public hearing, where board members further discussed the challenge and voted to retain *True Diary* in Sapphire's curriculum.

Joe, Molly, Andrew, and Dee were each interviewed for 30 - 60 minutes about their views on Alexie's novel and the book challenge (see [Table 4](#) for sample questions). Teachers were also asked about professional development they

received prior to teaching the novel and classroom teaching strategies they employ. These interviews, which were recorded and transcribed, also served as an opportunity to allow participants to clarify perspectives shared during and outside of the hearing.

Table 4
Sample Interview Questions

Participant	Interview Questions
Parent (Eileen)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you think studying this novel affects your child? • How do you think studying this novel affects other students or the community?
Student (Joe)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has reading this book and studying it in school changed your understanding about Native Americans? • How do you think studying this novel affects other students?
Teachers who teach <i>True Diary</i> (Molly and Andrew)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the concerns that we heard at the board meeting was that there is nothing positive about Native American society in this book. What do you say about that as an English teacher? • How do you guide students in your classroom though difficult conversations about issues that are likely to come up, especially non-Native students who may come to class with negative stereotypes of American Indians? • Which Essential Understandings are covered most prominently when you teach this book?
Indigenous Teacher (Dee)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Given your background, teaching experience, and tribal affiliation, what is your perspective of <i>True Diary</i>? • Are there any positive aspects of the novel? • Do you think it is the way that you teach a book like that that is important, rather than just having the book in the curriculum?

Data Analysis

Data were evaluated using open and focused coding (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). First, Glenda assigned codes (e.g., “parent rights,” “censorship,” “classroom discussions”) inductively to observation notes, documents, and interview transcripts. The codes were then assigned to “organizational categories” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 108) (e.g., “addressing stereotypes,” “negative depictions of American Indians,” “Essential Understandings”) to synthesize understanding across data sources.

To ensure trustworthiness, the participants were asked to validate interview transcripts and the overall findings. We then contextualized results within existing theory, research, and practice related to multicultural education and IEFA. The

interviews with Molly, Andrew, and Dee provided an additional opportunity to verify and crystallize the codes and categories by applying them to classroom practice.

Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore ways counter-narratives, such as *True Diary*, might encourage community and youth to advance the goals of multicultural education. Below, we describe key themes, as aligned with Banks' levels of curriculum integration, which emerged through analysis of data. The first theme focuses on community member and youth response to curricular inclusion of *True Diary* (Research Question #1), while the second and third themes address the potential for *True Diary* to advance transformative multicultural education and/or social action (Research Question #2).

True Diary's Curricular Contributions and Additions

Much of the controversy surrounding *True Diary's* appropriateness in the Sapphire curriculum stemmed from disagreement regarding its inclusion of negative stereotypes, such as alcoholism, domestic violence, and poverty. Banks' (1993) model suggests that a focus on stereotypes—positive or negative—without contextualization and critique can result in lower levels of multicultural curricular integration, such as the *contributions* or *additive* approaches. The case study data demonstrate that Eileen's complaint focused primarily on the book's superficial portrayals of reservation life, rather than evaluating the counter-narrative's more complex messages. In this regard, *True Diary* engaged Eileen only on a contributions or additive level. In contrast, the other participants recognized multiple layers of narrative complexity—positive and negative, and explicit and implicit—that required a recognition of the difficult realities stemming from a legacy of U.S. settler-colonialism.

“Just not reality”: *Negative responses to True Diary.* In her written protest to the school board, Eileen lamented about what she saw as the novel's negative depictions of reservation life: “The author emphasizes the fact that tribal members living on reservations are destined to be uneducated, poor, unmotivated, alcoholics most likely fated to die in car crashes.” For Eileen, these depictions encourage people to see only “the downside...never an upside.” In her interview, she described the positive aspects of Indigenous cultures that she did not observe in *True Diary*: “I have Native American friends....They keep their folklore alive by retelling. They honor their elders like no other culture I have ever seen. They are fantastic at bead working and crafts. They have awesome hand games.” In her view, the novel's negative descriptions are “just not reality” and not what she wants her son to learn.

Eileen's wish for a more positive depiction of Indigenous peoples was shared by elementary teacher Dee, who yearned for more stories about "the beautiful ceremonies, the sharing, the taking people in" that she recognizes as inherent to her Indigenous culture. Together, these perspectives raise questions about authenticity within counter-narrative: Who decides what is "reality" in terms of Indigenous experiences? If an Indigenous person is the author of a work, is that work automatically a counter-narrative? If a non-Indigenous person has knowledge of Indigenous cultures, can he/she be an authority?

"Too true it hurts": positive responses to *True Diary*. In his interview, Andrew, a White teacher who teaches *True Diary*, expressed strong feelings about the importance of Alexie's semi-autobiographical perspective in shaping a counter-narrative that offers a glimpse into real experiences: "Who am I to tell Sherman Alexie, 'You know what? You really should be writing about different things.' Let his voice be heard....It's just one voice, but it's a valuable voice." For Andrew, Alexie's identity as an Indigenous person establishes cultural and experiential authority, and it is not the place of White readers and teachers to question the authenticity of the resulting counter-narrative.

The youth participants believed that *True Diary* offers a counter-narrative to overly generalizing and deficient curricular resources. Joe was emphatic that Alexie's portrayal was realistic, including its negative aspects. He explained, "You definitely learn about what [American Indians] lost and how they are right now." He viewed Junior's courage in leaving the reservation for a better education as positive. Testimonies to the board by White students also focused on positive messages about identity they took away from *True Diary*. For example, Sinead noted:

This is a novel about strength and resiliency, families who stick together, and the power of friendship. If that doesn't depict the positive aspects of Native American culture, I don't know what does.

Since counter-narratives offer perspective and—for many readers—a complex and unfamiliar voice, the "reality" of *True Diary* can be emotionally difficult for students and teachers. Dee described *True Diary* as "too true and realistic that it hits home hard and hurts." However, she noted that seeking the "truth," even if that truth includes negative, painful descriptions, is important in efforts to achieve social justice. For example, she recognizes the complexity of love and support from members of Junior's family, including his alcoholic father.

Eileen felt that *True Diary* fails to teach anything positive about Indigenous culture broadly, and Spokane culture specifically, and—therefore—it does not offer a valuable contribution to the curriculum or to IEFA-related efforts. While her desire to have more content that is clearly "Spokane" is supportive of IEFA *Essential Understanding #1* (i.e., recognizing diversity among tribal nations), supporters of the novel viewed *True Diary* as a counter-narrative that demonstrates the complexity, continuum, and intersectionality of tribal and individual identities, thus supporting multiple *Essential Understandings*.

Transforming Curriculum: Connections for Powerful Teaching

To move beyond the *contributions* or *additive* approaches to multicultural education, Grande (2004) encourages pedagogical and curricular disruption of whitewashed or romanticized Indigenous identities. As the insights shared by the teachers and students in this study demonstrated, counter-narratives such as *True Diary* offer important possibilities for meaningful dialogue about social justice, but simply including counter-narratives in the curriculum falls short of the goals for *transformation* multicultural education. For this approach, counter-narrative content must actively advance student understanding of complex historical and contemporary information.

Building contextual understanding. All three teacher participants described the potential for *True Diary* to connect to policies and historical events rooted in settler-colonialism, such as the removal of Indigenous peoples from traditional lands and the cultural assimilation forced by residential schools. For example, Dee noted, “the destruction [resulting from federal policies] was so awful” that injustices and historical trauma are perpetuated throughout Indian Country today. Andrew and Molly also spoke about *True Diary* as a powerful text for exploring historical context. Andrew said, “[The novel] deals with the treaty periods. It deals with the reservations, the boarding school era, everything.” In Molly’s classroom, students learn “a ton of history that happened right here” while reading *True Diary*.

To develop a critical, historical understanding, the teachers explained that they use classroom discussion about *True Diary* to address stereotypes and misconceptions, from alcoholism to receiving “free” money from the government. Andrew facilitates a question and answer session between students and an Indigenous staff member. This dialogue provides an opportunity for students to ask questions about stereotyping and identity and for the staff member to address misconceptions and fears. Molly also invites Native presenters into her classroom and uses discussion to address students’ stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, histories, and experiences. She sees it as a positive step when her mostly middle class White students realize that they hold stereotypes and begin questioning them. As she notes, “The novel helps to show against the stereotypes because [the characters] are such real human beings,” so students begin to think more deeply about the broader context that contributes to challenges experienced by the characters. Both Andrew and Molly explained that they engage their students in thinking about difficult questions embedded within the socio-historical fabric of the U.S.: Why does Junior live on one of many reservations which were “meant to be death camps” (Alexie, 2007, p. 217) for an originally nomadic people? Why does he need to leave in order to pursue a quality education? Why are the treaty rights of health and education not adequately met on his reservation?

These examples demonstrate connections to several IEFA *Essential Understandings*, especially #4 (reservations were not “given” to American Indians) and #5 (federal policies affected, and still affect, American Indians), although, in most cases, the novel does not provide detail about these topics. Therefore, to be effective, teachers must expand upon the content. Such teaching requires educators to access specialized information that is rarely included in easily accessible curricular materials. In Montana, because of IEFA teachers have access to resources (e.g., professional development such as the workshop required for Sapphire’s educators who teach *True Diary*, lesson plans, etc.), but few other states have such an option.

Engaging learners with multiple perspectives. Teachers who teach *True Diary* can further support curricular transformation by inviting students to consider Junior’s struggle from multiple perspectives. For example, through reading and discussion, Molly encourages students “to put themselves in someone else’s shoes and understand a different way of looking at things.” Andrew uses an illustration from *True Diary* (by Ellen Forney), which contrasts a White and an Indigenous youth, to address the issue of stereotypes. In the image, the White youth wears designer clothes, has an “ergonomic backpack (with cell phone),” is promised “a bright future,” and is surrounded with “positive role models” and “hope,” while the Native youth wears clothing purchased at Kmart and Safeway, uses a garbage bag for a book bag, is reminded of “a vanishing past, a family history of diabetes and cancer, and bone-crushing reality” (Forney, in Alexie, 2007, p. 57). Andrew’s students identify stereotypes of their own identities and where these come into conflict, such as “athlete” and “honors student,” as a means of understanding how Junior feels as the only Native person at Reardon High School. Molly uses film interviews with Alexie to show her students the many connections between Junior’s and Alexie’s own life experiences, including the fact that the author himself broke the cycle of poverty and addiction.

While the techniques offered by teachers like Andrew and Molly help majority White classes connect with Native characters in *True Diary*, they may over-generalize Indigenous experiences and/or over-simplify Native identities if they are not framed appropriately, potentially undermining IEFA *Essential Understandings* #1 (diversity among tribal nations) and #2 (diversity among individual American Indians). Unless teachers go the extra mile to provide cultural speakers, historical context, or deeper thinking, *True Diary* will fall short of advancing the goals of multicultural education for students who are merely—as Eileen suggests—“looking to get through the book” and “take the test.”

Social Action: Counter-Narrative Critiques to Engage Learners

During her interview, Dee noted that learning about the destruction perpetrated against Native peoples is the first step that allows students “to help

make changes.” Her suggestion that *True Diary* can support critical thinking in order to advance change highlights the potential to achieve Banks’ *social action* level. Responses to the challenge of the book’s inclusion in Sapphire’s curriculum demonstrate this potential in practice. For example, Casey’s remarks to the board encouraged “generations of students [to] read this book until prejudice is eradicated” and Indigenous students like Joe pleaded that their experiences be validated through the inclusion of Alexie’s voice.

At the hearing, 33 individuals publically voiced their support for the novel’s curricular inclusion, including eight students (four who identify as Indigenous), three Native parents, seven teachers, and multiple community members. Three people—all parents—spoke in favor of removing the novel from required reading. In addition to expressing their views at the hearing, several people engaged in activism beyond the hearing. For example, Joe gathered 1,400 signatures on petitions to support *True Diary* inclusion in Sapphire’s curriculum, rallied supporters, wrote to members of the school board, and participated in media interviews. During his interview, Joe described ways he had been affected by Eileen’s challenge of the novel’s inclusion in Sapphire’s curriculum. His teachers provided encouragement by listening to his concerns and helping him create petitions, plan interviews with the media, and prepare emails to board members. One teacher allowed Joe to describe his activism for an assignment, and the administration recognized Joe’s leadership by awarding him “Student of the Month” honors. During the board meeting held one week after the public hearing, the board chairman referenced an email from Joe, which “made a big impact” on the chairman’s thinking. Similarly, other community members were swayed by the youth voice in the book challenge. In media reports, Sapphire’s curriculum director described the activism of youth who were inspired to defend a book assigned in school, noting, “Think of what they did....It was absolutely amazing.”

Attention to *True Diary* and its inclusion in the curriculum helped community members become aware of the power of counter-narrative for Indigenous students. Andrew reported that his Native students were more engaged in class: “Those kids see truth in that, and they are validated by it.” Joe explained that comparing his own tribe to the Spokane allowed him to recognize the importance of sustaining culture and language. As a result, Joe views the novel as a book about “what you can do, what you are capable of” as an individual and as a tribal member.

Throughout the case study, the youth participants shared an interest in transferring understandings that emerged from reading a work of fiction to public contexts outside of their English classrooms. For example, following his experience supporting *True Diary*’s place in the curriculum, Joe wrote to the school board to protest the way in which Manifest Destiny (the doctrine justifying settler-colonialism in the Americas as a matter of White destiny) was taught in his U.S. government class. Joe’s actions are a clear example of what Banks (2014) terms *social action*.

Conclusion

True Diary's inclusion in Sapphire's curriculum demonstrates the potential for counter-narratives to promote meaningful multicultural education, to support IEFA *Essential Understandings*, and to encourage youth-led social action. As a result of the response from and action taken by students, teachers, and community members, *True Diary* was retained in the curriculum by a unanimous vote of the Sapphire school board. The Montana Library Association awarded the school district the 2014 Award for Intellectual Freedom in recognition of its handling of Eileen's challenge of *True Diary's* inclusion in the curriculum.

For the majority of participants in this study, the addition of *True Diary* to required reading advanced the goals and *Essential Understandings* of IEFA (Carjuzaa et al., 2010; Elser, 2010; Juneau & Smoker Broadus, 2006). Furthermore, we believe that previous experience with IEFA prepared both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, as well as their teachers, to engage effectively with Indigenous counter-narratives. In schools that do not have a curricular structure such as IEFA in place, such efforts might be less well-received and/or more difficult to implement effectively. In particular, Indigenous counter-narratives may be less likely to engage youth and community members in social action efforts in places with limited visible Indigenous presence.

Although this study focused on a bounded event—the 18-month-long challenge of *True Diary's* inclusion in Sapphire's curriculum—the results demonstrate the potential for counter-narratives to provide ongoing learning opportunities both within and beyond the classroom. In Montana, specifically, both Native and non-Native leaders in the IEFA professional development community point out that confronting and analyzing instances of resistance offer important opportunities for multicultural education. In particular, dialogue and collaboration between social justice leaders and resistant stakeholders encourage the “real, rich relationship-building process” that is vital to the success of multicultural education and IEFA (Baldwin, 2012, p. 79).

Despite Sapphire's successes, Dee noted that it is important to provide “more education out to the community” related to IEFA and multicultural education. Community forums and dialogues; tribal, parent/guardian, and youth membership on curricula selection teams; reading groups that include youth, teachers, and parents/guardians; and use of distance technology (e.g., videoconferencing with Indigenous scholars) all hold potential for various community stakeholders to engage in learning from counter-narratives. Additionally, it is important for teachers to communicate with parents/guardians about IEFA and similar initiatives, as well as about their plans for teaching counter-narratives and other potentially controversial material.

In the current global sociopolitical climate, our findings encourage caution: Not all responses and actions are equally valuable in terms of advancing

multicultural education. While our study's participants emphasized the need for counter-narratives to provide *real* representations of Indigenous experiences, they differed in their response to *True Diary's* ability to meet that goal. For Eileen, and to a lesser extent Dee, there was a desire to support a counter-narrative only if it aligned with a pre-conceived, positive idea of contemporary Indigeneity. While Dee's positionality as an Indigenous woman, educator, and cultural leader qualifies her to critique *True Diary's* representation, Eileen does not hold the level of cultural authority needed to contest the book's reality. Eileen became concerned when she realized that *True Diary* did not express the view of Indigeneity *she* wanted in the curriculum. This example demonstrates the importance of listening to people of color, including youth, to determine authenticity and value.

Perhaps the greatest lesson we learned from the case study is that while it is challenging to achieve the most advanced level of Banks' model for curriculum integration, social action can happen organically and can take on different forms for different people. While *True Diary* was part of the district curriculum, the social action we witnessed through this case study occurred primarily outside of the classroom. Additionally, while *True Diary's* inclusion in the curricula ignited public support from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members, we recognize that many people chose not to voice their understandings publicly. For example, Dee—one of very few Native educators in Sapphire—did not engage in a public response to Eileen's challenge, although she held strong views about, and familiarity with, the novel. It is important for community members, including youth, to have multiple formal and informal opportunities to voice their perspectives related to curriculum design and implementation.

Notes

1. While it is preferable to refer to specific Indigenous peoples by their unique tribal affiliations, it is not always appropriate to do so. Using such affiliations could compromise confidentiality, given the small populations of many tribes. Throughout this article, we use "American Indian," "Native," and "Indigenous" interchangeably, as these are the preferred terms identified by the study participants, scholars, and *Indian Education for All* policy.
2. District and participant names have been changed to pseudonyms.

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