

Forum Research Article

Towards an Indigenous Leadership Paradigm for Dismantling Ableism

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to propose an Indigenous leadership paradigm for dismantling ableism. I begin by defining ableism within the context of school leadership, then apply an Indigenous ontological and epistemological framework to strategies educational leaders can use to dismantle cultures of ableism within school communities.

Keywords: Indigenous Leadership; Educational Leadership; Disability

Leadership discourse framing equity and access calls for dismantling oppressive conditions linked to the politics of difference as a moral imperative. However, leaders, working within nested systems governed by policies and procedures crafted around unexamined beliefs about dis/ability – and the ways ability intersects with race, class, and gender – discount “the institutions themselves (policies, practices, schools) becom[ing] instruments of discrimination (Beratran, 2006, para. 1). Government reports and scholars have demonstrated myriad deficiencies in the various approaches to effectively providing access and equity in American Indian education supported by federal education policy mandating schools meet the unique cultural needs of American Indian students (Mackey, 2017). Social justice literature in education speaks at length about institutional barriers to student success (Fraise & Brooks, 2015; Horsford, Grosland, & Gunn, 2011) and provide strategies for improving leadership preparation by incorporating equity frameworks into preparation curriculum and field experiences (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009). I acknowledge this scholarship is valuable in bringing attention to the needs of students marginalized by discriminatory education systems, but suggest it would benefit from incorporating increased intersectional analysis of complex hierarchical relationships that reimagines the structure of “institutionally sanctioned stratification along socially constructed group lines” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2008, p. 350).

In this article, I propose an Indigenous leadership paradigm for dismantling ableism. The premise of this paradigm centers on three key features. First, U.S. educational leaders’ overreliance on civil rights laws prevent them from identifying existing institutional structures perpetuating inequitable conditions for students of divergent racial, ethnic, and ability backgrounds. Second, Indigenous ontological and epistemological perspectives on the relational nature of place and space, particularly as it applies to dis/ability, can reframe (and serve to dismantle) ableist structures. Third, intersections of race, class, gender, and ability inform the ways in which ableism is enacted in different locations, requiring complex analysis on the parts of educational leaders to understand how their locations require strategies tailored to meet the unique needs of their school communities. I begin by defining ableism within the context of school leadership, discuss Indigenous perceptions of ability, and conclude by

applying an Indigenous ontological and epistemological frame to strategies educational leaders can use to dismantle cultures of ableism within school communities.

Researcher Positionality: Interrogating Dis/ability and Transmitting Knowledge

My positionality largely informs my conceptual understanding of how ableism, intersecting with racism, sexism, and classism, serves to harm school communities. My responsibility as an enrolled member of the Northern Cheyenne Nation to find my replacement and transmit knowledge to future generations requires that my research, service, and teaching be tailored to subject areas intended to facilitate Tribal nation building and self-determination in education. Professionally, I have worked in public, private, and tribal education in multiple roles for the past 17 years. As a public educator, I witnessed American Indian students who required specialized educational services being excluded on a regular basis as part of their Individualized Education Plan when the targeted measurable goals could have been attained through alternative means that would not have required such isolation. I taught the Masters level Education Law course and the Doctoral level Special Education Law course to annual cohorts of Educational Administration and Special Education graduate students after transitioning from public education to Academe. Personally, I am both a person affected by dis/ability and the parent of a child with a dis/ability. My personal experiences coupled with my experiences in public education, teaching education law, chairing doctoral dissertations with special education components, and sitting on doctoral committees for doctoral students from the Special Education program has reinforced my belief that the relational components of an Indigenous paradigm can positively influence dismantling ableism in all school contexts. Similarly, practicing educational leaders have the responsibility to acknowledge the need for dismantling ableism, engage in the work, and ensure they have prepared someone to carry on the work should they leave their positions in the future.

Framing Ableism and Indigeneity: A Paradigm Evolves

Dismantling institutional ableism poses significant challenges given dis/ability has not been interrogated similarly to race, ethnicity, and gender in schools. Smith, Foley, and Chaney (2008, p. 304) define ableism as “a form of discrimination or prejudice against individuals with physical, mental, or developmental disabilities that is characterized by the belief that these individuals need to be fixed or cannot function as full members of society”. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) includes provisions designed to protect the rights of students with dis/abilities. These provisions ensure students are provided a free and appropriate public education and provided services in the least restrictive learning environment alongside their peers to the maximum extent appropriate, yet this law does little to address institutional ableism requiring students to demonstrate the ability to ‘fit in’ as a condition of appropriateness. Gritzmacher and Gritzmacher (2010) point out that Indigenous communities may equate the normative standards of appropriateness associated with IDEA to the federal government’s assimilation goals through the Boarding School era. Campbell (2008) explains that dismantling ableism, as applied to the educational context, requires more than a law mandating that students be provided specialized educational services, but also a

cultural shift in the “beliefs, processes, and practices” (p. 154) intended to reverse exclusionary, dehumanizing othering of students with dis/abilities. This is difficult for many leaders to conceptualize when they already believe they are making decisions based on the best interests of students according to prevailing legal and professional standards.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act attempts to address equity through several provisions, most notably, placement in the least restrictive learning environment appropriate to students’ needs. This provision is intended to minimize the social and psychological effects of segregation, however Beratan (2006) problematized application of the provision and outlined the ways in which it perpetuates institutional ableism. His critique focused on the use of the term “appropriate”, which centers around the decision-making authority of educational experts to determine how and when a student best “fits” into normative school structures rather than centering around the student’s needs. Of particular concern with regard to Indigenous students are the ways in which “cultural characteristics co-exist and interact with disability related factors” (Garcia & Malkin, 1993, p. 52). For example, cultural differences between some Indigenous and Western communities regarding the importance and priority of education compared to other family/community responsibilities, or personal characteristics some traditional Indigenous students demonstrate (or are perceived to demonstrate) such as refraining from making eye contact, being less verbal or competitive compared to their peers, may be misunderstood as indicators of dis/ability by some educational experts rather than cultural differences between Indigenous students and (typically) non-Indigenous educators (Gritzmacher & Gritzmacher, 2010). As a modern tool of assimilation, the Least Restrictive Environment provision encourages more traditional students to question tribal identity and cultural values in order to avoid exclusion and gain access to social interaction with their peers.

CRT and DisCrit

The social, political, and intellectual understanding of dis/ability in the U.S. as it relates to people’s experiences within broad social structures has evolved from a biological determinist viewpoint to a social constructionist viewpoint alongside other civil rights issues (Meekosha, 2004). However, dis/ability has largely been omitted from equity literature referencing intersectional constructs of race, class, and gender (Beratan, 2006; Garland-Thomson, 2016; Meekosha, 2004). Critical Race Theory (CRT) centers around race, positing that racism is endemic in society and has become so deeply ingrained it has become invisible (Crenshaw, 1989, 1993; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000), yet CRT only minimally engages with the relationship between race and dis/ability. Historically, literature addressing dis/ability within an intersectional framework in education is limited to analysis and critique of disproportionate representation of marginalized racial/ethnic groups and boys in special education (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982; Skiba, et al., 2008). Decades of empirical evidence has demonstrated that deeply entrenched practices stemming from systemic and institutional racism, secured through racist education policies (Kendi, 2016), rather than racial bias on the parts of individuals alone, influence decisions made for and about students. This line of research is useful for providing educational leaders research-based strategies for

reducing racial bias towards students who are misidentified for special education services, but it does not address equitable school conditions for students who require specialized learning opportunities.

Dis/ability scholarship is similarly limited in scope, often utilizing race as an additive feature without fully interrogating the complex social positioning of dis/ability and race. Annamma, Connor, and Ferri (2016) sought to remedy binary conceptions of race and dis/ability, arguing dis/ability and race are socially co-constructed and interdependent. The authors assert “issues of perceived dis/ability constitute issues of equity that involve all people...the social construction of dis/ability depends heavily on race and can result in marginalization, particularly for people of color and those from non-dominant communities” (2016, p. 13). To bridge the fields of critical dis/ability and race studies, Annamma, et al. (2016) introduced DisCrit, a dis/ability dimension of CRT intended to “theorize about the ways in which race, racism, dis/ability and ableism are built into the interactions, procedures, discourses, and institutions of education, which affect students of color with dis/abilities qualitatively differently than White students with dis/abilities” (p. 14).

Addressing Issues of Power

CRT and DisCrit both address issues of intersectional identity by analyzing the ways in which “multiple forms of inequality and identity are interrelated across different contexts and over time” (Annamma, et al., 2016, p. 2). Paris (2016, p. 83) further explains intersectionality as “the way multiple aspects of identity may combine in social constructs of reality...[with] the influence of multiple identifications... often mask[ing] the influence of single identity characteristics.” Intersectionality recognizes people have many identities influencing the degree to which they experience discrimination with no one identity more significant than another (Collins & Bilge, 2016, Crenshaw, 1989). DisCrit is distinctively different from CRT because it goes beyond notions of inter-relatedness between race and dis/ability to assert “their embodiment and positioning reveals ways in which racism and ableism inform and rely upon each other in interdependent ways” (Annamma, et al., 2016, p. 13). As a result, educational leaders engaging in practices intended to dismantle ableism must concomitantly attend to dismantling equally oppressive racist, sexist, and classist structures within schools.

American Indigenous peoples are defined as sovereign nations, identified by their unique racial, cultural, and political status recognized through federal law and education policy crafted with the stated goals of meeting the unique cultural needs of Tribal communities (Mackey, 2017). This is particularly salient in addressing educational leaders’ moral imperative to dismantle ableism because “what constitutes disability and what it means to be a person with a disability can vary across cultures” (Weaver, 2015, p. 148). The racial and cultural spheres of American Indigenous peoples’ identity are not well represented through existing theoretical or conceptual frameworks intended to include dis/ability due to the continued political tension arising from the third legally recognized identity construct against which dis/ability must be considered in Tribal communities – the political sphere.

Provision for American Indigenous peoples' education, unlike other racial or minoritized groups in the U.S., is required through the federal trust responsibility established by the U.S. Constitution and defined by the U.S. Supreme Court. Additionally, federally recognized American Indigenous peoples have established tribal government structures that operate on a government-to-government level with both state and federal governments (see Helton, 2003/2004; Mackey, 2015, 2017). Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) maintain the political relationship between these with regard to American Indigenous education is best summarized as an ongoing struggle for power between constitutionally recognized sovereigns. As such, framing equity through the lens of meeting cultural needs is largely ineffective due to the power imbalance between policy-makers and those for whom the policies are written despite federal education policy goals formally prioritizing self-determination in education (Mackey, 2015, 2017). As Gorski and Swalwell (2015) discuss, conversations about equity must start by addressing issues of power, and in the case of American Indigenous people, Indigenous knowledge and culture have only been valued and incorporated to the extent they do not significantly challenge existing social power structures in American society. Dismantling ableism in Indigenous communities requires educational leaders to place equity and the cultural understanding of ability at the forefront of all education initiatives. This includes the interrelated elements of race and dis/ability found in DisCrit while simultaneously approaching work done in schools from an Indigenous worldview using traditional knowledge creation and relational understanding of space and place (Grande, 2009).

Indigenous Perceptions of Ability

There is scant empirical literature addressing Indigenous perceptions of impairment in the North American context. Senier (2013, p. 213) contends dis/ability is a modern identity “culturally imposed upon indigenous” people through colonization where prior to contact, dis/ability was treated “either matter-of-factly or as a valued capacity” (p. 214). Grech (2012, p. 52) contends modern scholars continue to legitimize colonial dominance, stating “disability studies remains profoundly... West European and North American... and focused exclusively on urban post-industrialist settings” despite the fact nearly 80% of all dis/abled people in the world live in the “so-called Global South, the bulk in rural areas and most suffer the brunt of disproportionate poverty”. This trend runs parallel to dis/ability studies in the U.S. context where American Indigenous communities are largely invisible alongside their Black and brown Global South counterparts. Despite vast ontological and epistemological differences, Grech asserts:

“[Western] theories and tenets such as the social model of disability are consistently exported to a Global South it never intended to address. As the imperialistic trail of Western knowledge and practices legitimises this process, debates are perpetually re/neocolonised, discourses are simplified and generalised, contexts (places and spaces), cultures and histories (temporalities) homogenised, and many critical issues ignored or intentionally resisted. They become ontological invisibility” (2012, p. 52).

Australian scholars have examined the intersection of Indigeneity and ability in Australia to situate what the moral imperative to dismantle ableism means in an Indigenous context. Hollinsworth (2013) posits that non-Indigenous practitioners are more likely to diagnose conditions such as intellectual dis/ability in instances where members of the community do not perceive abnormality or dis/ability to exist. Echoing Weaver (2015), Hollinsworth further notes that due to the socially constructed nature of dis/ability, the definition varies across diverse Indigenous communities. Assessing dis/ability within Indigenous communities poses challenges due to Indigenous peoples' differing perceptions about what is considered impairment, resulting in both self-reports (Hollinsworth, 2013) and standardized assessment tools and techniques yielding unreliable results for people in Indigenous communities (Holland & Persson, 2011; Senior, 2000). This speaks to the lingering effects of colonization and non-Indigenous peoples' beliefs that they are better situated to make decisions for and about Indigenous peoples than the people themselves.

Indigenous perceptions of what does or does not qualify as impairment is often assessed by the degree to which a specific condition affects an individual's ability to participate in social and cultural obligations (Anderson, 1997). Hollinsworth (2013) noted separate studies identifying loss of culture and social networks as a greater concern to Indigenous communities than other physically impairing conditions, however there is still apprehension about mental impairment due to the unpredictable behavior and aggressiveness displayed in some instances (Senior, 2000). Unpredictability and aggressive behaviors have the potential to disrupt social and cultural gatherings, therefore, uncertainty of the unknown influences the classification of mental impairment. Transmission of cultural values, customs, and stories are a critical aspect of Indigenous life (Paris, 2016). Further, everyday social interaction validates Indigenous identity within oppressive institutional structures, suggesting Indigenous perceptions of impairment are more relevant to Indigenous peoples, who tend to value social networks and cultural sustainability, than medical definitions or legal interpretations of impairment.

Indigenous Ontological and Epistemological Perspectives

Indigenous perspectives about ability differ from Western perspectives that view visible and invisible impairment as a category of otherness. Indigenous people consider all to be fully participating members of the community regardless of ability, each contributing as intended by the creator, mediated through natural, relational forces. This is a direct reflection of Indigenous ontology that does not seek to establish one objective truth, but recognizes multiple realities exist in relation to one's orientation towards the truth (Mackey, 2018; Minthorn, 2014). As such, individuals are valued while relationships and community are privileged over institutional practices. Indigenous epistemology mirrors the relational nature of Indigenous ontology and neither deconstruct reality to a static object. Indigenous knowledge is constructed through relationships between things in a macro context of interrelated cultural, spiritual, and physical elements (Wilson, 2009).

Towards and Indigenous Leadership Paradigm for Dismantling Ableism

The Ethic of Indigeneity serves as “an applied ethical lens informing educational leadership for socially just and interconnected responses” (Mackey, 2015, p. 167) aligned with Indigenous ontological and epistemological orientations. This ethical framework provides structure for applying Indigenous knowledge in practice, asserting:

1. All matters can be reduced to relationships between people and in and among communities. Indigenous values are defined through the relational nature of all people.
2. Community is comprised of family and each family member has a responsibility to be an individual while remaining a part of the collective. Despite differences, all belief systems are valued and allowed without forcing those systems on others.
3. The political contours within schools are not reduced to an either/or, this or that reductionist point of reference. Multiple solutions can exist but these solutions are not predicated on the exclusion of all other possible solutions.
4. Indigenous knowledge requires the individual to continually strive to find someone to replace them to ensure the transmission of invaluable lessons to the next generation.

Relational Components to Dismantling Ableism

There are practical steps leaders can take that honor relationships between members of the school community while examining structures, processes, and procedures to identify areas where ableism exists and can be dismantled. Leaders can begin by interrogating overreliance on traditional (Western) approaches to data collection and analysis (e.g. who collects data, conducts observations, and/or contributes to conversations regarding referral and assessment; which data are collected; what they mean in the context of Tribal customs and values) and identify all possible cultural differences that offer alternatives to special education placement and services that prevent students from participating in school as fully valued members of the school community. Federal mandates requiring schools to meet the needs of students with dis/abilities rigidly implemented in communities that previously did not recognize the otherness of conditions defined as dis/abling reinforce the social construction of dis/ability introduced as a product of colonization. Indigenous communities seeking self-determination and autonomy in education require educational leaders willing to acknowledge “pedagogy is...inherently political, cultural, spiritual, and intellectual” (Grande, 2009, p. 201). As such, identifying tensions between Western and Indigenous cultural values, then prioritizing Tribal culture over the superficially imposed dominant culture begins the process of reasserting Tribal Nations’ identity. Educational leaders should ensure the provision of research-based, ongoing professional development for all school personnel that addresses Tribe(s)-specific culture, history, and values, ableism, bias, and the ways Indigenous communities viewed people with dis/abling conditions prior to colonization. Dis/ability should not be avoided or compartmentalized into special education-specific professional development. Professional development should emphasize unexamined beliefs, Indigenous perspectives regarding impairment, and provide concrete examples for developing sustainable improvement

initiatives based on the expressed needs and priorities of those in the school community affected by ableism. Educational leaders should seek out and develop relationships with community members who can serve as consultants or guide curriculum development to ensure dis/ability is authentically portrayed from a Tribal perspective. In addition, educational leaders should find ways to reciprocate within the community as needed in order to strengthen and sustain these relationships.

Responsibility as an Individual and as Part of a Collective

Each school community is unique, and each educational leader will have to determine how to best dismantle oppressive structures. As a moral imperative to dismantle ableism, educational leaders will have to firmly resolve that determining how to best dismantle structures is not the same as selectively dismantling structures or waiting until a politically opportune time to dismantle structures. Relationships between people, cultural, spiritual, and physical elements all comprise an Indigenous paradigm centering space and place where people of all abilities flourish and learn from one another. Indigenous communities understand that responsibility to the collective group is just as important as individual responsibility for personal actions and needs. As such, dismantling ableism provides educational leaders a pathway for fulfilling their responsibility to the collective group while creating pathways for previously excluded individuals to do the same. Similarly, creating an unrestricted environment where difference is respected, rather than othered, honors traditional perspectives about dis/ability that existed prior to colonization. As Grande (2009) suggests, dismantling ableism as a moral imperative troubles dominant values and prepares Indigenous youth for future nation building.

Political Contours with Multiple Possible Solutions

An Indigenous leadership paradigm for dismantling ableism starts by redefining dis/ability within the school context. Because Indigenous ontology and epistemology do not recognize one objective truth and reality is understood through multiple, complex relational features, this paradigm begins by interrogating the real or imagined limiting features of impairment within the context of the school community. Further, in what ways is the impairment the dis/abling condition, or conversely, in what ways is the environment or activity creating the conditions of dis/ability? This is an important question because dismantling ableism requires leaders to interrogate structures, processes, and procedures to identify where changes can be made to better facilitate an integrated school community. Another key aspect of redefining dis/ability as a means of dismantling ableism is examining phenomena that have become so normal they no longer seem abnormal. For example, do educational leaders question whether it is students' behavior or lack of classroom management that causes a group of students to regularly be held inside for recess as a disciplinary measure? Are there educational games in classrooms that reward creativity and cooperative problem-solving rather than earning the most points per team at the fastest rate of speed? How dis/ability is defined and making intentional efforts to correct structures, processes, and procedures rather than people is an important first step to developing a

relational approach to dismantling ableism.

Conclusion: The Importance of Educational Space and Place

The social construction of dis/ability is comprised of a complex set of assumptions about what it means to be 'able-bodied' and 'able-minded'. As a social construction, factors such as architectural barriers, poverty, housing, transportation, access to healthcare, violence, illness, and many other factors influence dis/ability (Wendell, 1996). Similarly, as a social construction, dis/ability can be dismantled by attending to the social factors contributing to dis/abling conditions and limiting factors. Deconstructing the moral imperative to dismantle ableism into a paradigm prioritizing relationships between members of the school community, and encouraging educational leaders to view dis/ability and structural ableism through multiple lenses in order to reimagine the ways in which school culture can change, is a simplistic approach to a very complex problem of practice. Ableism is not an issue isolated to educational institutions, rather, it permeates all of society in the same way racism and sexism permeate it. Because of this, an initial Indigenous leadership paradigm for dismantling ableism is at this time conceptual. Centering the experiences and worldviews of those who face discrimination and exclusion due to ableist structures within the unique context of the school community is an important way to correct the dehumanizing effect of ableism.

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