

Lona Running Wolf

## ***Shifting Educational Paradigms to Match Learners: Sustaining Cultures, Languages, and Paradigms Through Educational Sovereignty***

**Lona Running Wolf** is an Indigenous educator who advocates for school reform efforts that include a focus on student, school, and community healing, recognizing the impact of historical and intergenerational trauma on Indigenous peoples and the importance of addressing these issues within the context of education. She has developed teaching and learning frameworks and school reform models that are based on Indigenous pedagogy, which emphasizes the cultural values, language, knowledge, and experiences of Indigenous communities.

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### **Introduction**

*I'm sitting in a room with 25 Apsalooke tribal people listening to the discourse happening in their tribal language regarding the curriculum they are developing for their tribal community college four-year Educator Prep Program (EPP). Not one word is spoken in English. The room is full of elders, young people, and in between. They are all American Indian/Indigenous educators who joined together to make a change in education. These educators are exercising educational sovereignty by creating an EPP that is rooted in their own paradigm (worldview). The goal is to produce pedagogy that is based on Apsalooke traditional systems and the Apsalooke culture and language. This incredible work is needed across the country for all Indigenous students who continue to struggle with student achievement.*

*The same work is occurring for Blackfeet (Nitsitapi) educators who are also doing the work to redesign their four year EPP at their tribal college. These two innovative Indigenous projects are making history. Their work will reverse the effects of historical trauma and create an educational system that is beneficial for their tribal children.*

*As I sit listening to these Apsalooke educators, I feel my eyes well up with tears. What I would do to be able to speak fluently in my tribal language, my birthright of Siksikaitsitapaiks (Blackfoot speaking people). I have felt the displacement my entire life due to the effects of colonization suffered by my people. I am determined to break that cycle. Hearing these educators do their work, I feel hope.*

Over the last decade, a trend has occurred in education. The movement by the mainstream educational system is to focus on Common Core State Standards and standards-based instruction, specifically in math and reading. In addition, many school improvement efforts concentrate on reading and math encompassing data-driven decision-making. Scripted programs in the most struggling schools have become the emphasis. High-stakes testing is driving the system.

Meanwhile, academic scores for American Indian students are not improving. According to data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2022, Montana had one of the largest achievement gaps between American Indian and white students in the country. The average math and reading scores for American Indian students in Montana were significantly lower than those of white students. In fourth-grade reading, the average score for American

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Indian students was 32 points lower than for white students. Similarly, in eighth-grade math, the average score for American Indian students was 32 points lower than for white students.

Significantly, the gap for American Indian/Indigenous students in relation to their white peers has continued to widen in Montana over the last decade. The Montana Office of Public Instruction (2022) has also reported that the graduation rate for American Indian students in the state is lower in comparison to white students. In the 2018-2019 school year, the graduation rate for American Indian students was 65.1%, compared to 87.6% for white students.

Children's mental health issues are also increasing, with a rise in hospital visits for children across America for self-harm or suicidal ideation (Leeb et al., 2020). American Indians are at the top of suicide data in Montana (Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, 2022), increases that began prior to Covid.

The data shows that what we are doing in education, although we are working tirelessly, is not working. Yet the system continues to double down doing the same thing, hoping for different results. For Indigenous students and communities, as Dr. Leroy Little Bear (2000) describes, this is paradigms colliding.

A paradigm (worldview) is made up of a collective understanding of the world according to the customs, stories, values, and philosophies of a group of people (Little Bear, 2000). Depending where you come from and your culture, people see the world through a different lens and the way of life (systems) is developed through those lenses.

However, with the purpose of colonization, one group exercises dominance over another and works towards replacing the paradigm of another (Stewart et al., 2022). When this type of subjugation occurs, the way of life (systems) is designed to match the paradigm of the dominant group and those subjected to colonization are forced to live and survive within those foreign systems. Over time, the subjugated group's original paradigm shifts to adapt to the

new paradigm but never does the original paradigm completely get erased. The shift has created a shattered paradigm for Indigenous people (Little Bear, 2000).

In this article, I will introduce myself and describe my professional background and positionality of this work. Then, I will explore (in brief) the current state of education and offer reasons why it doesn't work for Indigenous students. Next, I will discuss why changing the system to match the paradigms of Indigenous learners will promote success for students and Indigenous communities by reversing the effects of historical trauma. I will also discuss barriers that will make it difficult for this change including shattered paradigms and coloniality. Finally, I will introduce you to two Educator Prep Programs (EPPS) currently doing the work of matching their educational paradigms to their learners and developing teachers who will be able to seamlessly enter into the Indigenous educational paradigm and teach within its frameworks.

This article is a call to action for a need for change in the way we educate Indigenous students within the public school system. Educators, policy-makers, and visionaries will need to work together if this change is going to be successful.

### **Who I am**

As an educator in the public school system, there is nothing more fulfilling than when a student finds their voice and feels visible in the classroom. As an Indigenous person, there is nothing more fulfilling than seeing an Indigenous person connect to their self-identity and feel pride in who they are. I have witnessed these two things but never together. The current system of education pulls in a direction that is opposite of building a positive self-identity for Indigenous people. I have witnessed it and I have spent my career trying to change it.

I have worked in many capacities of school reform. My work has been within the system of education at both the state and local levels. In both

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capacities, my work was positioned by the good intentions of well-meaning “experts” who just didn’t understand the complexity of the problems and solutions within the paradigm of Indigenous communities.

***My Work as an Elementary School Teacher***

As a teacher, I experienced the vast amount of experts that circulate through school districts supporting efforts of school improvement. If it is a district that serves American Indian/Indigenous students, they are most likely a “comprehensive” school according to the formulas of the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) accountability system (U.S. Department of Education & Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2015). Comprehensive designation means that the school or district is performing at the lowest 5% of the state.

A lot of funding goes to these districts from federal and state but along with money comes the many initiatives that promise to pull these schools out of the gap. According to the Montana ESSA school report card data (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2019), most of the same districts have been in comprehensive support for decades, and every single one of them are either located on a reservation or serve high populations of Indigenous students. These districts have been saturated with comprehensive support from consultants and world-renowned educational experts, yet still the data does not improve (Montana Office of Public Instruction American Indian Student Achievement Report, 2022).

As a teacher, I was subjected to following all plans that the experts would bring. This meant new curriculums, new programs, new initiatives. Year after year our data would see minimal to no change. The level of reporting, training, initiatives, and saturated support leaves these districts in perpetual chaos. As a teacher, I was often left feeling like I did not have the autonomy to teach in ways that will connect to my learners or their needs. There is little room for

teaching culture and language or even designing lessons that are from an Indigenous paradigm. I, along with other administrators and teachers, was left frustrated because we work so hard but little to no change occurred in closing the American Indian student achievement gap or moving out of comprehensive support.

***My Work as an Instructional Coach***

As an instructional coach I became highly trained in best practices that the educational experts in the country promised would improve student scores. I worked with teachers in implementing the newest initiatives that promised growth. I saw hard working dedicated teachers driven by data using the most modern and evidence-based curriculum and district/school leaders dedicated to improvement. In large, all the efforts were from the paradigm of the dominant culture including the state measuring assessment, resulting in little to no change.

***My work in Educator Prep Programs***

As a faculty member of a university, I have taught method and content area courses promoting evidence-based pedagogy. My syllabi was aligned with educator prep programs’ common course descriptions within the Montana university system. The learning outcomes of my courses were designed to produce high quality teachers that understand the art of teaching and learning.

What I hear often from the teacher graduates after they begin their service as teachers is that they find it difficult to teach anything but what programs tell them to teach, yet the programs do not know or fit Indigenous students. Even if they had the resources to teach Indigenous lessons, the schedules do not always allow flexibility to do so.

***My Work as Director at a State Educational Agency***

The complexities of why districts with high populations of American Indian/Indigenous

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districts stay in comprehensive support are not like other schools in the U.S. These complexities stem all the way back to the beginning of colonialism when Indigenous paradigms were intentionally shattered. As a state director, I worked in school improvement with the goal of closing the achievement gap. I sat at the tables with many of the experts and tried to help them understand the complexities. I worked to provide a cultural lens to identify solutions to fit the real problems in Indigenous communities. This was difficult and not often heard.

The models of school improvement are so rooted within the western paradigm, it was nearly impossible for change. In this role, I quickly learned how the system works. The laws and regulations of education not only stifles Indigenous learners –but all learners as well. It was glaringly obvious that the educational tenets and tacit assumptions of the educational system create an institutional machine whose cogs and gears are designed to resist change.

***My Work as an Indigenous Cultural Practitioner***

For many years now, I have worked at learning my self-identity as an Indigenous person. Although my ancestry comes from many different tribes including Blackfeet, Little Shell, Gros Ventre, Haida, and Tlingit, I was born and raised in the Blackfeet (Nitsitapi) nation where my self-identity is rooted. I was completely disconnected from knowing my language and culture from birth (as many Indigenous people are). However, thankfully due to my parents who began learning their roots, I was introduced to my culture in my early adult years. I have been fully immersed in learning the stories, songs, ceremonies, practices, values, beliefs, philosophies, and paradigms of the Nitsitapi (Blackfoot) people for over 20 years now.

I walked this self-identity learning journey (and am still walking it) in parallel to becoming an educator and all the roles I have held in education. What I found was that it was nearly impossible to incorporate my cultural knowledge into my practices due to the requirements of the

educational system. This includes all K-20 levels of education. This was unless leaders or educators had a strong cultural identity and shifted their mindsets in working outside the box and sometimes against the system, and I have only seen this minimally. I have experienced firsthand how the current educational system pushes against true equity for Indigenous students and how dominantly the system is built to push against the Indigenous paradigm.

**Redesigning the Educational System**

Changing the system to match a paradigm means redesigning systems based on the lifeways of communities, including their culture, values, language, and learning potentials (Alim et al., 2017). According to Paris, Genishi, and Alim (2017), this work is more than just providing an equitable system of education for Indigenous children in their communities. Redesigning education means that the system itself is developed within their own paradigm and for their specific learners so that these structures are sustainable.

This work will require a strong understanding of how colonialism has impacted Native communities. For decades, the educational school systems have been based on what works for one type of learner and is structured from within the paradigm of western-centrism ideology. Here are some ways in which current models of teaching and learning do not align with Indigenous pedagogies:

- Teaching Common Core standards that do not include Indigenous knowledge or values
- Using strategies and methods that may not be culturally appropriate or relevant
- Goals (college and career readiness) that may not specifically be tied to Indigenous paradigmatic goals and dreams
- Using curriculum, programs, or materials that are not always written to reflect the paradigm of Indigenous learners

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- Students sit in classrooms and at desks for much of the day learning from books, which is not a traditional Indigenous form of learning
- Schedules and calendars are structured from the beliefs of the western paradigm
- Teachers accredited to the standards of the western paradigm that do not equally recognize Indigenous knowledge holders
- Language is specific to White Mainstream English (Baker Bell, 2019), and only those who are proficient in the language will be successful (or we wouldn't have EL learners)
- Educator prep programs that produce teachers that are only taught to teach within the dominant paradigm and perpetuate systems of oppression and marginalization.

In my keynote presentation to educators at the Montana Indian Education for All (IEFA) conference (Running Wolf, 2020), I provided an explanation of why school improvement is not working for comprehensive districts. In looking back to the traditional paradigms of Indigenous people, you can see how the systems were built to create Indigenous people that were holistic (Bastien, 2004). This means that the Indigenous systems were designed to develop people's connections to positive self-identity and their connection to the universe. The educational systems focused on well-being, intellect, environment and based on a collectivism cultural archetype.

An archetype, explained by Zaretta Hammond (2014) in *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and the Brain*, is important in understanding paradigms:

*A common cultural archetype connected to deep culture is a group's orientation towards either collectivism or individualism. Collectivism and individualism reflect fundamentally different ways the brain organizes itself. Turns out our brains are wired*

*to favor a communal view of the world. Humans have always sought to be in community with each other because it enhances our chances at survival. We shared workload and resources. Over time our brains become hardwired towards working and living cooperatively. (Hammond, 2014, p.25).*

To really understand the complexities causing the achievement disparities, experts must be aware of the paradigm of the community. The efforts of turning these struggling schools around is difficult, but it is impossible if the school turnaround efforts do not include paradigm shifts. Shifting the educational system back into the paradigm of the learners, according to many scholars on culturally sustainable systems or equity frameworks, is key (e.g., Alim et al., 2017; Germán 2021; Minthorn et al., 2022; Muhammad, 2020, 2022).

Within Indigenous paradigms, our values also provide a strong sense of self and prepare us for any situation that we encounter. Many call it resilience. Author Amanda Tachine (2018) calls it survivance in which Indigenous people are centering Indigenous knowledge and creating spaces where Indigenous students can thrive and maintain their cultural identities.

Dr. Leroy Little Bear (2000), calls it anchors. Ceremony, songs, stories, language are all anchors that allow us to survive through the constant flux of life. We learn how to maneuver life in a positive manner and overcome barriers because our anchors teach us positive coping strategies and flexibility for a constantly changing world.

### **Matching Paradigms to Learners**

Educational laws such as Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and Indian Education for All (IEFA) require educators to integrate Indigenous cultural lessons in the classrooms. This has been problematic (Stanton et al., 2019) and resulting in many districts only implementing cultural activities during Native American Heritage Month

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in November. Simply sprinkling cultural components onto a system that is based solely on western paradigm does not cut it. Due to many residual barriers that stem from the history of colonialism, the work has to be deeper than surface level culturally responsive pedagogy (Alim et al., 2017)

### **Reconnecting Culture**

Many historical policies such as the Boarding School era were intended to replace the tribal identity of Native children and replace it with the dominant world view (Gerome, 2019). As mentioned previously, within the system of colonization, the dominant group will force their paradigm on to the subjugated group. Over time, this effort begins to crack and then shatter the worldview of the subjugated. For Indigenous people, this meant a breakdown of their culture, language, systems, and self-identity. As Dr. Little Bear (2000) describes:

*Colonization created a fragmentary worldview among Aboriginal [Indigenous] people. By force, terror, and educational policy, it attempted to destroy the Aboriginal worldview but failed. Instead, colonization left a heritage of jagged views among Indigenous peoples. They no longer had an Aboriginal worldview, nor did they adopt a Eurocentric worldview. Their consciousness became a random puzzle, a jigsaw puzzle that each person has to attempt to understand (Little Bear, 2000, p. 84-85).*

The complexity of cultural loss for Indigenous people makes the work more difficult because Indigenous people within a community may not all agree or understand their own cultures. They will have to do the work (without fear) of reversing the effects of historical trauma and decolonizing many of their systems that are still currently promoting dysfunction, trauma, and poverty. This includes relearning the languages, values, and culture of their people. It also includes recognizing and adapting their collective

understanding of their culture to the modern world.

### **Reconnecting Positive Self-Identity**

Generations of Indigenous people experienced historical trauma through many different types of Indian policies. These policies each in their own way contributed to destroying the self-identity of Indigenous people. The dangerous thing about colonialism is that many of the perpetrators believe that they are within their divine rights to subjugate. Many of the policies enacted by the people in power felt they were doing good. One of the most detrimental policies was the boarding schools where Indigenous identities were being purposefully erased.

If you look up methods of brainwashing, these same tactics were used on Indigenous children to make them hate their cultures and adopt the culture, language, and systems of the dominant. These historical traumatic events shattered self-identity, one generation after the other. By 1926, 83% of all American Indian children were in over 360+ boarding schools across the United States (Adams, 2020). One specific goal of the boarding schools was to purposely disrupt the connections of family units because this was a recognized strength of Indigenous people and without that disruption, the efforts of assimilation may not work (Newland, 2022).

Today, many Indigenous people have turned against their cultures due to the centuries of policies aimed at that intent. Many Indigenous people do not want to reconnect to their culture. This phenomenon is one of the factors that most contribute to why Indigenous people lack a positive self-identity (L. Weasel Traveler, personal communication, December 12, 2022).

In his work with youth, elder Leonard Weasel Traveler discusses the sadness he feels when he sees children who are falling through the cracks and entering into the school to prison pipeline. He states: "These children have no identity. They have not had access to developing a

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positive identity that our culture brings and helps them to maneuver the struggles of today.”

As a Niitsitapi elder, Weasel Traveler has worked with many groups to reconnect to the language and culture. His impact in my community has exponentially helped the Blackfoot Confederacy to reconnect to their paradigm. He has worked directly with Indigenous youth over decades and discussed what he sees happening in schools and how this contributes to the negative self-identity. “You walk into some of these schools and see how they feel like prisons or institutions.” He remembers his own experience of boarding schools and connects that to the heart of his work. “I couldn’t speak English and I got punished and abused for it.”

He has helped many Indigenous people including myself rediscover their identity, however many Indigenous people are still left in limbo.

### ***Understanding Historical Trauma (a misnomer)***

People (even Indigenous people) are guilty of wanting to brush historical trauma under the rug. This is because many people are confused by the term *historical*. They see that word and think it means that the trauma happened in the past and therefore doesn’t exist today. Sadly, those generational historical compound traumas that happened in the past were just the Tsunami. The after effects of the historical trauma tsunami is the generational trauma flood that has become the contemporary result. Indigenous peoples’ health and wellbeing, self-identity, languages, cultures, systems, and environments are all still in the devastating and long lasting cycles of trauma that began from the origin point of historical trauma (Duran, 2006). To heal the wounds, one must recognize that the wounds are there and need to be healed.

### ***Breaking Generational Cycles***

Native American children are faced with generational cycles stemming directly from

historical atrocities. Without the understanding of how these policies have created ripple effects today, the after effects continue to get stronger. Experts in education who do not understand paradigms see this only as individual student needs. In reality, historical and generational trauma have a community impact creating the need for community-based healing practices that address historical and generational trauma (Gone, et.al, 2019).

Contemporary educational methods do not include this as an understanding in the current educational system. Very little emphasis is provided for trauma itself. Meanwhile schools on reservations are saturated with children who need trauma counseling. Health (including mental health and physical wellbeing) disparities stemming from these trauma cycles are vast.

It isn’t enough to be trauma-informed. The system of education has to take into consideration how trauma impacts learning and the brain. Chronic trauma has a direct impact on the executive functions of the brain (Bremner, 2006), and methods and strategies in the current educational system are based on fully functioning executive functions such as memory. Therefore, school improvement programming must be based around these aspects. In addition, teachers need to have a strong understanding when they graduate from EPPs regarding how to teach these types of learners in trauma-informed ways.

Finally, the more an educational system looks like the culture of the people, including their language, the more children will be able to build higher senses of positive self-identity. Restructuring schools to match the paradigm will impact student achievement, but there are barriers making this transformation easier said than done.

### ***Disconnecting Coloniality***

One barrier is the collective understanding and intentional breaking down of the colonized education system itself and redesigning education based on the Indigenous

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systems. This may be uncomfortable for many because the system of education is an extraordinary machine that is hard to change. As described by Michael Dominquez in *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies* (2017):

*Colonization as an explicit de jure system of political domination has ended, yes. Yet bans on ethnic studies, the proliferation of reductive curricula, disproportionate suspension / expulsions rates for youth of color, the prevalence of the school to prison pipeline, increasing levels of school segregation, legislation and policy making that target and privatize schools in communities of color, police brutality in and out of schools, and so many other policies concerts, indignities, and assaults on agency, culture, language, and identity persist (p. 226).*

To truly decolonize education, framers of the new educational system must develop curriculum, processes, and systems of their schools that may not look anything like the traditional education and use resources that are developed by Indigenous educators and scholars. Elders and community members may need to be included (even without holding higher education degrees). Classrooms may be located on the landscape, in the environment, without walls. Learning will be through experiential modes and not through textbook readings. This may be difficult for some teachers.

In thinking ahead, there may be a clash of paradigms by teachers and leaders due to the lack of flexibility that many educators will have due to colonization impacts. Many educators won't see their role in coloniality because of their inability to understand due to implicit or explicit bias. For Indigenous educators, cultural identity loss (due to historical trauma) may not allow themselves to see how they may also be perpetuating colonialism. This includes parents within the district who may also not be willing for the school district to step out of the western paradigm and

develop educational systems that match their true cultural identities.

### **Redesigning Educator Prep Programs**

The change must begin in the Educator Prep Programs (EPPs) in which the program is being taught through the paradigm and lens of the culture of the community. I began this article with a narrative of that work already being done. If teacher prep programs and leadership programs recontextualize their curriculums to match Indigenous learners, coloniality will not be a barrier to redesigning education. The work must begin with the Educator Prep Programs that are producing teachers for the Indigenous communities.

### **Tribal Community Colleges as Visionaries**

Currently, my colleagues and I are working directly with two tribal colleges that have begun the work of decolonizing their Educator Prep Programs. The current partnership is a 2+2 model in which the tribal colleges offer the associates degree in education followed by a bachelor degree program in education being offered by my university.

The goal of these EPPs was to graduate local Indigenous community members who would assist in solving the teacher shortages in their own communities. Another aspect of the partnership is assisting with becoming their own 4-year program. To do this, both tribal community colleges are developing a four year curriculum that comes from their own paradigms.

The goal of the curriculum work is to develop an EPP that is rooted in the paradigm of the tribes and includes the Indigenous pedagogy of their people. Their visionary work towards redesigning their programs will have an exponential impact on their communities. The curriculum teams are made up of Indigenous educators and community members and elders.

This work is still in the beginning stages, but the process began by looking at the paradigms of their learners. This included the historical and



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contemporary cultures of their community and the barriers, challenges, and strengths of the learners today. Next, the Indigenous curriculum designers identified what an educator needs to know in order to be prepared to teach these types of learners. They are shifting the paradigm of their programs by reconnecting through their own lens.

The learning outcomes of these two EPPs include everything from the stories, songs, ceremonies, languages, ways of passing knowledge, and the values of their culture. It also includes learning about the brain and how it is wired when impacted by trauma. The outcomes will produce teachers who are fully able to implement Indigenous pedagogies. The curriculum framers understand that this effort can reverse the effects of historical trauma and break generational cycles. Most importantly, these programs are creating critically conscious educators who will one day become the leaders in the district. Such leadership is important for the work of transformational Indigenous processes (Minthorn et al., 2022).

### **Implications for All Educators**

The importance of understanding paradigms assists educators in understanding why our Indigenous students have a gap in achievement. When looking at the data from the Montana Office of Public Instruction (2022), I recommend that educators use a paradigm lens. What we see is not an achievement gap (because our Indigenous learners are just as smart and capable as any other learner).

What we see is Indigenous students who have not adapted fully to the western paradigm and therefore do not perform as well in that system. Author Amanda Tachine (2022) asks this question: What would education look like if our educational systems measured success based on how Indigenous communities measure success? The work for educators must be to ask themselves this question.

We must look into our own practices

(pedagogy) and determine if we are in fact perpetuating colonialism (coloniality). Once we begin to disconnect from a colonial mindset, we can begin the work of decolonizing classrooms, curriculums, and programs (Minthorn et al., 2022). School administrators and boards must also do the work of decolonizing their mindsets. There are training opportunities that will help districts do this work, but the work cannot come from experts who do not understand or grants that are creating more initiatives that are not built for Indigenous learners.

Once we decolonize our own mindsets, systems can then begin their process of decolonizing and redesigning education to match the paradigms of their learners. It sounds radical but it is either do this or continue to be in the bottom 5% perpetually.

Einstein famously said, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." It is time to try new approaches and strategies in order to achieve better outcomes for our Indigenous children. I am ready to roll up my sleeves, are you?

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