Understanding School Climate for American Indian Youth: A CBPR Case Study Approach

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Introduction and Purpose

With funding from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), Child Trends, in partnership with the Center for Native American Youth (CNAY), collaborated with a tribe in a Southwestern U.S. state to conduct a five-year community-based participatory research (CBPR) program to explore American Indian students' perceptions of school climate and identify opportunities for school and community leaders to create safer and more supportive learning environments for American Indian students and their families. To do so, we conducted a systematic review of participating schools' websites, a youth photovoice project, interviews with school staff and students, and a student school climate survey. This report gives an overview of the goals and purpose of the project; explains how youth, community members, and local and school leaders were engaged throughout the project; discusses challenges that were encountered and how the study team navigated those challenges in partnership with the community; describes the data collection activities and findings; and shares cross-cutting implications and lessons learned.

Project Background

A safe school climate—free from violence and fear—is the critical starting point for students' educational engagement and success. Beyond just providing students with a safe space, schools must also be a place where youth can grow, connect, and thrive, learning the lessons that will help them transition into happy, healthy, and successful adults. The importance of school climate—a multifaceted construct to describe the school experience, which includes domains such as engagement (e.g., student-teacher relationships, school and community connections), safety (e.g., freedom from harassment and bullying), and environment (e.g., having fair and transparent student discipline policy, appropriate facilities)—to critical education outcomes like attendance, test scores, grade promotion, and high school completion has been well-documented by research.[i] Unfortunately, however, research has also shown that not all students have equal access to safe and supportive school climates.[ii]

One key group who experiences disparities in school climate is American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) students. Research has consistently documented that AIAN students are less likely to experience positive school climates and are more likely to have negative academic, social, and health outcomes than their peers.[iii] AIAN students, for example, perceive less total social support, including less teacher support than White, Black, and Hispanic students and less classmate support than White and Hispanic students.[iv] These findings are particularly troubling given that research finds that student-teacher relationship quality, school connectedness, and disciplinary disparities are connected.[v,vi] AIAN students also report experiencing unfair discipline practices, bullying and harassment from their peers, and a cultural bias against them in the classroom, both in terms of the exclusion of their culture and history in classroom curriculum as well as in teacher pedagogical practices.[vii,viii]

When considering school climate among AIAN students, it is important to acknowledge the role of systemic discrimination and racism—both historical and contemporary—against AIAN communities. For example, systematic assimilative efforts such as 19th- and 20th-century boarding schools, which were rife with sexual and physical abuse, intentionally isolated youth from their families, communities, and culture.[ix,x] Similarly, the perpetuation of negative stereotypes[xi] and the trivialization and abuse of AIAN cultures and heritage through, for instance, the use of stereotypical imagery for school mascots, can further disconnect AIAN students from their schools.[xii,xiii] Moreover, the lack of AIAN representation among teachers and school administrative staff, experiences of being bullied, and perception that their cultural background is not respected can lead AIAN students to feel further alienated and less connected to school.[xiv,xv,xvi,xvii]

Project Goals and Objectives

Although research has documented disparities in school climate among AIAN students, most of this research has been based on pre-existing administrative data and relatively few studies have included the voices of AIAN students themselves. In response to this critical gap in the school climate knowledgebase,

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Child Trends and CNAY partnered with a tribal community in the Southwestern U.S. to better understand how American Indian students perceive their school climate and the factors that contribute to such perceptions. Given that research has shown that other students of color, such as Black and Hispanic students, also experience disparities in school climate, this study also aimed to understand the similarities and differences between American Indian students' perceptions of school climate and those of other students of color.

Our study objectives were as follows:

1. Engage American Indian youth, their peers, their families, and community and school stakeholders to understand perceptions of school climate;

2. Identify factors related to variations in perceptions of school climate;

3. Compare the experiences of American Indian youth with those of their peers;

4. Develop promising and culturally relevant recommendations to promote positive school climates for American Indian youth; and

5. Share findings with local stakeholders as well as the broader research, practitioner, and policy fields.

Although we were able to achieve many of our objectives, our tribal partner experienced several significant challenges throughout the life of the project which detrimentally impacted the study, and more importantly, the students and other individuals who lived in the tribal community. For example, the state forcibly closed the only tribally-run, traditional high school on the reservation, requiring all students to transfer to public high schools off-reservation or attend an alternative school on the reservation. In addition to disrupting the students' education, this school closure resurfaced past traumatic experiences and injustices that many of the students' caregivers and other relatives previously experienced from a public school district near to the reservation. Subsequently, given long-standing structural inequities and racism, our community partner—like many tribal communities—was hit hard by the COVID-19

pandemic.[xviii,xix] Students living on the reservation experienced high death rates among caregivers, Elders (who are critical for preserving cultural traditions), and extended family members. Further, the community's Tribal Council and Education Board had to navigate challenges related to providing access to broadband internet and technology so students could participate in online classes; getting meals to students who had previously relied upon access to free school lunches; and connecting students to community services, like mental health services, that they had previously been able to access through their schools. Similarly, the Child Trends team also navigated personal challenges caused by the pandemic, including issues with physical and mental health, loss of loved ones, and access to childcare. Collectively, these challenges led to lengthy delays in securing the necessary approvals of data collection procedures (and modifications to those procedures), the need to pivot and adjust data collection procedures to respond to changing contexts within the community, and low study participation rates as students, teachers, and caregivers had limited bandwidth and were experiencing high levels of burnout.

As a result of the above-mentioned challenges, the project shifted to a focus on understanding American Indian students' perspectives through a variety of different data collection strategies to obtain a more complete understanding of their experiences rather than engaging in a comparative study. Importantly, the project maintained a focus on informing school and community leaders as they make crucial decisions about how to ensure schools are safe and supportive environments for American Indian students and their families—a focus that became even more salient in the face of the lasting impact the pandemic has had on schools, students, families, and their communities.

Project Design

As noted above, the project was led by Child Trends in collaboration with CNAY and several local partners. Child Trends, including two local community liaisons hired by Child Trends, led all major study activities, including community engagement, data collection and analysis, and reporting. CNAY,

particularly the local site coordinators hired from the community, was involved in community engagement, outreach to community partners, interpretation of the study findings, and supporting the creation of the deliverables produced through the project. We describe how members of the community were engaged throughout the life of the study in more detail below.

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) Approach

An effective understanding of American Indian experiences and the identification of promising approaches to address disparities in educational experiences is contingent on the authentic engagement of members of the American Indian community. Thus, to achieve our study's goals and objectives, we planned to use a CBPR program. CBPR is an approach to research that equitably involves community members, key beneficiaries, and researchers in all aspects of a research project.[xx] Beyond ensuring that the perspectives, insights, and expertise of the American Indian community are included in the work,[xxi] many Tribal Nations require that research done in their communities be conducted from a CBPR approach, given their history of negative experiences with researchers.[xxii]

To implement a CBPR approach, our project was advised by a Partnership Board (PB) and a Local Advisory Board (LAB), inclusive of community members representing the perspectives of school staff, parents, youth, the Tribal Council, and the Tribal Education Board. Throughout the course of the project, Child Trends and CNAY team members met with members of the LAB and PB regularly and provided routine project updates via email. Members of the LAB and PB provided Child Trends and CNAY staff training on the tribe's history and culture, kept the study team informed of happenings in the community, shared the priorities of the Tribal Council and Education Board, informed the data collection protocols and procedures, supported recruitment, helped interpret findings, and provided guidance for (and, for a few members, co-authored) the study deliverables. In total, we met as a group with the project LAB and/or PB 6 times—two of which were multi-day, in-person convenings that occurred prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic—and engaged in one-on-one calls with individual members of the LAB and/or PB as

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needed.

Child Trends and CNAY are currently working to get on the schedule for one of the Tribal Education Board's twice-monthly meetings in January 2023. During this meeting, Child Trends will provide a presentation of the study findings, share and get feedback on the products produced through this project, and get additional clarification on the disclosure review and study close-out process. Following the meeting, Child Trends will work with CNAY, the LAB, the PB, and members of the Education Board to finalize and disseminate the products produced through this project.

Navigating Challenges

Grounded in our commitment to CBPR as an approach for respecting and uplifting the perspectives and decisions of our proposed tribal community partners, the project team navigated many situations that resulted in shifts to the project scope and scale, including but not limited to one tribal community deciding not to proceed as a partner in the project, a complex and lengthy process for waiving federal data archiving requirements, the closure of a partnering tribally-operated school, a global pandemic, staff turnover within partnering entities, and extreme weather events. Regardless of the circumstances faced, our partnership focused on adapting in ways that would allow sustained focus on our initial project goals and objectives.

As the project encountered several challenges, noted above, the CBPR approach and the relationships built early on through in-person meetings proved critical for revising our research design, methods, data analysis, and interpretation. In 2022, we shifted from a comparative case study design to a phenomenological study design. As part of the revised study plan, we narrowed our school engagement to one tribally-operated school and one nearby non-tribal public school. Data collection included a review of the participating schools' websites to examine how elements of school climate are represented to students, families, and community members; a youth photovoice project; student and staff interviews; and a study school climate survey. Details of each data collection activity and its associated findings are

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described in the subsequent sections. The protocol for each activity was shared with the project's LAB and PB members for input, then protocols were revised and circulated through various approving bodies, including the Tribal Education Board, Child Trends' Institutional Review Board (IRB), and NIJ's Human Subjects Protections Office. Draft findings were also shared with LAB and PB members, then revised, and will be presented to the Tribal partner community's Education Board for final approval.

Methods

Subjects and Data Collection

To better understand how to create safe and supportive learning environments for American Indian youth, Child Trends researchers worked with community partners and staff at the two study schools to: (1) conduct 90-minute interviews with American Indian students and school staff, (2) administer surveys to students, prioritizing American Indian students, (3) facilitate a two-day, six-hour photovoice project with American Indian students, and (4) conduct a review of the cultural relevance of school website content.

Recruitment for the school staff interviews was restricted to the two study schools. Recruitment for student-involved data collection focused on youth living in the tribal community but was not limited to students attending study schools. The website review was conducted in spring 2022; school staff and student interviews occurred in fall and winter 2021; survey administration occurred in summer and fall 2022; and the photovoice activity occurred in summer 2022. All youth who participated in data collection were in enrolled in the tribally-operated school or a middle or high school in one of three neighboring school districts. Among the four student interviewees, three were female high school students and one was a male middle school student; none attended either of the two study schools. Among survey takers, 80 percent were high school students, and one was under 19 years of age but had already

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Interviews	4
Photovoice	6
Tribally-operated school staff	
Interviews	3
Non-Tribally-operated school staff	
Interviews	3

graduated high school; all but one identified as American Indian or Alaska Native and half identified as male. Two of the survey takers attended the tribally-operated school and one survey taker attended the other study school. Among photovoice participants, two were enrolled in high school and four were enrolled in middle school, all identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, and four identified as male; none attended either of the two study schools. The six school staff that participated in interviews were split evenly across the two study schools and each school had two female and one male staff that participated. Staff from both schools included at least one principal or administrative leader. With respect to race and ethnicity, all of the staff that were interviewed from the tribally-operated school identified as White, while the staff at the other study school identified as Latinx, American Indian, and White.

Data Analysis

Interviews

For the student and staff interview data, we employed a deductive, rapid analysis approach. First, a member of the study team who had conducted many of the interviews developed summaries of the individual interviews using a template based on the key themes covered in the interview protocol. Next, the individual interview summaries were consolidated to reflect common themes from respondents within each of the two participating study schools (i.e., the tribally-run school and the high school in a neighboring school district), which were then compared and contrasted to identify similarities and differences. A preliminary summary of the data was shared with members of the LAB and PB, who shared feedback on their interpretations of the themes and described their perspectives on the generalizability of the themes to other students in the community—all of which was incorporated into the final summary.

Photovoice

For the photovoice data, the two members of the study team that conducted the photovoice sessions with the youth engaged in an inductive analysis of their notes, artifacts from the group activities, and the photos and captions submitted by the youth participants. Each identified the key themes that

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emerged based on their review and met to discuss their findings. The joint list of key themes and recommendations they developed was first presented to the two community members from the LAB and PB who had assisted with facilitation of the photovoice sessions, and then shared with the project's full LAB and PB. Members of the LAB and PB shared their interpretations of the themes, which were incorporated in the final summary.

Surveys

The survey data were analyzed descriptively, given the sample size limitation and the exploratory nature of the project. Patterns among male and female respondents were examined combined and separately. Differences in patterns by gender are summarized in the findings; however, due to the limited sample size, formal statistical comparisons were not run. The differences by gender are presented merely to highlight the potential value of exploring such differences in future research, and should be interpreted with caution, as they may be an artifact of the small sample size.

Website review

For the website review, we employed a deductive, rapid analysis approach. First, a member of the study team reviewed the school websites for each of the two study schools using a spreadsheet template we developed to represent key domains of school climate. Next, the reviewer developed individual summaries for each school that summarized the content in the template. Finally, the individual summaries were compared and contrasted to identify similarities and differences. A preliminary summary of the findings was shared with members of the LAB and PB, who commented on the themes and shared their interpretations of the findings, which were then incorporated into the final summary.

Findings

While sample sizes from our data collection activities are small, we were able to capture different perspectives across the various data collection activities. Further, the variety of data collection strategies

used provided us with a more nuanced understanding of the different aspects of the school climate experience among the American Indian student participants in the study. Additionally, as noted above, members of the LAB and PB were actively engaged in the interpretation of the study findings and these members shared their insights as to how generalizable the findings appear based on their own experiences engaging with American Indian students in their personal and professional roles within the partnering tribal community.

We have organized the findings around the three domains of the U.S. Department of Education's School Climate Framework: engagement, safety, and environment. First, we summarize the perspectives of students who participated in our surveys, interviews, and photovoice activity. Next, we present data from school staff along with a summary of our website review. We have separated these findings because, for the most part, students that participated in the study activities did not attend the two study schools. So, while it is instructive to explore the perspectives of school staff in context with the information the schools present on their website, we do not know whether those school contexts reflect the experiences of the majority of students who did not attend those schools.

Engagement refers to strong relationships between students, teachers, families, and schools, and strong connections between schools and the broader community.

Student Experiences

For the most part, American Indian students in our study reported feeling like a part of their school. and described having ample opportunities to engage in the kinds of activities that help them feel connected to their school. Students also reported mostly positive personal experiences with school staff, with their peers, and between their families and school staff. However, many students also reported feeling uncomfortable talking to school staff about a problem they might be having. Notably, while the students shared that they felt most supported by school staff who shared their background, many reported that their school does not have many staff that share their racial, ethnic, or cultural background.

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Some students also reported unfair treatment of students by some staff at their school based on their race, ethnicity, or cultural background. With respect to representation of American Indians in their school's curriculum and extracurricular offerings, survey respondents tended to be more positive in their assessments compared to what was shared by students that participated on photovoice or interviews. Further research is warranted to examine whether this variation is a true reflection of different experiences or an artifact of the method of data collection (i.e., survey versus discussion), which could have implications for future research with American Indian students about school climate. Below we present a more detailed analysis of student experiences.

Students reported mostly positive personal experiences with school staff.

Most students (80%) surveyed agreed (n=8) or strongly agreed (n=4) that their teachers care about them. The importance of supportive relationships between students and school staff was discussed by photovoice participants and also during student interviews. Photovoice participants described feeling comfortable in classes with teachers who were "funny," noting that those teachers often seemed to better understand them. Some students also described a school-sponsored water balloon fight as an example of something their school did that made students feel welcome and allowed them to "have fun." Being fun or funny wasn't always required, though. One student described an incident when he had to take time off school to attend a Tribal ceremony, and explained how his teacher made sure he had adequate time and support to catch up on the work he had missed. Another student described similar support when he was out of school due to illness. All four students that participated in interviews stated that they felt all students at their school had at least one staff member that they could approach, talk with, and ask for help.

Students described school staff's unfair treatment of their peers and their discomfort discussing their problems with school staff.

Despite the generally positive regard for school staff, some students reported strained or challenging relationships. For example, one third (33%) of survey participants (n=5) did not think staff at their school

treat all students respectfully, and nearly half (47%; n=7) said they did not feel comfortable talking to adults at their school about problems they might have. All but one survey respondent (93%) agreed (n=9) or strongly agreed (n=5) that they felt more supported by teachers and school staff that share they racial, ethnic, or cultural background, but about one quarter (27%) of respondents (n=4) said none of the school staff share their racial, ethnic, or cultural background, and only one-third (33%; n=5) said a few staff shared their background.

Among photovoice participants, nearly all described school as stressful. Some highlighted the role of school staff in exacerbating stress, describing incidents when they perceived teachers to be rushing them or speaking to them harshly, which they explained made them feel like these teachers did not respect students. Two of the students that participated in interviews also discussed challenging relationships with staff, reporting that while students at their school are not treated differently based on race, ethnicity, culture, gender, or sexuality by their peers, they had seen staff members treating students differently based on these factors. Another student remarked that teacher burnout was noticeable in the classroom, suggesting that staff wellness can impact student relationships with staff.

Relationships among students and between school staff and families were mostly perceived as positive.

Most students (80%) agreed (n=8) or strongly agreed (n=4) that students at their school get along well with each other; the pattern was the same with respect to people of different cultural backgrounds, races, or ethnicities. Photovoice participants often mentioned opportunities to interact with their friends as an important part of feeling safe and welcome at school. Students that participated in interviews echoed the sentiments from the survey, describing peer relationships at their schools as good. One student interview participant even stated that there had been a recent significant change at their school since the pandemic, noting that there used to be a lot of fighting. Nearly every survey respondent (93%) agreed (n=6) or strongly agreed (n=8) that they feel their parents/guardians are respected by their teachers and other school staff. This was echoed by the four students that participated in interviews, who

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reported that they felt teachers had a good relationship with families—even if it took some work to establish those relationships, as one participant stated.

Students reported ample opportunities to get involved in school activities that help them feel connected.

Most survey respondents (73%) agreed (n=9) or strongly agreed (n=2) that they feel like a part of their school. However, this is an area where males and females had different patterns, with nearly half (43%) of the male respondents (n=3) saying they do not feel like a part of their school, compared to only one (13%; n=1) of the female respondents saying she did not feel like a part of her school. When it comes to opportunities to get involved in extracurricular activities or have a say in classroom activities and rules, survey responses were overwhelmingly positive: most (93%) agreed (n=12) or strongly agreed (n=2) that students have lots of chances to help decide things like class activities and rules, and most (87%) agreed (n=11) or strongly agreed (n=2) that there are lots of chances for students to get involved in sports, clubs, and other school and extracurricular activities. Photovoice participants talked about the role that activities like sports, art, and music have in helping them to feel proud and connected to their culture.

Perceptions of cultural representation were mixed, but many students want their schools to do more.

While a majority (73%) of survey respondents agreed (n=7) or strongly agreed (n=4) that their school provides instructional materials that reflect their cultural background, ethnicity, and identity, about one in four respondents (27%; n=4) disagreed. Despite the positive assessment in the surveys, photovoice participants described a relative lack of representation of American Indians at their schools. When asked directly, most photovoice participants reported that their school did not have any clubs or other activities that focus on Native American students. During the photography activity, which took place in a tribal school on the reservation that intentionally includes AIAN cultural elements including art and language, several students took pictures of art that represents their cultural heritage as part of their discussion of school climate. Three of the four students that participated in interviews also indicated that their culture and background were not regularly included within classroom resources or materials. One student talked

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about how their cultural beliefs have helped to keep them safe and out of danger. Another reported that while their culture and background are incorporated into some school activities, they would like their culture to be treated the same way other cultural backgrounds are treated.

It is unclear whether the discrepancy between the survey responses and the photovoice and interview participants is due to true differences in the experiences of the different students or if engaging in discussion elicits deeper reflection or creates additional trust necessary to speak more frankly about their experiences.

Safety refers to schools and school-related activities where students are safe from violence, bullying, harassment, and controlled-substance use.

Despite mostly positive assessments of peer relationships at schools, some students did report instances of violence and bullying, and one in five reported feeling unsafe going to and from school. There were some notable differences in response patterns with respect to fights at school and teasing based on race or ethnicity and between male and female survey respondents; these differences should be interpreted with caution given the small sample size. Further, while the survey did not address school security, the topic was addressed in photovoice and interview conversations. Those conversations revealed that students had mixed feelings about school security, including some concerns about possible bias among school security staff. Below we present a more detailed analysis of student experiences.

Some students reported experiences of violence, although patterns differed by gender.

Most survey respondents (80%) agreed (n=8) or strongly agreed (n=4) that they feel safe going to and from school; however, one in five (20%; n=3) disagreed. With respect to specific acts of violence or harassment, more than half (53%) of the students agreed (n=5) or strongly agreed (n=3) that students at their school fight a lot, and one third (33%) agreed (n=3) or strongly agreed (n=2) that students at their school are teased or picked on about their race or ethnicity. When it comes to these experiences of violence and harassment, there were different response patterns for male and female students. For example, more than half (56%) of male respondents disagreed (n=3) or strongly disagreed (n=1) that

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students fight a lot at their school, while only one quarter (29%) of female respondents disagreed (n=1) or strongly disagreed (n=1). On the other hand, nearly all (85%) female respondents disagreed (n=3) or strongly disagreed (n=3) that students are teased or picked on about their race or ethnicity, while the majority (57%) of male respondents agreed (n=2) or strongly agreed (n=2) that such teasing occurs at their school. While we cannot draw strong conclusions from such a small sample, it is important to keep in mind that gender differences may exist with respect to experiences of violence and harassment at school.

Many students reported bullying and cyberbullying.

Bullying and cyberbullying was a problem reported by survey respondents; most (73%) agreed (n=8) or strongly agreed (n=3) that cyberbullying occurs and nearly half (47%) agreed (n=5) or strongly agreed (n=2) that bullying occurs. While bullying was not a theme that was discussed frequently during the two photovoice sessions, three of the five students that participated in the photography activity created photo captions that described Native American students as feeling lonely or being bullied at school. It is notable that although both of the female participants created photographs related to bullying and isolation, during the group activity earlier in the day where they were asked to characterize how comfortable or safe different people in the school make them feel, everyone classified "students" as comfortable/safe. This could reflect a tension between the importance of supportive relationships with peers despite experiences of bullying and isolation. Among the four students that participated in interviews, most stated that there is no bullying at their school while one reported that online bullying is a widespread problem. It is notable that while the majority of survey respondents reported some form of bullying, few of the photovoice or interview participants explicitly described bullying at their schools. It is difficult to make strong conclusions based on the small sample in our study, but further research may be warranted to explore whether the differences by data collection method reflect differences in the experiences of the participants or if the patterns may be related to the different methods.

Students have mixed feelings about school security, including concerns about bias.

While the survey did not ask specifically about school security staff, the topic was raised in conversations during photovoice and also during student interviews. Photovoice participants described how school security made them feel both safe and unsafe. They explained that some security guards give out stickers to students which made them feel safer around the security staff. However, most students also described feeling intimidated at times by the security guards. Additionally, there was also a perception that school security was more likely to assume Native American students were breaking the rules. For example, students explained that there was a problem with vaping in school bathrooms and shared that they perceived that school security were more likely to blame Native American students for vaping.

All four interview participants discussed having some form of security at their school. One participant

> **Environment** refers to appropriate facilities, well-managed classrooms, available school-based health supports, and a clear, fair disciplinary policy.

stated that the school doors are always lock]ed and that they have security guards—whom students avoid because they don't want to get caught violating the dress code. Two participants reported that their school has either police or security guards watch over the school which makes them feel safer. One interview student stated that their school has a school resource officer, although they don't feel any safer with them on campus.

Students had mostly positive assessments of their school environments, although there were different patterns between male and female survey respondents. For example, more male survey respondents than females agreed that school facilities are well-maintained or that school rules are applied equally to all students. Notably, unfair enforcement of school dress codes—especially against female American Indian students—was a topic of conversation during the photovoice activity, which could be related to the different patterns in survey responses.

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Students had mixed feelings about their school facilities; some felt instructional materials were outdated.

Just over half (53%) of survey respondents disagreed (n=7) or strongly disagreed (n=1) that broken things at their school get fixed quickly. However, there were different response patterns between males and females: while most (71%) of the male respondents agreed (n=4) or strongly agreed (n=1) things get fixed quickly, most (75%) of the female respondents disagreed (n=5) or strongly disagreed (n=1). Photovoice participants indicated that their school facilities are generally well-maintained, although some remarked that the school bathrooms were sometimes dirty. When discussing their school buildings, all of the interview participants echoed comments from the photovoice participants, stating that the buildings are pretty clean with some trash occasionally found on the ground, as well as some minor repairs that needed to be made. Participants also discussed how they were given laptops or tablets which they could take home, but that some of the on-campus technology needed to be updated. Students stated that most of the academic materials seemed to be dated, with one participant stating that the sports and music equipment are noticeably a higher quality than their academic materials.

Students have positive perceptions of school staff's academic expectations and support.

Most survey respondents (80%) reported agreeing (n=7) or strongly agreeing (n=5) that their teachers praise them when they work hard. Likewise, most respondents (80%) agreed (n=8) or strongly agreed (n=4) that their teachers give them attention when they need it. All but one of the interview participants reported that their classes were somewhere in the middle in terms of difficulty, not too hard, not too easy; one student felt that their classes were easy. All interview participants reported that they felt their teachers wanted them to get good grades and to do well on tests, as well as that the teachers at their schools have the same academic expectations for all groups of students, and that those expectations did not change during the pandemic. One participant noted, however, that when it comes to advanced classes at their school, teachers should recruit more diverse students to participate in those courses.

While many students report school rules are enforced fairly, patterns were different by gender.

Most (73%) of survey respondents agreed (n=7) or strongly agreed (n=4) that school rules are applied equally to all students. However, while most male respondents (86%) agreed (n=4) or strongly agreed (n=2) that school rules are applied equally to all students, in comparison, just over half (57%) of female respondents agreed (n=2) or strongly agreed (n=2) that school rules are applied equally. Photovoice participants noted that they understand the need for school rules and thought their school rules were fair for the most part, they just wanted them to be equally applied to all students. In particular, photovoice participants discussed unfair enforcement of the school dress code, which they perceived as being applied more strictly to students of color—and Native American students in particular—compared to White students. Among interview participants, three of the four participants stated that their respective school's rules seem fair and are communicated clearly to students and families, although one participant stated that the rules at their school are strict, harsh, and unfair, stating further that the school is too quick to suspend students. While most participants reported that the rules, whether fair or not, were in fact equally enforced, one participant reported that there was apparent systemic racism at their school that benefits White students. This participant also noted that there were a lot of resources and support for Latinx students, yet there were not any resources or supports for American Indian students.

Despite having support services at school, many students were uncomfortable reaching out for help.

Just over half (53%) of survey respondents agreed (n=3) or strongly agreed (n=5) that they can talk to a teacher or other adult at school about something that is bothering them. During the photovoice activity, several students took a photo of a flyer that was hung in several places in the school that said "It is OK not to be OK" with some information on ways to access support. When the group discussed whether they felt comfortable or uncomfortable with different adults at school, several explained that they do not feel comfortable with counselors because they would feel anxious talking to a counselor. However, one student shared that he did feel comfortable because he had spoken with a counselor when his uncle died,

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and the counselor had helped him a lot. While the majority of students who participated in an interview reported that they have mental health services available on campus, two participants reported that mental health is not an issue, one reported that mental health is somewhat of an issue, and one reported that mental health is a big issue at their school. While none of the participants were aware of any substance use services being offered at their respective schools, two reported that substance use is not a problem at their school, one participant reported it being somewhat of an issue, and one participant reported it being a significant issue. Food insecurity and nutrition were reported as being somewhat of an issue at all of the schools, with one school offering an on-campus food bank.

School Staff Experiences and School Website Content

Below we summarize perceptions of staff from the two study schools who participated in interviews as well as relevant findings from the website review. Overall, staff from both schools described similar challenges faced by students and difficulties in connecting with families. However, staff at the tribally-run school tended to describe more positive relationships, both between students and school staff and also among students. Additionally, the staff at the tribally-run school described an explicit focus on tribal cultural values that was not as present in the non-tribal school. This difference in centering tribal cultural values was also reflected in the content of each school's website, with the tribally-run school's website including more content related to tribal cultural values. The non-tribal school, on the other hand, had more detailed information about anti-bullying efforts as well as information about supportive services related to health and mental health. We caution against making comparisons between staff and student perceptions because most students that participated in the study did not attend the two study schools and school contexts may vary significantly between the study schools and those attended by the student study participants. We have organized the information by school climate construct, school, and data collection activity (interviews or website review).

Engagement

Tribal school staff

All three staff at the tribal school who participated in interviews reported that they believe students at the school are comfortable approaching staff and being honest and open with them both in and out of school settings and that students know what is expected of them. Staff reported that there is a focus on culture at the school, which can be seen through the many Native cultural classes offered to students. These classes include arts, history, language, and weaving. Additionally, staff participants stated that teachers focus their lesson plans and learning units around American Indian culture. Staff also reported that both student artwork and American Indian themed artwork are exhibited in the school's classrooms. With respect to families, they reported that there are few opportunities for families to provide feedback to school staff and that relationships between school staff and families have always been difficult. However, they also reported relationships between school staff and families seem to have strengthened during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Non-tribal school staff

Staff from the non-tribal school reported that students are generally open and accepting of their peers, although they also reported that students do not feel safe in hallways and bathrooms at the school due to fights, bad language, and substance abuse. Staff participants from the non-tribal school reported that some staff reach out to families and communicate with them regularly, while some staff members are uncomfortable reaching out to families. Staff reported that when it comes to a focus on culture at their school, there is a Native American club and the club has their own meeting space within the school building, and the school also has an American Indian school district liaison on staff.

Website comparison

The website review revealed that both schools make efforts to connect with families by including information about communicating with and contacting the school and about school events and offerings. Descriptions of extracurricular and after-school activities didn't vary much by school with students being

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able to join sports, drama, and band programs; two participants also discussed students having the opportunity to participate in community service and science programs, as well.

The non-tribal school's website did not address American Indian students specifically in their environmental information. However, the tribal school's website explained that their curriculum was designed to honor the cultures of local tribes and their Tribal sovereignty. The tribal school's mission included that the learning environment they provide is immersed in the local tribal cultures. They had some content in local Indigenous languages on their website, but no documents translated into those languages and no ability to translate the website into those languages. They also included time for American Indian practices in their attendance policy such as bereavement, cultural, traditional, and ceremonial events. and included information on the integration of local tribal language and culture in their curriculum.

Safety

Tribal school staff

Staff participants reported that when it comes to school safety at the tribal school, they conduct both fire drills and lockdown drills to prepare staff and students for incidents. Staff also reported that there is a security guard at the school who "wands" the students upon entry and is well-liked by the students who attend the school. They also stated that fights between students are almost unheard of at their school.

Non-tribal school staff

When it comes to school safety at the non-tribal school, staff participants reported that the school campus is surrounded by a fence which the students think makes the school look like a prison. Staff also reported that there is a school resource officer who is well-liked by the students, and there is a school security team. Staff participants stated that although students at the non-tribal school feel safe in their classrooms, they feel that the students do not feel safe in the hallways and bathrooms due to fights, bad language, and substance use.

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Both schools provided general information on school safety, including counseling resources, bullying and/or cyber bullying, emergency preparedness, transportation, and COVID-19 information. The non-tribal school, which was also much larger than the tribal school, additionally provided information on their pet therapy program, suicide prevention, substance use and abuse, homeless students' rights, and free and reduced meals. The non-tribal school also had more information about bullying and harassment than the tribal school. The tribal school included information about their commitment to a safe learning environment with contact information for school security. Neither school had anything specific about safety of American Indian students.

Environment

Tribal school staff

Staff interview participants from the tribal school reported many challenges that they feel students at their school are experiencing. Staff stated that poor attendance and truancy are challenges, that many students have changed schools multiple times, and that there is a lack of family support. Additionally, staff participants reported that students have challenges with mental health issues (especially deaths of peers and family members by suicide), and that many students have experienced high levels of trauma, including loss of loved ones, domestic violence, and homelessness. While alcohol and drug use were both reported as challenges students are experiencing, it was noted that drugs were a bigger problem than alcohol—specifically, fentanyl, Percocet, and marijuana. Staff participants also reported that pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections were challenges students experience. While food security was not described as a major concern, nutrition was a concern, with staff linking poor nutrition to high rates of diabetes. Staff reported that there are many services offered at the tribal school to address these challenges. These services include school counselors on campus and behavioral health services on campus. Staff participants also noted that there are many services available to students within the community.

Non-tribal school staff

Staff at the non-tribal school reported many challenges they feel students at their school are experiencing. Staff participants reported that many students have attendance issues, though they report tardiness as a bigger issue than absenteeism. Staff discussed the high prevalence of student exposure to trauma, including both domestic violence and homelessness. Drug and alcohol use were also reported as challenges students experience. Additionally, staff participants stated that food insecurity and nutrition are both major issues among students.

Staff reported that when it comes to student expectations, the student rules and consequences are not clear and there is a lot of inconsistency in consequences, especially across demographic groups. In particular, they emphasized that there is more often punishment for boys than girls, especially boys of color. Additionally, staff participants stated that while some staff want administration to handle behavioral issues, other staff members want to handle these behavioral issues themselves without administration. Staff reported an increase in mental health issues, drug use, and food insecurity, which they attribute to the impact of the pandemic.

Website comparison

The non-tribal school's website had a counseling page that included a link for suicide prevention and crisis hotline information, which takes you to the school district's suicide prevention webpage. This page includes the county's crisis services phone number, as well as the phone number for a crisis line connected with a local mental health service provider. The page includes additional resources like the Teen Lifeline phone numbers, crisis text line number, trauma therapy contacts, and support numbers connected with a local tribal community. They also include links for internal school district resources for parents looking to help their children and for children needing help. The website included substance use and abuse information for students and parents.

The tribal school's website included information about their counseling resources. The website counseling page includes information on services offered to students and parents for both transition

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counseling and job and career counseling/coaching, as well as contact information for contacting counseling staff. Transition counseling services listed include help in class scheduling and graduation expectations, social adjustments, crisis intervention, mental health counseling and social service needs, and graduation planning. The job and career coach description highlights supports for service learning placement and hours fulfillment; identification of careers, college and/or other high education; applying for colleges, financial aid, and scholarships; and career planning.

Implications for and Limitations of Study Findings

The multiple methods and data sources included in this study allowed us to develop a fairly nuanced understanding of perceptions of school climate among study participants attending tribally-run and non-tribally run schools in a Southwestern state. Many of our findings align with other studies investigating school climate in other youth populations. For example, extant literature supports our findings that positive relationships with school staff, [xxiii] access to mental health supports on campus, [xxiv] and participation in arts and athletics[xxv] can play a role in creating safe and supportive school environments and increasing students' positive connections to school. Our finding that school security and school discipline may be perceived as being unfairly applied towards students of color is also supported in the literature.[xxvi] There is also research to support our study findings that are unique to American Indian students; for example, previous studies have found evidence that American Indian students feel more connected to their schools when they see representations of their cultural values in instructional content and school programming.[xxvii,xxviii]

It is important to note that several findings from our study warrant additional research. For example, we found some different patterns by gender with respect to peer relationships and school discipline; however, a larger sample size is required to determine whether these differences are significant or representative of the experiences of American Indian youth beyond our study participants. We also found

different patterns based on data collection activity. For example, while survey participants were mostly positive in their assessments of representation of American Indians at their schools, lack of representation was a common theme in photovoice and interview discussions. Further investigation is warranted to determine whether these different response patterns reflect varying experiences among the different samples, or whether there is something about these topics that elicit different responses in surveys as opposed to discussions. Understanding whether American Indian students respond differently to the same types of questions asked using different data collection methods could have important implications for future research on the topic of school climate.

Implications

Making meaning of the themes that emerged during this project must be done within the broader context of colonization and the resulting historical trauma. Indigenous communities struggle with a variety of disparities which include high suicide and substance use rates, mental and physical health disparities, high rates of poverty, low educational achievement, and loss of Native languages and culture.[xxix,xxx] The American Indian youth who chose to share their experiences and wisdom through this project must not be seen as uniquely vulnerable. On the contrary, their resilience in the face of a systems that have been built to oppress them is remarkable. That resilience is the product of generations of wisdom and strength within their families and communities. While more research is needed to better understand how to dismantle the education system to rebuild it in ways that are healing and promote resilience and thriving, school leaders cannot wait for more research. Rather, as this project so aptly demonstrates, the knowledge that is most critical can be found when education leaders take the time to listen to students, their families, and their communities.

Whatever strategies a school or school district may choose to implement in order to establish and maintain a learning environment that is physically and emotionally safe for American Indian students, it is critical that education leaders share power with Native students and their families when making decisions.

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While it is impossible to make meaningful change without authentic partnership, it is also true that partnerships require trust, and that trust must be earned. Schools that endeavor to "unwrite" the hidden curriculum that marginalizes—and in some cases erases—tribal communities must recognize that there will be no easy answers and no overnight change that will endure. However, when school leaders commit to power-sharing and invest in long-term solutions, they will inevitably find that when their schools create safe and supportive learning environments for Native American students and families, all students, families, and staff stand to benefit.

Limitations

The findings from this study represent the views of our study participants; attempts to apply these themes to a broader population should be made with caution. Although our approach was strengthened through our engagement of the LAB and PB and the multiple methods (i.e., survey, interview, website review, photovoice) and perspectives (i.e., teachers, school administrators, and students) included, the study results are limited by the small sample sizes across each of our data collection activities. To better understand the extent to which our findings may generalize to American Indian youth in the broader community, we probed on the LAB and PB members on their perceptions of how well the findings align with what they see in their personal and professional lives working with American Indian students. Our LAB and PB generally reported that the study findings resonated with them and are aligned with many of the strengths, opportunities, and challenges their students experience during their educational journeys.

Outcomes and Artifacts of the Study

Across our five-year study, Child Trends was able to build and maintain partnerships with youth, school staff, and other community leaders to better understand American Indian students' experiences with school climate and identify opportunities for supporting American Indian students in both tribally-operated and non-tribally-operated secondary schools. Importantly, Child Trends was able to maintain

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these partnerships through a global pandemic that greatly impacted the community, students, and schools, as well as through other unanticipated events such as the closure of the only traditional high school on the reservation. The strong foundation our relationship with our community partners was built upon enabled us to weather many storms (in one instance quite literally, as a storm wiped out power on the reservation for one day of our photovoice activities) and pivot in response to changing circumstances and evolving community needs to ultimately produce much needed insights regarding American Indian students' experiences with school climate—which are often understudied given that American Indian students often represent only a small segment of the broader population of students.

Given that our project was intended to provide a direct benefit to the community, which we describe in more detail below, most of the products developed through this project are targeted towards local policymakers, like the Tribal Council and Education Board, as well as to local school leaders. All of our products are currently in the process of undergoing disclosure review, and we will amend this report upon the completion of that review.

To share lessons learned regarding how to effectively engage tribal communities in CBPR studies examining school environments, we facilitated a webinar, *Conducting Research and Evaluation in a Good Way with Indigenous Nations and People: Bridging Indigenous and Western Rigor*, for the Indigenous Peoples in Evaluation topical interest group of the American Evaluation Association. In addition, our team is currently co-developing an empirical journal article in collaboration with CNAY and our community partners to share lessons learned and best practices for engaging in this type of work.

Below, we list a citation for each anticipated product and a brief description of the product.

- Gordon, H. S. J., Around Him, D., Jones, R. M., Kipp, B. J., Meyer, A. L, Carlos, M., & Brady, C. (2022, October 27). *Conducting research and evaluation in a good way with Indigenous Nations and people: Bridging Indigenous and Western rigor* [Conference presentation]. October 2022 Paper Bag Sessions, Indigenous Peoples in Evaluation Topical Interest Group,

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- Gordon, H. S. J., Day, M., Murphy, K., Stratford, B., Around Him, D., Jones, R. M., Rust, K. V., Sekaquaptewa, S., Kipp, B. J., & Brady, C. (In preparation). *Conducting research and evaluation in a good way: Lessons learned from a participatory study of school climate among American Indian students*.

Community Benefits

A central aspect of this project was ensuring not only that the tribal community had a say in how the research was conducted, but also that the community would derive tangible benefits from the study. A part of the project was to produce a journal manuscript with that in mind, focusing on lessons learned in conducting research that involved partnerships between government funders, non-tribal research organizations, and tribal communities. In developing that manuscript, a member of the study team conducted interviews with community members about lessons learned over the course of the project. Below we summarize some of the community benefits they highlighted.

1. **A positive experience with research.** Community members have noted that, while they wanted some opportunities for community members to engage more with the project and they would have liked to see a larger sample size, the project was viewed positively by the community. Because they viewed the relationship with the study team positively, community members believe that community leaders will be better positioned to consider future research opportunities with the potential to benefit the community.

2. **Learning about photovoice.** Community members were involved in facilitating some of the photovoice sessions. Since being exposed to that strategy, community members have explained

that they resonated with the photovoice approach to engaging with youth and have applied it in youth programming delivered within the community.

3. **An opportunity to consider the content of the school website.** Community members received a draft review of the website content for their school as well as the non-tribal school; they also received the template that was used by the research team, which can be used to periodically review and revise their website content when warranted.

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