

Testimony for the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children

Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, Ph.D. (Lumbee)

Given: February 25, 2022

My name is Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy. I am the son of Mary Elizabeth Jones Brayboy. She was the daughter of Zelma Sampson Jones and Rose Bell MacMillan Jones. She was also the daughter of McKinley Jones, Sr. I am also the son of Bobby Dean Brayboy. He is the son of Eva Harris Brayboy and Tecumseh Bryan Brayboy II. I am the father of Quannah McKinley Warriner Brayboy and Ely Tecumseh Brayboy. I am an enrolled member of the Lumbee Tribe. Both of our sons are also enrolled Lumbee citizens.

I have been preparing Indigenous teachers to serve in their home communities since 2001 and a professor since 1999. In that time, I have been part of teams that have prepared over 160 Indigenous teachers in Alaska, Arizona, and Utah. Our teams have also prepared over 40 Indigenous master's students (with 25 more in process), and 23 Indigenous doctoral graduates (with 10 more currently in process). Much of my professional life has been focused on thinking about the future of Indigenous education.

I am currently President's Professor at Arizona State University (ASU). At ASU, I am Director of the Center for Indian Education, Vice President of Social Advancement, and co-Editor of the *Journal of American Indian Education*. I am the author and co-author of over 100 scholarly publications and am an elected Fellow of the American Educational Research Association and

an elected member of the National Academy of Education. I was the third Indigenous person and first Indigenous man to be elected to the National Academy.

I have been asked to address the challenges and offer some of my best ideas for improving the education and well-being of Native children. I'm honored to do so.

In 2000, K. Tsianina Lomawaima wrote, "The history of American Indian education can be summarized in three simple words: battle for power" (p. 2). This statement cogently highlights the complex struggle regarding the schooling of American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians. Education has been—and some would argue still is a: (1) Battle for the hearts and minds of Indigenous nations; (2) Colonial call for assimilation; and (3) Responsibility of the federal government arising from a series of agreements between tribal nations and communities and the United States meant to open land bases to a burgeoning immigrant population. In short, the education of Indigenous peoples is intricately intertwined with the legal/political relationship between Indigenous peoples and the U.S. government, as well as myriad problematic (some would call them racist) policies and practices that have devastated Indian children and communities.

As Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) have outlined, schools have historically been used as "civilizing" and homogenizing institutions. According to this argument, schools historically worked to create a model (United States) citizen and enforce a staunch commitment to individualism at the expense of Native language(s) and identity. Schools have had moderate success in these goals. Indigenous children, their families, and communities have resisted these calls, although the resistance appears as "school failure." The infrastructures created for

schooling of Indigenous children have been successful in disrupting communities of learners, locally connected to their places of living, loving, and being. Schools outside of reservations have largely erased the presence of Indigenous children and their cultures. And schooling has become narrowly defined so that success is measured by standardized tests not meant for Indigenous peoples, but to fulfill an idea of accountability. The infrastructures have worked. The structures have pushed Indigenous children so that particular kinds of learning have become anathema to who we are as cultural beings; the structures have created fear and terror for children. Schooling has done its work of either forcing us to assimilate or forcing us out of the process all together.

You, however, have likely heard this and been exposed to the data demonstrating the effectiveness of ostracizing us. The reasons echo those of the Merriam Commission, who authored the so-called Merriam report in 1928. That is almost 95 years ago and we are still trying to “figure things out.” These reasons, and the concomitant data, are not new. Frankly, I feel no need to re-report those data here. They are painful. They bring forth emotions of sadness and hopelessness. They are terrorizing. So, I refuse to add them.

We need new structures and ideologies to move forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. I am interested in ideas to move forward and offer a few here.

- 1. Create a comprehensive blueprint for building a new structure that connects schooling, health, justice, and food toward a framework of Indigenous well-being.**

Schooling does not happen in a bubble. To the extent possible, and in both rural and urban settings, there must be a plan to strengthen and build capacity in the areas listed

above. For schooling, this includes preparing enough Indigenous teachers to meet the needs of children in the communities in which they live. Additionally, there must be administrators and social workers who are immersed in the culture of the learners in their schools. These educators (I'll say more about their preparation below) and the schools must be attuned to the health and food needs of the students, with a clear eye toward the power of how discipline and justice are engaged—and meted out—by schools.

- 2. Schools and Colleges of Education must re-imagine how they prepare teachers for Indigenous children.** I have written elsewhere (2005) about the fact that colonization is endemic to society. One of the ways this is evident in the fact that many schools and colleges of education continue to prepare teachers in the same manner they have for decades. The coursework that leads to teacher licensure is almost always driven by multiple reading and assessment courses that help teachers give diagnostic testing, but not have the wherewithal to alter their teaching strategies to address what the diagnostics have revealed. Curricular requirements have remained stagnant. There are few courses on Indigenous education and Indigenous histories offered in any schools and colleges of education. Any teacher who may have an Indigenous student should be exposed to a course on culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous children, which will address the curricular and pedagogical needs of meeting students where they are and creating opportunities for students to thrive in the schooling process.

The Office of Indian Education's Professional Development awards (CFDA 84.299B) have made a difference in providing funding that leads to the preparation of Indigenous

teachers. To move toward creating a system that addresses and supports the well-being of Indigenous children and communities, these awards should be, at minimum, tripled, to help prepare more teachers who come from a place to return to it and teach. This is one way to move toward self-determination through self-education. Resources are necessary, but they must be accompanied by the re-imagining noted above. What I am proposing here is the bare minimum; the blueprint and plans must be expansive, creative, and willing to break the current structures, while committing to re-building in new and effective ways. My most immediate point is: What we've been doing to prepare teachers has not been effective and we must do better.

- 3. Schools serving Indigenous students must be committed to the whole child.** Schooling often happens in a building with a focus on a child's learning. While this is crucial for success, it is imperative that schools create the conditions for students to thrive. Rather than asking, of young children, "Are they ready for school?" we should be asking, "Are we ready to create the conditions for children to thrive as learners and humans?" This requires opportunities for schools to examine their support mechanisms, communications with families, curriculum, policies and procedures, meals, health systems, and the infrastructure of the school itself. Each area will need to be considered with the framing question of: Can we create the conditions for Indigenous student success? To do so requires that schools are gathering places throughout the week and into the weekend for communities, students and their families, and sources of joy, happiness, and growth. Teachers and administrators must understand the wholeness of their students to include their families and the places where they live.

**4. Curriculum and Pedagogy must include place-based learning.** The importance of place is crucial for learning, and especially for Indigenous children. Place-based learning is not simply taking a curriculum outside; instead, it is using place and environment as a learning and teaching tool. Place-based teaching allows students to learn in and through place. Teachers, then, must be prepared to teach in these ways. The relationships that exist between peoples and places is at the heart of this work and can be a way to address the challenges in the current systems for Indigenous children. For the wisdom already borne from these strategies, I have included a number of references to work that is charting a pathway forward in place-based learning.

**5. Create a college going culture for Indigenous students and families. And create the conditions to realize it.** Since its inception, the National Indian Education Study (NIES) has demonstrated that both 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade Indigenous students have college aspirations. These numbers vary, but the percentages are often above 80% at each grade. Why then, are so few Indigenous students attending college? There appear to be some infrastructural challenges: lack of sufficient college counseling, poor academic preparation, high teacher turnover, lack of appropriate role models who have been successful in college. There are other factors as well: families and students must understand what college is and how to access it in meaningful ways. Colleges must reach out earlier and make their benefits clearer. There are economic issues to be addressed as well. College prices continue to rise, while access to aid has stayed steady or lessened. For Indigenous students from rural and reservation lands, what industries and job prospects are available for them if they choose to return to their lands?

Economic self-determination is a critical part of this process. Finally, I want to note that I am not someone who believes that everyone should go to college. There are plenty of opportunities available to people without college degrees. Schools begin the sorting process early—in some instances as early as kindergarten—wherein students are moved into groups that lead to college pathways for some and away from these pathways for others. Not everyone should go to college, but everyone should have the choice if they choose to; those choices should not be made for them as 5-, 6-, and 7-year-olds.

- 6. Create ways to link national data that addresses education, health, justice, food, poverty/economic health, and physical infrastructures.** The last recommendation is intended to bookend the first. We have no real way to link data that will provide researchers, policy makers, communities, and individuals with a real sense of the well-being of Indigenous peoples. Education and schooling are necessarily tied to other factors that contribute to well-being of peoples and communities. Can we imagine a space where there is the ability to link and gather data across spheres to provide a holistic picture of our well-being? Can we create a system that allows researchers and policy makers to understand the intersections between the factors listed above and how they influence one another? Can we create a system and structure that creates the conditions under and through which researchers and policy makers can understand—in real time—how the adjustment in one area will impact (either positively or negatively) in another related area? If we cannot, we must find a way to do so. If we can, we should create and implement it no later than 2025.

Thank you.

## References

- Bang, M. (2015). Culture, learning, and development about the natural world: Advances facilitated by situative perspectives. *Educational Psychologist, 50*(3), 220-233.
- Bang, M., Faber, L., Gunneau, J., Marin, A., & Soto, C. (2015). Community based design research: Learning across generations and strategic transformations of institutional relations towards axiological innovations. *Mind, Culture, and Activity, 1-14*.
- Barajas-López, F., & Bang, M. (2018). Indigenous making and sharing: Claywork in an Indigenous STEAM program. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 51*(1), 7-20.
- Brayboy, B. McK. J. (2005). Toward a Tribal Critical Race Theory in Education. *The Urban Review, 37*(5), 425-446.
- Lomawaima, K. T. (2000). Tribal sovereigns: Reframing research in American Indian education. *Harvard Educational Review, 70*(1), 1–21.
- Lomawaima, K. T., and McCarty, T. L. (2006). *To remain an Indian: Lessons in democracy from a century of Native American education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Marin, A. (2020). Ambulatory sequences: Ecologies of learning by attending and observing on the move. *Cognition and Instruction, 38*(3), 281-317.
- Marin, A. & Bang, M. (2015). Designing pedagogies for Indigenous science education: Finding our way to storywork. *Journal of American Indian Education, 54*(2), 29-51.



Marin, A., & Bang, M. (2018). "Look it, this is how you know:" Family forest walks as a context for knowledge-building about the natural world. *Cognition and Instruction*, 36(2), 89-118.

McDaid, N. & Bang, M. (accepted). 'Then the Nettle People won't be lonely': Recognizing plant personhood in an Indigenous STEAM summer program. *Cognition and Instruction*.

Tzou, C., Starks, E., Meixi, A. R., Ortiz, S. M., Peterson, S., Gladstone, P., Tail, E., Chang, A., Andrew, E., Nevarez, X., Braun, A., & Bang, M. (2020). Codesigning with Indigenous families and educators. *Connected Science Learning*, 2(3).