



Revitalizing Education

A Tribal Approach to Engaging Educators and Students
Through a Native Summer Learning Program

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Promoting educational success is a primary focus for the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Choctaw Nation provides scholarships and programming that support student achievement, yet families with school-age students remain challenged by Oklahoma's limited per capita education funding, ranking in the bottom 10% of U.S. states (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Furthermore, the cultural needs of Native students are often insufficiently addressed in traditional education practices and curricula.

Photo above: POSSE students studying horticulture of tanchi (corn). Photo courtesy of POSSE host site.

In response, Choctaw Nation established the Partnership of Summer School Education (POSSE) program in 2013. POSSE is an out-of-school time (OST) summer program for early elementary-aged children attending schools within the reservation's boundaries who demonstrate academic need. A tribally developed education initiative, POSSE provides academic support for students while infusing culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy and engaging practices for teachers. Following seven

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years of implementation, this exploratory study was designed to gather insights from POSSE educators regarding perceptions of programmatic impact on students, school staff, and classroom practices.

Background

Culturally Sustaining Practices

Culturally sustaining pedagogy requires more than simply responsive or relevant cultural instruction; it sustains the language, literacies, and cultures that students and their community embody (Paris, 2012). Culturally sustaining education relies on the cultural knowledge and experience from students' homes and communities to alleviate social and structural barriers. Essentially, students learn best when making connections to their lived experiences (Harper et al., 2023). By incorporating culturally sustaining pedagogy into the classroom, students experiencing marginalization can receive education equal to that of their peers, and the teachings benefit all students (Parkhouse et al., 2022).

When students receive low-quality instruction in unwelcoming environments, they may suffer from underachievement, which fuels a perception of low academic self-competence (Hunter & Tippeconic, 2020). However, students succeed when they are allowed to participate in curricula that reinforce their language, literacy, and culture (Alim & Paris, 2017). This promotes belonging and connection at school and increases cultural pride and identity. These sentiments result in beneficial outcomes for diverse students, including increased motivation, interest in academic content, and enhanced self-perception of their academic ability, which lays the groundwork for supportive and inclusive teacher–student relationships (Hunter & Tippeconic, 2020).

Culturally relevant professional development for educators leads to increased standardized test scores, improved writing skills, and positive ethnic identity for students, fostering perceptions of respect and appreciation from their teachers (Parkhouse et al., 2022). These relationships are critical foundations of a positive and safe classroom environment that promotes student success (Hunter & Tippeconic, 2020).

For educational programs, culturally sustaining pedagogy is reflected in the resources and access to services for learning communities with diverse needs. For example, incorporation of culturally sustaining pedagogy could include specialty programs and coursework, inclusive signage, language instruction, and communication in multiple languages. It may also include review of accountability structures, teacher evaluation and support systems, and professional development practices (Parkhouse et al., 2022).

Local partnerships, such as those between Choctaw Nation and school sites hosting POSSE, are integral to the success of culturally sustaining OST programs. Community organizations partnering with OST programs hold important knowledge about local community values and resources

to help programs succeed. These organizations support and sustain OST programs by providing space, funding, materials, and staff training, as well as developing and delivering programming (Levine, 2024).

For this study, the researchers conceptualized culturally sustaining pedagogy in a broad sense, beyond a single focus on American Indian/Native American curricula. Our view encompasses holistic student and educator experiences within the program, both seen and unseen. These experiences include infusion of Choctaw culture and heritage into program materials and resources, along with support from the tribe for teacher training, programmatic leadership, and summer school partnerships with school communities.

Teacher Engagement

Multiple theories exist regarding employee or work engagement (Shuck, Reio, & Rocco, 2011), ranging from human motivational approaches to economic measures of behavior (Pincus, 2023). As a broad term, *work engagement* may be measured in terms of vigor, dedication, and/or absorption in one's job (Minghui et al., 2018) and as the positive and fulfilling state of well-being or attitude about one's work (Bakker et al., 2008). In the education sector, educator engagement has been conceptualized in three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and social (Klassen et al., 2013). These constructs draw heavily from Kahn's (1990) theory of teacher engagement,

which defines engagement as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (Kahn, 1990, p. 694).

Employees who are engaged at work feel connected to a larger purpose within their organization and are more likely to commit to that purpose. Applying this principle to the educational setting, teachers who feel connected with their school organization experience deeper commitments to their jobs, schools, and students. Furthermore, resources such as social support from colleagues and supervisors enhance teacher engagement (Hultell & Gustavssen, 2011), thereby leading to increased connection and commitment. Teachers with this sense of commitment demonstrate greater effort and are less likely to leave their jobs, with a significant correlation among teachers’ success, their enthusiasm, and positive outcomes for teacher–student relationships (Jackson, 2018).

Increased educator engagement benefits both teachers and students. For example, self-determination theory posits that teacher engagement influences the quality of teacher–student relationships (Wang et al., 2022). Students build positive relationships when teachers make them feel valued by supporting their life situations and respecting their perspectives (Jones & Jones, 2020). This, in turn, significantly affects student motivation, which supports improved academic engagement and behavioral outcomes for students. Conversely, negative teacher–student relationships are associated with students’ lack of enjoyment of school, limited cooperation in the classroom, and overall diminished academic readiness (Palermo et al., 2007). The implications for OST programs are that students will have higher investment and improved outcomes when they feel a sense of belonging fostered by a welcoming atmosphere. Therefore, educator engagement is integral to promoting culturally sustaining pedagogy and fostering student success in both the regular and OST classroom settings.

For this study, researchers conceptualized *teacher engagement* as teachers’ self-reported increased

enthusiasm for their work. Engagement was also defined as a sense of purpose, meaning that educators perceived that their work in the POSSE program made a difference in both their professional lives and their students’ lives.

Program Context

Originally established in a single school district, the POSSE program has expanded to 52 host sites across nearly 11,000 square miles of the Choctaw Nation reservation in southeastern Oklahoma. Internal education data from Choctaw Nation show that the POSSE program has enrolled approximately 38,000 students to date, including 33% who identify as Native American. Since its inception, POSSE has served students in kindergarten (22%), first (24%), second (21%), third (19%), and fourth (6%) grades. Currently, POSSE’s programming supports students in grades K–3.

Regardless of race, all early elementary students within Choctaw Nation territory who score below the 40th percentile on nationally normed reading assessments are invited to participate in POSSE. Others are invited based on recommendations by school staff. The average student–teacher ratio is 10.8:1.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore educator perceptions of POSSE’s impact on students, school staff, and classroom practices. Perspectives were sought from principals and teachers during six focus groups. Additional descriptive statistics provide educator demographics.

The study design was approved by the Choctaw Nation Institutional Review Board and conducted by the Choctaw Nation tribal research department and an external Choctaw researcher. Since 2016, the tribal research department, managed by a professional Native American educator, has conducted scientific research for the tribe, allowing tribal leaders to make value-rich and data-driven decisions.

Data collection for the study occurred during the Choctaw Nation Professional Learning Conference (CNPLC) held in Durant, Oklahoma, in May 2022.

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To recruit educators for the sample, researchers selected an equal number of smaller and larger POSSE sites from the CNPLC registration list to represent all quadrants of the reservation. Researchers then contacted principals at selected sites via phone to invite them to participate in a focus group. Each principal was also asked to recommend one novice and one veteran POSSE teacher for focus group participation. Principals used their own discretion when categorizing POSSE teachers as novice or veteran. The tribal research manager contacted teachers via email with an invitation to participate. Before each focus group, participants provided informed consent, with documents stored securely by the research department.

Six researchers conducted the focus groups in pairs consisting of one senior researcher and one research assistant. The three senior researchers were Choctaw tribal members, lending cultural sensitivity to the data collection process. Focus groups began with a standardized script read aloud to participants. Research assistants noted information on coding

sheets, allowing the research team to cross-reference names and speaking order with recorded voices.

Participants introduced themselves by sharing their first name, total years of teaching experience, and time spent in the summer learning program. On average, novice teachers had 1.1 years of experience teaching in POSSE and 9.2 years of teaching during the regular school year, and veteran teachers averaged 4.7 years in POSSE and 17.5 years in the school year. Principals reported an average of 16 years of teaching experience and 6.5 years in the principal role.

Table 1 contains the questions asked of all focus groups.

Within 24 hours following the focus groups, the three lead and senior researchers documented overall impressions of their focus groups in the form of two-page field notes, which were shared among the researchers as well as with POSSE administrators. For accuracy, the focus group sessions were recorded, transcribed using Descript software, and verified by lead researchers. Following processes described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Miles and Huberman

Table 1. Focus Group Questions, May 2022

Items	Asked of Principals	Asked of Teachers
What do you see as the most significant change in teachers as a result of POSSE?	X	X
What do you see as the most significant change in students who attended POSSE?	X	X
What are social/emotional needs that could be hindering students in the classroom?	X	X
In what ways does POSSE support social/emotional needs of its students?	X	X
What do you see as the most pressing academic needs of our students?	X	X
What aspect of POSSE has the greatest impact on students' academic achievement?	X	X
What aspect of POSSE has the greatest impact on students' confidence?	X	X
In your opinion, what determines success in the POSSE program?	X	X
How might these successes affect Choctaw children's adult lives?	X	X
What are your perspectives on (thoughts about) integrating the Choctaw culture in the POSSE curriculum?	X	
What suggestions do you have for other POSSE principals?	X	
What suggestions do you have for other POSSE teachers?		X

(1994), inductive thematic analysis was used to identify important descriptive concepts (such as data elements). Researchers initially coded their own sessions; interrater reliability was achieved by reviewing and cross-validating field notes and coding processes via shared files. Emerging concepts were grouped into themes; the relative importance of each theme was determined by content analysis or frequency of occurrences. A natural break in frequency of theme occurrences aided researchers in selecting the top themes ($n = 7$); these are discussed in the Findings section. A coding example for one of the most frequently occurring themes, *Confidence*, is shown in Table 2.

Focus Group Findings

This section presents each primary theme from the principal and teacher focus groups. The seven themes developed through inter-rater coding were Engaged Students, Engaged Teachers; Inspiration and Motivation; Love of Learning; Providing a Social Safety Net; Giving Voice; Lifetime of Confidence; and Planting Seeds for Future Success.

To visualize each theme from a cultural lens, a graphic using traditional Chahta tanchi (corn) was developed (Figure 1). Tanchi was chosen because it represents a meaningful and cultural food staple used by Choctaw people for centuries.

Engaged Students, Engaged Teachers

POSSE educators experienced autonomy during the summer learning program that was different from that experienced during their traditional academic year. They felt empowered to follow best practices and experiment with teaching methods that met each student at their level. For example, POSSE educators focused on content mastery as opposed to “teaching to a test,” such as standardized and high-stakes assessments. This resulted in greater teacher enthusiasm and a positive sense of renewal in their teaching careers.

Many POSSE teachers and principals observed that engagement was a reciprocal process between teachers and students. When children exhibited increased excitement and interest, it led to positive outcomes for teachers, such as increased enthusiasm and a sense of professional renewal.

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Figure 1. Tanchi Illustration of POSSE Interview Themes



This reciprocal loop of engagement was noted by both experienced and novice educators across subject areas. A principal in a focus group stated, “If your teacher is excited, guess what? You’re going to be excited. The kids really feed off the teachers, a relaxed atmosphere, and their willingness to be there and make it fun.”

Inspiration and Motivation

POSSE was a source of both academic and social inspiration for students. During the regular school year, some POSSE students exhibited social-emotional needs manifesting as discipline concerns and social skills challenges. During POSSE, students were given opportunities to practice and model positive friendship skills. Many children found commonalities with peers while viewing themselves in a new, positive light. Teachers and administrators noted that POSSE students were inspired by their successes rather than demotivated by their failures: “[T]he focus level goes way up with those kids … it’s just little, small victories

that you get to see here and there, but those are huge milestones for a lot of kids,” said a veteran teacher.

Having supplemental and culturally relevant resource materials provided by POSSE was seminal for educators. Returning POSSE teachers benefited from themed literacy and mathematics tools, such as free trade books for

Table 2. Identifying *Confidence* Theme by Coding Data Elements

Data Elements	Frequency
Increases student confidence	10
Builds student confidence and sense of pride	10
Builds confidence and sense of pride	9
Confidence (for students)	9
Builds student confidence	4
Small groups help to increase student confidence	4
Less intimidating (for students)	3
Fosters student/teacher confidence	1
Increased self-confidence	1
Large classes during school year decrease student confidence	1
Teachers need to be excited to build student confidence	1

students to use and keep. These resources provided flexibility and creativity in instruction, because teachers were allowed to scale instructional approaches according to their professional strengths and student needs. Further, teachers applied the themed learning to their academic year outside POSSE and viewed POSSE as an ongoing supportive resource. For educators, the toolkits and resources were a source of inspiration for their teaching practices that endured well after the summer school program ended.

Love of Learning

For many students, learning gains in POSSE represented their first experiences with academic success. POSSE's small group settings were often cited as the primary reason for improved student performance, along with teachers having time to return to concepts and to appropriately pace learning for each student. One principal explained this phenomenon in action:

A lot of students are more excited about coming

to school because it's more of a 10:1, 11:1, 12:1 ratio. They get more individualized instruction, and they're more successful. They're not frustrated. That transcends not only through the summer, but they're more excited about coming back to school when school starts.

Educators noted that POSSE students were excited about attending summer school in a way that contrasted with their usual school year experiences. Many teachers and principals reported that they, too, experienced this increased excitement in their approach to POSSE.

Providing a Safety Net

The extended school year was an opportunity to provide wraparound support for POSSE students. When asked to describe challenges faced by students in Choctaw Nation, teachers reported lack of childcare, isolation, poverty, and food insecurity as realities for many families. As a buffer against

these challenges, POSSE provided a consistent and predictable schedule for students, maintained a safe and secure setting during the summer, and helped combat food insecurity by providing free breakfast and lunch to each participating child. These provisions met basic needs and supplied critical foundations for supporting student readiness for learning. POSSE, as an extended OST learning program, ensured that the primary needs of students were consistently met—needs that often derail student capacity for learning. A veteran teacher shared:

[There are] lots of broken homes and lots of kids coming to school with a lot of trauma in their lives, that these little five- and six-year-old kids have to endure, I mean nightly and during the day, so school's their happy place, it's their safe place. So that's what I like about [POSSE].

Giving Voice

POSSE elevated the voices of educators and their students. POSSE staff were given autonomy and the necessary resources to determine how best to meet their students' needs, and teacher voices were further highlighted during the subsequent focus group process. POSSE students became much more vocal and likely to contribute during summer school classes through increased participation, raising hands to answer questions, and interacting with peers. A veteran teacher observed that POSSE's small group settings allowed teachers to provide individualized attention that empowered student voices:

You can focus on what each student needs. You can—not that we don't try to do that throughout the year, but it's just easier when you're in a small group. They start talking and you find out so much because once they start talking, they don't stop.

For teachers and principals, this led to positive teaching experiences and potential easing of stressful aspects of education, such as navigating disciplinary referrals and behavioral concerns.

Traditional education settings in the U.S. have marginalized Native teachings, leading to a lack of exposure to tribal culture and decreased relevance for Native students. In contrast, POSSE educators noted

that the program provides a platform for Choctaw culture and heritage. Through POSSE, students were introduced to Choctaw language and history. Trade books, such as *Chukfi Rabbit's Big Bad Belly Ache* (a Choctaw traditional folktale), were provided free of charge to each student. The books were used during classroom instruction before being sent home with the student for use after summer school. By giving voice to Choctaw language and culture within the learning environment, the program provided a bridge for Native students to learn more about their heritage while also introducing Native teachings to non-Native students.

Lifetime of Confidence

POSSE educators indicated that the program fosters a love of learning that sets the stage for improved academic outcomes in the future. Small group settings, cultural teaching resources, autonomous instructional approaches, and social-emotional learning opportunities worked together to build confidence in POSSE students. Essentially, experiencing academic and social success instilled a belief in students that they *could* succeed. Teachers and principals noted that this belief flowed into increased enthusiasm and engagement at school and with peers, enduring well into the following school year. A veteran teacher shared:

I think it helps for those kids to build that confidence that normally doesn't get to shine during [the] normal school year when we're in regular class with all the other kids. It gives them the opportunity to shine with summer school and they feel like they're proud, you know, and they're confident, that confidence.

POSSE's small group settings allowed teachers to provide individualized attention that empowered student voices.

Planting Seeds for Future Success

POSSE teachers noted that the program can have a potential lifelong impact for students. Modeling, broadening student's horizons, and instilling confidence during the early years of development may lead to improved life outcomes for students, such as degree attainment and vocational success. A novice teacher shared thoughts on the importance of modeling positive future outcomes for POSSE students:

In their adult life, they realize when they do get older, they're not limited to what mom and dad, and grandma or grandpa, have always done. Then they know because they are becoming better readers and more confident, they have options of what they want to do with their life. They're not stuck in the same town or the same place. They can choose to do that if they want to, but it's just a choice now and not a generational curse.

For example, POSSE incorporated field trips into the summer learning program. For instance, students visited a local vocational-technical campus and fire training facility to learn about careers as first responders. They learned fishing skills at a state park on the reservation. Students toured the Choctaw Nation hangar and learned about careers in aviation. The Choctaw Nation recycling center taught lessons in waste management. They toured a grocery store and learned about careers in food distribution. A popular cultural destination was the Choctaw Cultural Center, where students learned social dancing, beading, or cornhusk doll making. Teachers and principals cited these experiential learning opportunities as among the most impactful elements of POSSE. Many noted that students in Choctaw Nation may lack access to models of vocational and academic success, or that they live in isolated communities. POSSE field trips represent ways to expand students' horizons by modeling different vocations and opportunities within their communities.

Teachers and principals were also positively affected by the POSSE program. The autonomy and support provided by POSSE represented a professional renewal, which led to increased enthusiasm as educators reinvested in their careers.

Discussion

Given POSSE's unique opportunity to reach tribal and nontribal children early and effectively, the implications of influencing future growth and success in Indian country are profound. The focus group findings highlight how providing support, building confidence, and empowerment can increase engagement and investment for both teachers and their students in OST settings.

Professional Implications for Educators

Educators often cited small group settings and autonomous teaching opportunities as seminal components of the POSSE program. Teachers could reinvest in their careers by engaging in their preferred teaching modalities while providing individualized instruction. Students also benefited from an increased love of learning and confidence in their academic and social skills. This led to deeper engagement, paving the way for improved academic and social outcomes for POSSE children.

Academic/Social Emotional Loop

The POSSE program provides academic support for students struggling to meet grade- and age-based benchmarks. Educators have noted the links between poor academic performance and behavioral and social skills challenges. At first glance, the POSSE program appears to center solely on academic skills. However, the interconnection between academic and social-emotional development is clear. By providing students with small group settings that encourage success and allowing teachers to dedicate time to individualized instruction, POSSE models a supportive classroom environment fostering social skills development, leading to decreased discipline referrals and improved peer interactions.

POSSE demonstrates the importance of early academic and social intervention, coupled with addressing unique needs and realities of children living in Choctaw Nation. Food insecurity, lack of access to child-care, and isolation were cited as concerns. Providing a form of wraparound services in summer, POSSE represents a bridge between ensuring wellness and encouraging academic gains for children.

OST summer learning programs offer opportunities to fill gaps between academic and social outcomes. Safety, social-emotional wellness, and enrichment form building blocks of health and well-being for students facing significant challenges in their home lives. Considering that many students, both Native and non-Native, on tribal lands can benefit from access to social support, programs like POSSE represent pathways to supporting these children in numerous ways.

POSSE models a supportive classroom environment fostering social skills development.

Culturally Sustaining Approach and Implications

Intervening early in a student's academic life and incorporating relevant culture are important pathways to improving academic success and promoting inclusion. Native students may feel disenfranchised in educational settings. To address this, POSSE incorporates Choctaw language and celebrates Choctaw customs to create a welcoming environment. This inclusion has immediate academic and social impacts, promoting a culturally sustaining approach by engaging both Choctaw and non-Native youth during a critical learning period.

As a valued link in the chain of cradle-to-career initiatives, POSSE's extended summer learning plays a crucial role for vulnerable children in Choctaw Nation. POSSE students were given access to experiential learning opportunities such as guest speakers and field trips, modeling positive vocational and life outcomes. By allowing children to think outside their daily experience, POSSE exists as an incubator for future success and allows children to envision what could be, rather than simply what is.

The findings from this research demonstrate the unique potential for Native nation building in OST education. Developed by Choctaw Nation, POSSE's goals are twofold: to address the specific learning needs of children in Choctaw Nation through summer recovery education, and to suffuse curricula with Choctaw language and culture. Students are introduced to basic Choctaw vocabulary and have access to culture and heritage, which enhances academic and social relevance for Native students in POSSE and introduces these topics to non-Native students.

It is important that Native students feel represented in their curriculum and school settings. For non-Native students, exposure to Native culture is the first of many steps to combat the marginalization and “othering” of Native peoples, with the ultimate goal of improving representation across multiple academic and social settings.

Recommendations for Practice

Encouraging academic success in a culturally rich setting is an important goal for OST programs like POSSE. Similar to POSSE students, many Native

youths attend school in public education systems. For communities located within or near tribal boundaries, programs like POSSE present pathways to encourage and support improved academic outcomes and to provide culturally sustaining instruction in a partnership model between tribes and local school agencies. Specifically, the partnership between the Choctaw Nation and its 52 public school host sites highlights the benefits of collaborating with external organizations to create and sustain OST programming. For example, in the POSSE program, Choctaw Nation coordinates logistics, funding, and materials, and develops culturally grounded programming. As an external partner, the public school system provides access to a skilled educator workforce and significant infrastructure that bolsters OST program delivery.

Next, the POSSE program recruits public school educators to engage in learning that focuses on formative and student-paced processes, rather than “teaching to a test” or state standards. Educators in this study highlighted the benefit of a model that revitalizes teacher and student engagement and success. Teachers and principals shared their increased enthusiasm and sense of renewal and remarked on students' improved behavioral, academic, and personal growth. The processes developed by POSSE demonstrate the reciprocal, positive loop between teacher and student engagement. Essentially, OST programs can reap twofold benefits of improved student outcomes and positive workforce engagement through a liberating and culturally sustaining approach.

However, a general lack of awareness of Native teachings, lack of workforce capacity, and logistical and cost challenges are barriers to implementation of

culturally sustaining programming for Native students. For programs that serve Native students but are not in proximity to Native lands, forging relationships and increasing awareness of Native identities and practices are the building blocks of promoting student engagement and improved outcomes. As a next step, non-tribal OST programs may consider merging Native teachings (such as traditional folktales and experiential learning) into curricula. Consulting with elders in tribal communities and inviting feedback from Native families are additional ways to begin the journey from cultural sensitivity to culturally

sustaining educational practices, building bridges that ensure academic success for all Native youth.

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