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# Policy through Practice: How Tribal Education Department Leaders View Educational Policy Problems

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A core responsibility of government is to craft policies to alleviate an array of complex social, legal, political, and economic policy problems that impact the well-being of the society it governs.[1] Developing policy begins with a government recognizing and defining the scope and nature of a policy problem.[2] Generally, this process is shaped by elected and appointed government officials according to their interests, values, and ideologies about a given policy problem, and the desires of the populace.[3] This article examines how American Indian tribal governments recognize and define educational policy problems, through the experiences, perception, pedagogy, and practices of tribal education department leadership.[4] This work presents interview data collected from two education department directors serving in two federally recognized tribal governments in Northern California.

## LITERATURE ON TRIBAL GOVERNMENTS AND TRIBAL POLICY ISSUES

The existing body of literature about tribal governments presents a continuous struggle on the part of tribes to push the boundaries of their inherent sovereignty,[5] while the state and federal governments try to restrict those powers.[6] There is a distinct effort within the literature to understand how tribal governments define and exercise sovereignty in accordance with their own unique cultural, social, and political contexts, including looking at the ways that tribal governments forge new bureaucratic institutions to meet the changing needs of their communities.[7]

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The literature also addresses policy problems that are directly and indirectly related to the day-to-day policy issues faced by tribal governments in promoting nation-building efforts, entrepreneurialism, and governmental economic development within their communities,[8] creating culturally relevant legal systems and governance.[9] This area of work has also documented the challenges communities face in the areas of maintaining and strengthening the use and fluency of their languages and cultural knowledge and practices,[10] developing culturally responsive education opportunities,[11] and improving community public health.[12] This article's analysis is distinctive in that its focus is on the process of developing tribal policies, in contrast to the predominant theme in the literature, which has tended to examine the impact of new programs and practices from community perspectives.

## CONTEXT INTO THE CASES

This is a comparative case study of the processes of recognizing and defining educational policy problems in two tribal governments located in California. The tribal governments discussed in this article are the "Water Pomo of East Lake" and the "Evergreen Rancheria."[13] In addition to being located in California, these two governments share the same set of institutional characteristics in that they both have (1) a governing council, (2) an education department, and (3) an existing educational policy that governs an education-oriented program, funding, or service provided to the society). In both of these communities citizen enrollments number less than five hundred and the youth attend school off-reservation. This study relies on the data generated from multiple interviews with two education department directors, one from Water Pomo of East Lake and one from Evergreen Rancheria. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed sentence-by-sentence using open coding methodology.

The Evergreen Rancheria is a federally recognized tribe with approximately three hundred enrolled members, of which one hundred fifty citizens are under the age of eighteen. The Rancheria is located three hours north of the San Francisco Bay area. Composed of several departments, the Evergreen Rancheria government is governed by a constitution approved by the membership in the late 1980s. This constitution grants judicial authority to the tribal court and legislative authority to the Evergreen Rancheria council. The council is made up of six political actors, which includes a chair, vice-chair, secretary, treasurer, and two alternate council members. The principal responsibility of the council is to generate policy and oversee tribally owned businesses, which include a hotel, gas station, mini-mart, and a gaming establishment. The government also has an executive branch comprised of a chief operations officer, chief executive officer, and chief financial officer. The executive branch oversees all of the administrative operations of the businesses and departments, including the education department, which consists of a director and an assistant director.

The Evergreen Rancheria government offers a variety of educational programs and services to members. The programs are funded through the general budget and grants. Program offerings include a youth leadership council, K-12 school advocacy for

students, scholarships for college or trade schools, summer and after-school programming, private tutoring, standardized test preparation (the SAT and ACT), and funds for school-based extracurricular activities (physical activity, sports, music or field trips), and K-12 private-school tuition. The government also maintains a Head Start center and a computer lab for tribal members.

The Water Pomo of East Lake is a federally recognized tribe with approximately 180 enrolled members. Of these citizens, seventy are under the age of eighteen. Like Evergreen Rancheria, the Water Pomo reservation is also located forty-five minutes north of the San Francisco Bay area. The Water Pomo council is governed by a constitution which delegates legislative authority over day-to-day operations and affairs to a council. Composed of seven members—a chair, vice-chair, treasurer, secretary, two at-large executive members, and one at-large member—the responsibilities of the council are to make and enact laws and policies governing on-reservation activities. In addition to the council, several government departments execute tribal policy and programs. Current operating Water Pomo government departments include education, fiscal, housing, enrollment, and Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) offices. The Water Pomo manage a casino and an online money-lending business.

The Water Pomo of East Lake government offers several educational programs and services to members, most of which focus on early childhood education through middle school. The majority of the programs are funded by fundraisers, small grants, and in-kind donations from community members, nonprofits, and local businesses. Program offerings include public recognition for academic and civic excellence (awards for good grades, attendance, and citizenship), K-12 school advocacy for students, education-oriented childcare, a computer program providing laptops to eighth and twelfth graders, and field trips. The government also maintains a space for education programs.

## Theoretical Framework

The structure and function of tribal governments represents the imposition of assimilative policies as well as the conscious efforts of indigenous communities to revise and redefine colonial structures according to their own needs, desires, and cultures. The concept of tribal sovereignty is inherent, and how communities choose to exercise and present their sovereignty, internally and externally, is their choice. An informed discussion about structure and function of tribal governments must recognize that they represent culturally, racially, socially distinctive communities and acknowledge that they form bureaucracies that govern the day-to-day operations of a society.

Because existing political theory does not account for the unique political, social, and cultural status of American Indian communities, using political theory to discuss tribal governments is problematic. For example, the people in elected or appointed positions are the family, close friends, and neighbors of the constituents they serve. Because of a higher level of intimacy between a tribal government and its community that, arguably, does not exist in other political contexts, existing political theory has an epistemological gap. Although it cannot, therefore, wholly speak to the uniqueness of

tribal governments, mainstream political theory can still contribute to a discussion of tribal political contexts and provide some insight into tribal governments, to the extent that such frameworks are used thoughtfully and adapted with tribal critical theory in mind. That is, any theoretical lens must be reconstructed and reinterpreted to account for the representation of tribal governments and their purposes: to act as actual institutional manifestations of inherent sovereignty as well as to represent cultural, racial, and social distinctiveness.

For this article to contextualize the data in a way that speaks to the function of tribal governments as bureaucracies while honoring American Indian communities as culturally and socially distinctive, I employ two theoretical lenses drawn from Bryan Brayboy's 2005 article "Toward a Tribal Critical Race Theory in Education" and John Kingdon's 2010 work *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*.[14] A central tenet of tribal critical theory, referred to as TribalCrit, is that tribes encompass political and racial identities at the same time, and indigenous people are continuously working toward expanding sovereignty, autonomy, and self-determination. To understand the experiences of tribes, analysis must reflect and include tribal voices, ideologies, traditions, and variance of these experiences and identities on a community and individual scale.[15] Research about tribal governments must honor the complexity of tribal identities. In this essay TribalCrit assists in reimagining Kingdon's theoretical interpretation of the political process by including the multidimensional identity of tribal governments. In tension with conventional political theory's aim of absolute objectivism, TribalCrit also offers the complex intersectionality among race, identity, and politics.

In discussing the roles of political actors inside and outside of the United States government, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policy*'s expansive theoretical lens represents policy development in a highly bureaucratic government. For practical reasons such as the size and complexity of governmental institutions, aspects of this book's theoretical approach are not relevant in tribal contexts. Moreover, it does not account for differences in intimacy between political actors in the US government and those in tribal governments. Kingdon's theory is compelling, however, in its dynamic view of policy creation as a highly contextual and living process that is dictated by participants inside and outside of the government as well as the political climate in and around it. In other words, political process is adaptive and occurs over time as it is driven by people, situations, and types of problems to be solved. As people and needs change, so do the types of policies enacted. This aspect of Kingdon's work is more reflective of tribal governmental contexts, in which, for example, political priorities may change when new council members are elected. From a TribalCrit standpoint, the reasons and purposes for such changes in focus are analyzed as a function of the uniqueness of tribal communities in their pursuit of expanding sovereignty.

To briefly summarize, Kingdon argues that the policy development process hinges on the government recognizing and defining a policy *problem*. Recognizing and understanding a policy problem guides governments in identifying the types of policy proposals to pursue and baseline criteria for evaluating potential policy proposals. Governments come to recognize policy problems through *indicators* identified by information gathering.[16] Indicators are signals of a policy problem, and come to be

recognized through a government's collection and analysis of data (such as surveys, interviews, programmatic funding inequities), and feedback from citizens (such as citizens writing letters or calling political actors about problems). Policy problems are defined by political actors (i.e., elected and appointed officials) in and around government. Political actors can also take notice of a policy problem when a crisis emerges, such as a natural disaster or sudden increases in death rates or high school dropout rates. Indicators of policy problems also surface through assessment and monitoring of programs, services, and activities.[17] Indicators are critical to the recognition of a policy problem because "indicators are used to assess the magnitude of the condition [of the problem] (e.g., the incidence of a disease or the cost of a program)."[18]

Public opinion also influences the problem recognition process; it "can have either positive or negative effects. It might thrust some problems onto the governmental agenda because the vast number of people interested in the issue would make it popular for vote-seeking politicians."[19] Policy problems become also recognized because of budgetary changes and concerns, and the self-interests of bureaucrats in maintaining or expanding their political or programmatic territory. Although indicators, public opinion, and bureaucratic self-interest might demonstrate that a multitude of problems exist in the system, only some problems will garner significant government attention because not all problems are solvable by enacting policy. In other words, a problem must be actionable to qualify as a policy problem.

Defining a policy problem is an interactive and often interpretive process; that is, shaping that definition are the people who define the problem, the information they rely upon to understand the policy problem, and how they compare it to other policy problems present in the system.[20] Political actors weigh in on the causes of the problem and how to correct it based upon its indicators. Political actors engage each other through meetings and discussions to define the policy problem in an interactive, iterative process by which a definition of a policy problem is drafted, refined, and eventually formed.

## Tribal Recognition and Definition of Policy Problems

In the two case studies examined in this article, the Water Pomo and the Evergreen Rancheria education departments come to recognize educational policy problems when (1) tribal citizens report them to the education department, (2) the education department recognizes problems through their hands-on work with the community, and (3) they are revealed by periodic government or department program monitoring and/ or budgetary requests. Reporting the perspective of the education department senior leadership, in these two tribal education department cases the prevalent theme is how information about policy problem indicators flows through the governmental system. Specifically, the case study data significantly corresponds with the Kingdon framework: policy problems came to be recognized and defined within the department through crisis, indicators in the system, and feedback from citizens. The process of problem definition also hinged on the knowledge and experiences of educational department leaders to recognize a policy problem through their work with governmental programs and services and their broader knowledge of the community and culture.

## Policy Problems in the Water Pomo Government

For the Water Pomo education department, recognizing and defining policy problems occurs through continuous system monitoring and hands-on interactions between citizens and department leadership. The education director spearheads education programming in the department, communicates with citizens to assess program needs, and implements programs and policy suggestions from the council. She also closely monitors program participation by tracking attendance and interacting with citizens through phone calls, home and school visits, council meetings, and community events.

The Water Pomo education director describes the focus of her policy work to be expanding academic achievement opportunities for students by providing learning opportunities, differentiated instructional support, resources, and interpersonal skill development:

> We have several programs. So we have our early childhood education program. It's basically our children three through preschool and then we have our afterschool program which is our kids kindergarten, and we service [until?] about seventh and eighth grade. After that, they tail off—we have them here Monday through Thursday and they get their core curriculum of their ABCs, their 123s, their colors, their shapes, everything that they would need to be classroom-ready by the time they enter into kindergarten as well as classroom discipline. So they know how to interact and socialize and to share and, you know, just the basics of interacting with other children so they're very comfortable and ready for kindergarten. And then our older kids, what we do during the school year is they come here after school and we tutor them.

The education director's dedication to academic achievement shapes her process for recognizing and defining policy problems. The vast majority of policy problems she recognizes are defined through the lens of her beliefs about the importance of academic achievement and the problems she has observed as the education director. As a result, many of the department policies she pursues focus on providing supplemental academic achievement opportunities:

> When I first started here . . . I saw the kids with low self-esteem . . . I saw kids who thought they could never achieve good grades . . . I thought, how can I change these things? What can I do? And you start creating programs. So I tried to address different things that I've seen, like creating programs that I think would help, like the gymnastics program, I thought that would help with their confidence and self-esteem . . . So how do I start making these programs so these kids start wanting to achieve?

She also discussed her recognition of educational policy problems in the community as a larger need for programming that supports positive academic outcomes: "By the time they get to 8th grade, that's when these kids are getting in trouble. More like sixth grade. I would say sixth, seventh grade, eighth grade for sure. And I'm seeing kids

dropping out. I'm seeing kids having extracurricular activities that are not positive. I thought, 'what can I do to keep these kids in school?'"

Even when the education director recognizes indicators of a policy problem, she still is constrained by the types of department policies she is able to pursue. The council provides base funding for the education department, but the budget is often tight. The director identifies and defines policy problems within these budgetary constraints, which shape the types of policy problems she is able to recognize and define, and, ultimately, develop policy to alleviate. The director often seeks free, donated, or grant-funded resources to support the development of policy to alleviate the problems she recognizes:

> We do fundraisers . . . So every general membership meeting, we have a bake sale, and we have these wonderful elders that will bake their hearts away, bring in goods and we will sell them to the general membership—and it's wonderful . . . We have a local event here . . . So we'll go down and we'll sell like snow cones, popcorn, sodas, stuff like that . . . a local tribe that's close to us . . . always do something for like California Indian Day so we'll have a booth down there. We'll sell the same type of thing . . . And then we do have some wonderful people in the tribe that when they receive their per cap, they will send us money to fund the education department . . . I have a lot of unrestricted funding because of these different events that we do. We have a lot of people that donate, too. I have no problem going out and asking outside entities, like okay, we're having a reading program at the end of the year and we're going to have an awards ceremony on August eighth. We're going to have thirty kids. Here's a donation request letter. Would you mind donating these food supplies? And a lot of the local businesses will donate things. I've had pizzas donated. I've had drinks donated. I've had ice cream donated. I mean, a lot of people are really giving, really giving.

The Water Pomo Director also describes an instance when she defined the policy problem of tribal youth cultivating a healthy understanding of their tribal heritage to build self-confidence, in order to support the broader policy problem of improving academic achievement among tribal youth:

> I sat everybody down and said, okay, who are you and where are you from, where are your ancestors from? I cannot tell you how many kids were like, I don't know who I am. I don't know where I came from. I'm like, well, what do you mean? You guys are all Pomo. They're like what do you mean we're Pomo? I'm like, well, you're all Native . . . I'm like oh, wow. We have a lot of work to do here. But you know, once you get to middle school, you start questioning who you are and you may have a really good self-esteem, confidence of who you are when people start challenging that because that's when it starts getting challenged. So I said, let's bring somebody in here and we'll start teaching this so that way, kids can have pride in who they are and know where they come from.

When she becomes aware of this policy problem (i.e., how to build students' self-confidence by creating opportunities for them to learn about their tribal culture), she consults with the council to generate some potential solutions, and investigates other avenues to alleviate the problem. Defining a policy problem requires feedback from and negotiation with the council about the indicators of a policy problem that she sees. For example, she provides an instance of defining a policy problem and then navigating the tribal politics around a policy solution—to bring in an elder from a different Band of Pomo to teach tribal language and culture to the youth:

> Oh, we have our youth storytelling . . . We have Mr. Brown who comes from [another Band of Pomo]. He comes here and I wanted, you know, we have a really hard time with our elders coming down and teaching our youth . . . So I asked my administrator . . . why don't you let me reach out to an outside tribe? . . . there's only certain tribes I can reach out to, ones I can or cannot but I was able to reach out to Mr. Brown who's from [another tribe] and he comes down once a month with the kids and he does storytelling and each time that he has story-telling, it revolves around culture and he'll use about five or six words in the Pomo language so they're learning about their culture, they're learning a little bit about the language and they're being exposed and they're grasping the concept of who they are and where they came from . . . Then I asked also for the council to open it up to the community . . . I said [to council] how do we break down these barriers?

The Water Pomo education director describes the department's relationship with the tribal council as "positive" and "supportive." The open line of communication provides opportunities for the director to share indicators of policy problems with the council. She is also able to help shape the definitions of policy problems and the subsequent policies. The director also benefits from the council's agenda, which has prioritized education:

> [R]ecently, I came up with the youth advancement program so all of our eighth graders who graduate will get a laptop and all of our high school students that graduate are going to get a stipend or cash reward for graduating high school because I saw the need . . . So I came up with this program, I proposed it to council and they were all for it . . . I think they're great . . . one of their main agendas is to support education in our youth. I'm very fortunate because I know that a lot of tribes are not like that.

The bureaucratic structure of the Water Pomo government education department lends itself to having regular contact with citizens. The education director reported that through her management and implementation of educational policy (i.e., educa-tion-related programs and services), she also regularly engages with tribal youth. She remarked that, once she took the job as the education director, it took several months for her to build rapport with tribal youth and their parents. Through hands-on work in the community, citizens eventually felt comfortable to come to her in both formal settings (meetings at the educational department and educational programming) and

informal settings (interactions at her home and over the phone during non-business hours). In these ways the education director receives feedback from the community about policy problem indicators. This feedback plays a critical role in the problem definition process:

> [I]t's really hard to change people's perspectives but I will tell you that at first, when I started working here and the changes I was making, they were very, a lot of membership was against it and now I feel like I've even had people show up at my doorstep thanking me for some of the things that I've helped their children with. One person in particular . . . showed up at my doorstep about two years after me being here with her granddaughter and thanked me because I went down to the school and fought for her to walk the stage for graduation day. So that was a huge moment in my life.

She also discusses noticing tribal youth having issues of academic achievement, health, and access to technology. These words demonstrate that through her personal interactions she is able to recognize problems within the system although there is not always community coherence in identifying and defining policy problems. In turn, the education director uses this information about the problem indicators present in the system to inform the types of policies and programs she brings before the council. Thus, the problem recognition and definition process is refined through these modes of communication at the department, council, and community levels.

The education director also collects data on the academic achievement of students participating in educational programming and functions as a liaison between tribal youth and their schools to ensure that students are academically successful. As a liaison, she has permission to discuss academic needs and instructional differentiation with the school directly.

> We reach out to their teachers. We make sure they're not falling behind in any subjects. If their grades are slipping, we find out why. We also have our AmeriCorps tutor . . . we've partnered with and we have two tutors every school year so the kids who are really falling behind, we'll send them into the school and they'll work in the classroom with our kids who are falling behind. Or I notice at the end of the day, the teacher does science and the child is just in meltdown status. So we figure out whatever is causing, you know, the academics to decline and then we work from there to address the issue. So that's kind of how it runs during the school year. So on top of that, we have other programs established to help youth.

She has created a set of programming incentives for students to report grades to the education department, allowing it to recognize student achievement and attain a better sense of students' academic needs.

The education director is able to connect with citizens through a monthly education department newsletter, which is sent to all citizens and posted on the tribal government website. The newsletter highlights the academic and extracurricular achievements of Water Pomo youth and discusses the current program offerings at the

education department. Each month parents are solicited to share information about their children's academic achievement for the newsletter. The director forwards this information to the council for review and uses it to advocate for educational policy initiatives (i.e., educational programs and services).

## Policy Problems in the Evergreen Rancheria Government

Like the Water Pomo education director, the Evergreen Rancheria education director comes to recognize and define policy problems through her work experiences and pedagogical beliefs about the Evergreen Rancheria's educational needs. Because the education director views literacy and access to reading materials as a critical component to the academic success of tribal youth, a primary policy goal is opening a library with age-appropriate books:

> I feel it's extremely important for the kids to be able to know how to read and it's important for them to have the opportunity, too, to where they can check out books . . . I really want to . . . convert our tutor room into like a lounge area for the kids to come down. I'm looking into also getting licenses for the accelerated reader program because a lot of our kids . . . struggle with reading . . . also their comprehension . . . but then there are some students who . . . have no problem with it so I want be able to offer those resources for the students so . . . they'll be able to take their test and have more confidence in it.

As she filters her definitions of policy problems through her personal experiences with education, like the Water Pomo education director her definitions of policy problems are constrained by the practicality of implementing the policy proposal to alleviate the identified problem: "I wanted to get a library so [the previous director] had me just do research in regard to the library programs. Which one would be able to, not so much afford, but that was user-friendly . . . so that way the entire department can use it and help students." The education director is conducting research to find a library program option that is both affordable and user-friendly for the entire community.

The education director plays an important role in recognizing educational policy problems by forwarding information based on (1) collecting data on the academic needs of tribal youth, (2) receiving input from parents and youth, and (3) forwarding parental requests for education services to their council for review. During the interview, she identified that an important responsibility of the Evergreen Rancheria education director is maintaining regular contact with youth and parents in order to better understand citizens' educational needs and to detect problems within the educational system. However, maintaining regular contact is sometimes difficult because parents and students do not always respond to her communication efforts:

> It's really just getting out there. You got to know your people. You've got to be able to go out and just talk to them whether they're up at the front desk, you know, and you happen to be walking up to check your mailbox. . . . Even at general membership meetings, if a parent hasn't been returning my phone calls, I'll just walk up to them. I'm known as a hounder.

In addition, the Evergreen Rancheria education director regularly conducts system monitoring by an annual survey of the citizens about the types of educational programming and issues they need most. Feedback from citizens about the quality of the educational programming offered by the Evergreen Rancheria government provides the education director with a glimpse into new areas of program development or improvement. This information is used to shape and tailor the educational programming to fit societal needs:

> [W]e do an initial mail-out to them. I've been implementing Facebook, like under my just private Facebook. I'm friends with a majority of the parents. I'll put the survey up on Facebook and it's like, hey, I just sent out a reminder for our survey. You know, please get that back to us. A membership meeting is coming up . . . I'm walking around to parents, please fill the survey out, you know, so that's where I hound them.

In addition to the work of the education department, system monitoring is also conducted by the Evergreen Rancheria council and the executive branch: "they'll do surveys . . . out to the membership and it's like, 'oh, that's how these programs are doing.'. . . You know, I always look at things like there's always an area to improve." Through system monitoring, the education director discovered that the Evergreen Rancheria citizens valued educational opportunities that centered on whole-family participation, which led to recognizing the need to develop alternative educational initiatives focusing on whole-family engagement:

> Youth activities programs [are a priority], we also do like field trips for the families and the youth. And I would say that's probably one of my top three ones [education] issues . . . There's a lot of . . . surveys done where the families said they wanted to do family-oriented type activities, not so much just strictly for the youth . . . that's one thing that I took into consideration, and all of our activities now are family-oriented to where the entire family in the household can attend, including non-member kids, you know.

The education department also collects data on program participation, revealing which programs are being utilized and which are not:

> I have a tracking sheet on my computer. . . . Programs that are being underutilized or not utilized, constitute an indicator of a problem. Once the education director recognizes a problem, this information is then reported to the tribal council through formal interaction [i.e., quarterly and annual reporting and budget requests].

Problem recognition for Evergreen Rancheria also occurs through budgetary requests from the citizens to the education department for items such as extracurricular activities and academic support. These citizen requests allow the education director to recognize a programmatic need in the educational system—in other words, problem recognition:

When you get those requests for funding your job is to make sure the requests are allowed for the program. . . . To make sure they follow the policies and the procedures and everything. For example, you can get a request for a student wanting to buy a trampoline. So I mean, that's just a simple request. It's definitely an outdoor activity so getting the student up, not watching TV, you know, being physically active, basically so that would be a request that would be allowed to come through the program . . . where we can purchase it for them or they can get reimbursed for it. Let's see what other sorts of requests, like a laptop, for instance.

The education director also describes this problem-recognition process in discussing petitions to the department and council for government funding for K–12 students to attend private schools:

The kids can use their activity fund for their tuition for [private] school but the kids are only allowed up to a certain amount per year and it's definitely not going to be enough to cover tuition at all. . . . [the tribal government does] have a cap on what programs [it] will take up. But there was a lot of concern that the public schools were not offering things for our students or the classrooms, you know. You lived up here. . . . you have 35 students to one teacher and not all those teachers have an aide. Some of the kids were kind of just getting pushed aside and they weren't getting the education that they deserved . . . The tribal council came up with the idea for the private school assistance program and education at that point . . . procedures in regard to that and how that program was going to be ran and what it would pay for . . . I had concerns in regard to some of my students and the parents were coming and asking, hey, can we pay for private school . . . Basically, I was taking down names and the students and then I'd look back at the students' grades . . . like three years to see if they were going up or just completely went down.

As the two preceding blocked quotations show, policy problem recognition can also occur through citizen funding requests to the education department. Funding requests enable the education director to identify a programming need as well as potential programmatic ways to alleviate that gap (i.e., the problem definition).

Similarly, both the executive branch and council discuss education ideas in terms of budgetary constraints and need as defined by the memberships and government officials:

Our executive team . . . sit[s] down with input from the education department and with the education director, we sort of go over [education] issues . . . In the beginning, ideas were just thrown out [there]. Our program has a budget . . . and a lot of ideas [were] vetted through the general membership as a whole, and then it kind of got narrowed down to a set of programs.

## Variations in Educational Policy Problem Recognition Processes

As Kingdon explains, policy is developed in phases and to craft a policy to solve a problem requires knowledge of a problem's existence and scope. Generally, the manner in which such problems are recognized in a tribal governmental context is very similar. Before discussing the policy problem recognition process further, however, it is important to recall that as a result of the relatively small size of tribal bureaucracies and the often high level of intimacy between the department directors and their communities, Kingdon's policy problem process functions differently in a tribal context. Specifically, the process of focusing on and analyzing data—information that may indicate a potential problem—is different. For Kingdon, the most compelling information gathered through system monitoring is a macro understanding of policy and policy analysis, or "big data," whereas in these two tribal education departments, both macro- and micro-information from system monitoring were equally valuable. Indeed, while both departments gathered big data by administering surveys and monitoring program use, the education department directors also learned about the scope of policy problems by doing hands-on work in the community and communicating positively with tribal councils—in other words, essentially maintaining a high level of intimacy with the communities they serve. As both education directors described, they learned about a problem from interactions with people in many different ways, including council meetings, surveys, events, ceremonies, and personal contact outside of work, which differs from Kingdon's description of how political actors come to recognize policy problems within their departments and programs.

Kingdon writes that as a portion of the policy problem recognition process, "elected politicians judge their constituents' moods from such communications as mail, town meetings, smaller gatherings, and delegations of people or even individuals coming to them during their office hours in the district."[21] In the Water Pomo and Evergreen Rancheria education departments, however, feedback from constituents represents the primary way in which problems come to be recognized: citizens communicate with the departments and the council formally—voting for particular initiatives, and voicing concerns at council and business meetings—and also speak informally with tribal council members about their concerns. As we have seen, the interview data described several instances where directors received feedback about a policy, program or unmet educational need, and in turn, the directors forwarded the information to the council. However, directors also received feedback from council about policies and problem indicators they recognize.

Importantly, the relationship between the education department and the council is vital to the problem recognition and definition processes not only because of the familiar, regular interactions between these departments but also with tribal citizens. This flow of information among stakeholders is fundamentally different than Kingdon's view of the relationships and interactions among bureaucratic policy communities by virtue of the difference in size between the political sphere of the federal government and that of tribal governments.

## How are Policy Problems Defined and Who Defines Them?

Kingdon cautions that for political actors, "interpretation of indicators turns out to be a process more complicated than straightforward assessment of facts. *Focusing events*, including disasters, crises, personal experiences, and symbols, are important, but need accompaniment of preexisting perceptions which they reinforce."[22] Political actors inside the government define the problem according to their understanding of the problem indicators (i.e., problem definition).

For Water Pomo and Evergreen Rancheria education departments, the process of defining a policy problem centers on the ways that political actors inside of the government define a recognized problem according to their understanding of the issue, and the larger problems plaguing the community. The process by which problems are defined is an interaction between two governmental entities: the tribal council and the education department.

The flow of information influences the way that problem indicators are presented to, and recognized by, the council, which in turn shapes the definition of the problem. Problem indicators that are reported to the education director and that are presented to the tribal council for definition are predefined by the education director (by virtue of the manner in which she chooses to frame the problem with the available information). That process of reporting to the council requires the education director to make value judgments about problems that warrant attention from the department and government. The education director is forced to determine which indicators of the problem are most relevant to accompany the reporting of the problem to council: what problems will be promoted and what problems will be tabled. The process of defining the problem begins with the political actor reporting the indicator to the council.

The definition of these recognized programs appears to be a process of cultivating a somewhat coherent definition of the problem among the education director and the council and and their buy-in into that definition. This is not to say that the final definition of the recognized problem is the same definition among all political actors; rather, it is a definition that reflects general concepts and ideologies that are collectively shared by the political actors, while slightly differentiated by individual interests and beliefs.

## Limitations and Areas for Further Inquiry

This is a study of the perspectives of two political actors from two small tribal governments. Interview data from tribal council members was not reported in this article. To make larger assertions about the way tribal governments come to recognize policy problems would require data from political actors from a number of tribal governments (ranging in size and geographic location). The intention of this article is not to apply a one-size-fits-all model to the function of tribal political systems, which would be neither appropriate nor useful. However, this discussion of tribal political systems is generalizable to the broader theoretical understanding of the ways that governments recognize and define educational policies within their systems. Generalizing to theory does not rely on sample sizes; instead, it relies on fostering a clearer understanding

of phenomena in a case study.[23] When the characteristics of a case are applicable to the circumstances of another case, these findings are also valuable in case-to-case transferability.[24]

## Concluding Thoughts

The process of recognizing and defining policy problems within these two governments centers on how the indicators of a problem become recognized and how that information is shaped as it flows through the governmental system. In both cases, the education directors received information through their hands-on work with the community, system monitoring (on macro and micro levels) via information gathering and during formal and informal interactions with citizens and council. In turn, the indicator of a policy problem was reported to the council through formal and informal forms of communication with the department leadership. This is not to assert that the process of problem recognition was wholly dependent on department leadership. Citizens also express their problem indicators and public opinion about policy problems with the departments. To summarize the process specifically, the Water Pomo and the Evergreen Rancheria education departments come to recognize educational policy problems when problem indicators are (1) reported by the tribal citizens to the education department, (2) recognized by the department through hands-on work in the community, and (3) recognized through periodic programmatic monitoring conducted by the government or department, and budgetary requests.

To reimagine Kindgon's theory using TribalCrit is to craft a theoretical lens that reflects the complexities of tribal governments as political and cultural institutions. The value of the Kingdon lens is that it demonstrates that the policy-making process is iterative and hinges on the work of people inside the government. To craft a policy to solve a problem requires knowledge that a problem exists and its scope. However, the ways that problem recognition is achieved in a tribal context is different than what Kingdon articulates. To Kingdon, system monitoring is a macro process. In these two communities, knowledge about the problem was formed using macro- and microdata. Indeed, both departments administered surveys and monitored program use. However, they also learned about problems by doing hands-on work in the community—which is fundamentally different than Kingdon's view.

## Notes

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3. Ibid.

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13. The tribal governments and study participants have been given pseudonyms.

14. Brayboy, "Toward a Tribal Critical Theory;" Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies.*

15. Ibid.

16. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives.*

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., 197.

19. Ibid., 65.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 149.

22. Ibid., 113.

23. Robert Yin, *Case Study Research Design and Methods, Third Edition* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002).

24. Ibid.