

American Indian Students in “Culture Blind” Schools

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Abstract: American Indians have the lowest educational attainment rates of any group in the United States. Researchers have attributed this educational disparity gap to the lack of cultural relevance in mainstream educational settings. American Indian students perceive a cultural bias against them in both classroom curriculum and pedagogical practices. While some states have passed legislation to support teaching about American Indian history and cultures, no funding to support culturally relevant curriculum changes or teacher training accompany these measures. Successful American Indian college students learn how to develop a strong academic identity, while retaining strong cultural ties. A continuing educational gap in access to higher education, in a knowledge-based economy, affects the socio-economic status of families and tribes. Incorporating tribal values into mainstream schools would not only enhance educational connections for American Indian students, but can also improve the learning environment for all students.

Key words: American Indian education, educational disparity, boarding schools, culture and cognition

1. Introduction

American Indian students have the lowest educational attainment rates of any group in the United States. Many American Indian students perceive their current classroom experiences as unrelated to them culturally. Insisting that the culture of school is more important than the culture of students' homes is form of cultural imperialism. Educational institutions believe that they offer a “culture blind” education to all American students, an education where race and cultural backgrounds of students do not matter, a reportedly culture-free zone.

Researchers have attributed the educational disparity gap that American Indians experience to the lack of cultural relevance in mainstream educational settings. The rate of high school graduation for American Indian students is 46% compared to a national average of 89%. Only 17% begin college, compared to a national average of 62%. Among this 17%, only 4% survive the first academic year. Eleven percent of American Indians have college degrees, less than half the norm for the rest of the country (American Indian Education Foundation, 2011).

The practice of cultural blindness masks entrenched inequality. Educators assume that racial harmony is the norm in cultureless classrooms. Many view the underperformance of American Indian students in education as merely representing the lack of individual hard work and determination. Current educational disparities are viewed as a reflection of individual underachievement and lack of educational potential.

A continuing educational gap in access to higher education, in a knowledge-based economy affects the socio-economic status of families and tribes. Many American Indian families depend on public education as a pathway to upward mobility and increased opportunities. Reservations remain economically underdeveloped, and

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the full potential of many American Indian students, untapped.

Both Gallup and Kaiser Family polling data indicate that the majority of white Americans believe that racial discrimination no longer exists, that we live in a post-racial, color-blind, or race neutral society (Gallagher, 2012). The myth of culture-free classrooms maintains white privilege by negating the reality of racial and cultural inequality that American Indians face in American institutions.

2. History of American Indian Boarding Schools

Historically, education has been used as a weapon of colonization against American Indians. The American Indian boarding school system can be described as a war in disguise, a war to attain complete cultural supremacy. Education was used as a weapon to remove and isolate children from their families, diminish tribal populations, and extinguish tribal cultures.

Differences in the perception of education exist among dominated minorities, some resist “colonial education” while others view education as a path to economic security for their families. Boarding schools started as an experiment with Indian prisoners at Fort Marion, in St. Augustine, Florida. The Bureau of Indian Affairs and churches ran boarding schools. Money was deducted from annuities if children weren’t sent away to schools (Reyhner, 2004, p. 47). Tribes suspected that boarding schools were set up to divert their treaty money.

After the Civil War, the Catholic Church developed the largest number of mission schools, using government funding. Cultural repression was emphasized in boarding schools. The term *ethnocide* refers to the destruction of one’s ethnic culture. Children were subject to the repression of any previous cultural ties such as their names, languages, and religion. Modeled on the emerging prison system, military style training and corporal punishment were routine. Physical and sexual abuse, and death from disease was rampant (Bear, 2008). Children were removed from their families and tribal communities, as young as the age of five, up to age eighteen (Daniels, 2012). Runaways were returned by law enforcement. The impact of American Indian boarding school practices on parenting skills, families, and tribes, has yet to be fully understood.

The war against American Indian cultures, and for complete assimilation, was waged overtly. The infamous quote of Carlisle Indian Industrial School founder, Richard Henry Pratt, summarized the intent of these schools, “Kill the Indian, Save the Man.” (Child, 1998, p. 54). As succinctly stated by Reverend A. J. Lippincott at a Carlisle commencement, “The Indian is DEAD in you. Let all that is Indian within you die! You cannot become truly American citizens, industrious, intelligent, cultured, civilized until the INDIAN within you is DEAD.” (Child, 1998, p. 77).

Retaining family bonds was difficult given the cost of transportation to boarding schools. The cost of round trip train fare was over thirty dollars; while per capita annual income for American Indians was eighty-one dollars (Reyhner, 2004, p. 45). Students were a source of cheap labor for local farms. The students sometimes lived with white families in a practice called “outing”. The emphasis was on learning a trade or basic skill to become part of an unskilled labor force. The lack of professional training underdeveloped the economic potential of families and tribes.

In 1865, President Grant recommended that American Indian children be removed from their homes in order to achieve the goal of establishing an assimilated cultural identity in government-run schools, instead of church schools (Child, 1998). Protestants fought to end all government funding of mission schools.

The 1928 Meriam Report found that the majority of American Indian schools were inadequate. This report specifically criticized the use of American Indian students as laborers, at a time when child labor laws prohibited these practices in many states (Reyhner, 2004, p. 208). The Meriam Report supported the development of community day schools on reservations and the phasing out of boarding schools.

One legacy of the era of boarding schools is the high rate of historical trauma experienced in American Indian families. Historical Trauma theory argues that cultural trauma to a society impacts succeeding generations (Sztompka, 2000). Researchers have found that unresolved cultural grief causes generational emotional distress (PTSD).

The basis of historical trauma theory was developed with survivors of the Jewish Holocaust and Veterans of World War I and II. Similar to other traumatized populations, PTSD rates are higher among American Indians (22%), than among the general population (8%) (Brave Heart, 2011). American Indians continue to be exposed to more trauma than the general population. Eighty-five percent of American Indians experience trauma compared to 52% of the general population (Bullock, 2005). Trauma theory changes fundamental therapeutic questions from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What’s happened to you?” (Bloom, 2004). American Indians experienced colonization through a number of federal government policies including wars, fraudulent treaties, forced relocations, incarceration on reservations, boarding schools, and tribal termination in the 1950s.

Historical trauma continues in multiple generations because the descendants of genocide are genetically at higher risks of developing PTSD (Kellermann, 2001). Grief resolution can occur through collective mourning, based on cultural rituals, and on a commitment to community healing (Whitbeck, 2004). Cultural practices that are retained can be used for healing.

3. American Indian Educational Disparity

The dropout rate for American Indians is three times that of non-Indian students, at a time when a high school diploma is a minimal qualification for entry-level jobs. Over one-third of American Indian young people drop out of high school. Only 46% of American Indians graduate from high school and 17% attend college.

It is important to look beyond the educational outcomes so many Indian youth face, and also examine the schools they attend. A 2012 report attributes American Indian attrition rates to the lack of representation of American Indians in curriculum and among teachers (McKinney, 2012). A U.S. Department of Education study identified the top reasons why American Indian students drop out of school: (1) *uncaring teachers*, (2) *curriculum* designed for mainstream America, and (3) *tracking* into low achieving classes and groups (Department of Education, 1991).

The campus climate of schools can be aggressively anti-Indian at times. The use of derogatory American Indian mascots in public schools seems to support the belittling of culturally important figures. Public schools continue to use sports mascots with names like “Savages”, “Redskins”, and “Fighting Reds”. Sports mascots are often crude, cartoon-like depictions of “braves” and “chiefs”. Religious symbols like face paint and feathers are used without respect and context, an overt message of religious intolerance and cultural disrespect. Beginning in the 1960s, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) campaigned against this demeaning use of native traditions and rituals. In 2005, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) required colleges to retire demeaning mascots, but many public high schools still use them.

American Indian students perceive a cultural bias against them in classroom curriculum as well as

pedagogical practices. Only 8% of American Indian students who drop out do so because of academic failure. Most complain about boredom, and perceived hostility from classmates and teachers, which create a hostile school climate (Reyhner, 1995). Standardized testing has narrowed needed curriculum revisions and further disconnects teachers and curriculum from the lives of many American Indian students (Roppolo, 2007).

An analysis of social studies curriculum found that American Indians are largely depicted as victims, rather than recognized for their contributions to American culture (Journell, 2009). Any American Indian history that is covered in schools focuses on a limited time frame of pre-twentieth century history. Contemporary achievements of tribal self-determination are excluded from school curriculum, as well as the substantial pre-Columbian history of ancient civilizations in America. This serves to reinforce media images of American Indians as people who existed in the past (Willow, 2010). Nearly all states cease their coverage of American Indians after the 1860s, creating an incomplete narrative. This creates significant implications for the historical consciousness of all students.

Non-native teachers teach the overwhelming majority of American Indian students, whether on reservations or urban areas, in both tribal colleges and mainstream institutions. American Indian teachers can serve as important role models, but low educational attainment rates have contributed to a deficit of certified American Indian teachers. Teachers don't need to be cultural experts, but just be aware of American Indian students and welcoming to them (Pewewardy, 2003). Good teachers can build upon diverse student cultural backgrounds. Lack of empathy from teachers is cited as a major contributing factor in the drop out rates of American Indian students (Pember, 2010). Dropout prevention starts with caring and informed educators. Many educators could benefit from cultural relevancy training.

While some states have passed legislation to support teaching about Americans Indians, no funding to support culturally relevant curriculum changes or teacher training accompany these measures. American Indians have struggled to gain a presence in educational curriculum. In the 1990s, a political “culture war” occurred in the United States regarding the presentation of public school history curriculum. Liberals asserted that a critical reading of national history needed to be presented while conservatives felt that a celebration of “traditional” American historical accounts should be stressed. National educational standards, developed in 1994, did not expand the presence of American Indians in school curriculum. The original people of the Americas remain associated with the idea of “foreignness”. American Indians appear once a year in school curriculum, as part of the mythology of Thanksgiving, where they are “guests” of the Pilgrims, or an occasional Indian massacre or battle is mentioned. American Indians have served in every war, beginning with the American Revolution. A 1988 United States Senate resolution acknowledged the influence of the Iroquois Confederacy on the American Constitution. Imperial nostalgia has romanticized and belittled American Indians, belatedly showing approval of cultural aspects that were repressed by government policies in the past, yet unable to support the educational needs of American Indians in classrooms today.

Many whites today know little of American Indian history. The invisibility of American Indians in school curriculums supports Anti-Indian sentiments. As Elizabeth Cook-Lynn defines the term, “Anti-Indianism is that which treats Indians and their tribes as though they don't exist, the sentiment that suggests that Indian nationhood (i.e., tribalism) should be disavowed and devalued (Cook-Lynn, 2001, p. x). While overt expressions of racism against American Indians have been reduced, they have been replaced by a romanticized notion and commodification of American Indians (Denzin, 2013). Rather than acknowledging racial hierarchy, race and culture are now viewed as media symbols that can be consumed, and supposedly understood by anyone.

A strong relationship exists between language, culture, and cognition. Different linguistic communities conceive reality in different ways. According to the U.S. Department of Education, schools that support a student’s language and culture are more successful in educating those students. The Department of Education Indian Nations at Risk Task Force identified top priorities as the need for culturally and linguistically based education, and the need to train more American Indian teachers (Locke, 2007). Schools can play a vital role in serving student and community needs at a time when American Indian languages struggle to survive as spoken languages.

With higher poverty rates, American Indian families may experience frequent relocations due to family hardships (National Institute Health, 2012). A high level of absences is often the first evidence of dropout behavior (Reyhner, 2006). American Indian students are often placed in special education and basic skills programs, instead of culturally appropriate programs (Reyhner, 2004, p. 11). School discipline, detentions, and suspensions are higher for American Indian students than non-Indian. American Indian, African American and Hispanic youth are disciplined at higher rates and two to five times more likely to be suspended or expelled (Wallace, 2009, p. 47).

4. Educational Success and Resiliency Factors

For students to succeed in school they must have positive beliefs about their abilities as students, and about the importance of education to their future opportunities. This correlation may be difficult on some reservations with high unemployment rates and few jobs. Only 6 of every 100 American Indian college students will graduate, and only 2 of these 6 will complete graduate or professional degrees (Alberta, 2001, p. 89).

One response from tribes to high university attrition rates resulted in the development of tribal colleges. In 1968, the Navajo nation founded the first tribal college, Navajo Community College, renamed Dine College in 1997 (Reyhner, 2004, p. 295). Tribal colleges are committed to providing culturally based education on reservations. There are now 32 tribal colleges, most of them two-year institutions, in 12 states. Ninety one percent of tribal college students are non-traditional, often older working parents, and many are single mothers (Williams, 2007). These students take longer to complete their education due to both financial and family demands, than traditional students.

Students at some tribal colleges face a digital divide in their educational pursuits. More than 90% of tribal populations lack high speed Internet access, according to the Federal Communications Commission (PBS, 2011). With less than 10% of tribal lands having access to broadband Internet service, some developing countries have a higher rate of access, according to the Department of Commerce. American Indian students on reservations also need to use limited funds on gas to drive miles to Wi-Fi locations. (Huffington Post, 2012).

Tribal communities also founded American Indian charter schools; there are currently forty-four such schools in the United States (Reeves, 2009). Over 75% of American Indians reside in urban areas 90% of American Indian college students attend mainstream educational institutions, so changes must be made at this level in order to impact educational outcomes for the majority of American Indians students. The need for cultural and language retention programs are acute. Many tribes have reservation based language programs, but the majority of tribal members live off-reservation, without access to Indigenous language classes at mainstream schools and universities.

Developing an academic identity, and perceptions of social support systems are key factors in college

persistence (Okagaki, 2009). Many American Indian students are first generation college students who can encounter a less familiar campus climate. Second generation college students have more factual information about college from their family and friends. Students who can successfully develop an academic identity are more likely to persist in academia (Montgomery, 2000, p. 387). Students who have more positive perceptions of the university environment are more easily retained (Alberta, 2001).

When the factor of social support is examined, the role of faculty mentoring has the most significant impact on college retention. Students with at least one faculty mentor are more likely to succeed in college (Alberta, 2001, p. 96). Yet American Indians remain underrepresented among college faculty. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, nationwide there are a little over 7,000 American Indian faculty on college campuses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). American Indian faculty can connect to the important role that extended families hold in American Indian cultures, but they also face many pressures in academic environments which reward publishing more than community commitments. The lack of role models and precedents is revealed in student comments, “Statistically, we’re not supposed to be doing this...We’re not both supposed to be going to school and getting our education...you know — being Native Americans.” (Montgomery, 2000, p. 392). A lack of role models in educational pipelines impacts student aspirations.

Successful American Indian college students learn how to develop a strong academic identity, while retaining strong cultural ties. In addition to the academic challenges that all students face in college, American Indian students will also face cultural adjustments. Those who have a strong sense of cultural identity are more likely to persist (Alberta, 2001, p. 89).

5. Tribal Cultural Values as an Educational Foundation

Incorporating tribal values into mainstream schools would not only support educational connections for American Indian students, but can also enhance the learning environment for all students. Tribal values focus on how to be *respectful and generous*, how to *withstand hardship*, and how to *receive blessings*. One way to encourage educational attainment may be to encourage more American Indian youth to become involved in their communities. Personal identity is based on how people view you and learning your place in the world with humility and grace. Without sustained interactions, cultural miscommunications can proceed unwittingly. For example, while American schools often emphasize the need to build self-esteem in students, many tribal cultures value humility above the concept of self-esteem (Reyhner, 2006b).

American Indian students need to develop a strong sense of both their tribal identity and also their academic identity. They must view their cultural identity as being compatible with a positive academic identity. Students who possess a strong cultural identification and can successfully operate in a majority culture, have the most positive educational outcomes. Academic success does not need to detract from a strong cultural identity.

School cultures that are more congruent with tribal values will better serve the needs of American Indian students. College degrees can be viewed as an opportunity, rather than a barrier, as a part of life’s journey. Education is a pathway of many journeys; schools that embrace tribal values can be an important part of this journey.

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