

EDUCATION FOR NATIVE AMERICANS – HELP OR HINDRANCE?

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ABSTRACT: Native American students taught using a Euro-centric educational curriculum/model continue to fail out of the PreK-12 system. We will explore how devaluing Indigenous culture, yet maintaining the expectation that Native American students will thrive and graduate, are harmful and ineffective. How can relationships between teachers and our Native students, with respect for and consideration of Indigenous culture, lead to student success?

Introduction

Native American K-12 and Post-Secondary students who are enrolled in schools across the nation continue to struggle. The number of Native Americans graduating from high school is 69.1% (Adams, 2013). If the percentage of white students was this low, there would likely be a resounding outcry across the nation, trying to ascertain the cause and find a solution. While we strive to have equality in the classrooms, research still supports that our students of color, more particularly our Native American students, are graduating at lower rates. So, one can assume that racism and skin color still matter. What is seen on the outside isn't so important as what is inside. The color of our skin or the percentage of our blood should not be considered, it is what is in our hearts (Bray, 1999). People tend to judge by what they see, such as the color of our skin. There are many factors that will continue to be a problem if they are not addressed. For example, if students are not successful in school, there is a high possibility that they will live in poverty and earn a median annual income of \$33,627 a year (Flynn, 2014). They also will have a higher chance to be involved with criminal activities such as selling illegal drugs (Keith, 2016). Native Americans are more likely to live in inadequate and unhealthy housing, die from motor vehicle incidents, binge drink, smoke, and suffer from

higher suicide rates (Keith, 2016). At the post-secondary level, current estimates indicate Native American students represent 1.1% of the total U.S. college and university enrollment (National Center for Educational Statistics, [NCES], 2008). It is important for this dilemma to be resolved because it is negatively affecting Native American students, their families, and deleting their native cultural values. It is essential to preserve the cultural history of our country that we still do not know much about before the white settlers colonized the country. There needs to be a drastic change in the educational system so that educators are effective in closing the opportunity gap for Native American students. Such changes include, showing acceptance and fairness, helping them adjust to mainstream school, teaching students how to navigate the educational system, how to seek resources available on campus and communicate with their professor, and adjusting from tribal to post-secondary school.

Definitions of Relevant Terms

The terms referred to in this study are defined as follows:

- Assimilated- To take upon oneself the culture or tradition of a given community.
- Bachelor's degree- A degree obtained after successfully completing 120 semester/180 quarter credits that fulfill

program requirements.

- Caribou- A large reindeer that is widely hunted in Alaska.
- Disengagement- A process of withdrawing into a particular group or situation.
- ELL- English Language Learner.
- Native American- Refers to a member of an indigenous people in the United States.
- Pedagogy- A method or practice of teaching an academic subject or theoretical concept.
- Post-secondary- References to any education beyond high school.
- Reservation- Denotes land set aside by the American government on which Native Americans may live.

Acceptance and Fairness

Many Native American children dream of achieving academic success. They begin their educational journey with a sense of hope, adventure, and excitement but they exit twelve long years later treated as second-class citizens, unintelligent, unable to compete or cope, lacking job training or workable skills, unprepared for higher education, leading lives of hopelessness, alienation, joblessness, homelessness, and despair (Bray, 1991). This is not what the parents of these students thought they were signing up for; they had high hopes for their children, and the students had their own dreams to complete high school. The educational system is letting them down. Much of this is due to the lack of equality in the education system. For example, many schools on the reservations do not have school buildings that are fit for learning, up-to-date school books, or credentialed teachers. Teachers on the reservation lack the training to teach students in the way they can learn best (Bray, 1991). The educational system is failing to teach these Native American children the essential skills of reading, writing, math, and thinking for themselves. Prejudice from the local communities has hurt these Native American children while they are in the greater

public. Basic needs for these Native Americans are not being met, so they have a harder time learning what they are being taught. School boards need to hire leaders, not managers (Bray, 1991). Leaders need to encourage those working in education to set policies, and not necessarily worry about the day-to-day operations in education. They need to let the educators educate and let the administration set up a system that encourages the staff and students to work as a team, one that helps the students be active learners who love to learn.

Adjusting to Mainstream Schools

The dropout rate among Native Americans and ELL students in the education system is high across the board (Houseman, 2002). Most Native American students have their native language, so they are also considered ELL students. A higher level of adaptation is necessary for culturally and linguistically diverse students. There needs to be some connectivity between student and teacher relationships that includes their families. This allows more responsive connections, where families feel valued and respected, and are more willing to work with the teacher in educating their child. Family and community engagement helps students foster a greater sense of individual and cultural identity. Curriculum and textbooks are not written to include Native Americans in a favorable light. Bilingual students need to be viewed as assets, not deficits. Teachers' attitudes need to change and not call the white students real students (Houseman, 2002). Anyone who is learning, no matter what level, is a student. An idea of changing high school from a 4-year term to a 5-year term has been proposed (Houseman, 2002). This could help students feel more successful in completing their high school career. Teachers need to be better trained to deal with students and their cultures. Teachers need to portray respect and appreciation of each of their students' cultures in addition to simply teaching them the course material. They also need to be

able to tell the difference between language barriers and cognitive barriers (Houseman, 2002). A language barrier is not being able to understand the rules of English, whether it be writing, or speaking. Cognitive barriers could range from autism, Down Syndrome, or attention disorder. Educators need to be able to decipher if it is a language barrier or cognitive barrier, or both that the student is struggling with, so that they can deal with each issue separately. District leaders need to raise the level of teacher expectations, create additional training days for professional learning, and have teachers who are experienced in working with ELL and Native Americans to assist their peers in developing culturally responsive pedagogy. Another suggestion is to track students even after they leave their school, to track how they can encourage and support these students. All levels K-12 need to be equal, not separate, by not just passing students in the lower grades, then holding them to higher standards in high school level. As educators we need to consider how we can change the curriculum to the level that each student is at. Assistance needs to be offered to teachers in order to show them how to help their students to be able to learn how to learn. Teachers need to be held to a higher standard to help their students to feel more successful in the classroom. For instance, face-to-face connections with Native American communities can show improvements. Schools and families need to work together to make a stronger community. This dangerous trend of high number of drop-outs needs to be reversed.

Unteachable to Understanding

Any teacher that is asked if they let down the Native American students in their school would deny it. Due to the current institution of the education system, the predominance of students who are able to successfully navigate it are white. An illustration of this involves a Native student that was initially labeled by the school faculty as being unteachable. His parents had

moved him from school to school. Eventually, they moved from Canada into the United States. When this Native American student got to the new school, word spread that he was not teachable, so not a single teacher wanted him in their classroom. In the first class where he was placed, the teacher said he was not a good fit for her room. Eventually he was placed in a classroom with a different teacher. That teacher then learned about the student's native culture and wrote a story about a coyote because that is what the student understood (Clifford, 2001). This was a lesson to learn about culture, and the work educators need to investigate diligently, so we can reach all our students in the classroom. Most teachers are not trained in teaching Native American students. They do not know how to respond to them or encourage them because they have not been trained to know their culture, so there is a disconnect between the teachers and Native American students. For example, in native culture, children are taught not to make eye contact with those in authority, yet this could be misconstrued in the classroom as the student being disrespectful to the teacher if the teacher does not understand the student's cultural norms. A teacher could view this as showing disrespect to an adult. If the teacher does not know this, it would probably be followed up with a disciplinary action.

Tribal to White Postsecondary

American Indian acculturation from tribal lands to predominantly white postsecondary settings can be a culture shock. In the article *Whatever Happens to Him Happens to Us: Reading Coyote Reading the World*, Patricia Clifford examined the stress that Native American students experienced at their schools, whether it was just fitting in or understanding how to just get by with passing grades in school (2001). The article details how Native Americans are impacted by racist attitudes and the historical trauma they face while adapting to white culture. The loss of their native culture

has an impact on these students and their families back at home. The students interviewed in this study shared about the presence or lack of support they received from home, such as not responding to a graduation invitation. They also discussed what information they shared with their families, or if they withheld information altogether. Many family members at home felt proud about their students but also jealous of the opportunity they had (Flynn, 2014). Family members have mixed emotions, making isolating and divisive remarks to the students in the family such as, "Oh, you think you are better than us?" (Clifford, 2001). Students rely on self-motivation to keep up their studies at school as well as encouragement from their families back at home. The families tell students to not come back home until they are done with their studies. Students often lack financial support from home. They shared experiences of how they adjusted to the new opportunities they have and how it helped and/or was a struggle. As Keith (2016) stated, only 1.1% of students enrolled in college are Native American, with only 15% of Native Americans having a bachelor's degree compared to 55% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 33% for whites. Having a bachelor's degree might lead to more stable careers, jobs, and higher income.

There are many factors that lead to Native Americans being unprepared for the education system. For instance, they often have a hard time adjusting to the academic community, frequently have problems with self and family, cultural differences, isolation, and money issues (Keith, 2016). One huge factor can be the inability of a Native American student to be able to communicate fully with the advisor, counselor or teacher. In these situations, the staff should set up one key person on staff that can help the student navigate the educational system who is more aware of their needs, wants, and struggles. Also, Native Americans need to know their strengths and use those to help themselves be successful academically. We need to realize many of these students' parents have not gone

to college and either do not encourage or do not know how to support a student going to college. The parents who were sent away to boarding schools were often taught things that tainted their view of their education as well as their children's education due to the quality and methodology of their instruction. Some of the rules these parents were often told: 1) Let Jesus save you, 2) Come out of your blanket, cut your hair, and dress like a white man, 3) Have a Christian family and have one wife, 4) Do not go to Indian dances or to the medicine men (Adams, 2013). For the parents who were forcibly taught these rules, it is often difficult to encourage their children to go and be taught these same rules; they fear that this education will also strip them of their Native identity and culture. In order to allay these concerns, students should be put in touch with another student that was successful and hear their story. Additionally, some Native American students who refuse to assimilate have a harder time adjusting in college. Some Native Americans tap into their strengths and engage in both cultures. If a college does not make Native American students feel like they belong, they will sense that. We need to improve the availability and accessibility of clubs or groups that help students feel more comfortable and provide them with support and resources to set and achieve their goals. Teachers need to check to see how Native American students are dealing with the following: racism, discrimination, isolation, separation, and not adjusting to their environment. For example, it is important to set up an early intervention team if a Native American student is having trouble with attendance or failing grades. Staff, such as advisors, should ask ahead of time what it looks like for a Native Americans student when someone is encouraging them in order to be able to set up support systems that will be effective for each student. Reading material and analyzing data are important but having a personal connection can speak louder than the studies we have heard about.

Personal Experience

My personal experience and that of my family members falls closely in line with the research and other students' experiences detailed above. Two of my older siblings were sent away to a boarding school when they entered high school, because the reservation we lived on only had a school for K-8th grade. At first, my parents thought this would be a good thing, yet when my siblings came home for Christmas break, they had changed in ways that were a complete shock to the family. My brother had to cut his shoulder length hair, they both had specific clothes they had to wear, and the school had gotten rid of the clothes they brought with them. They would not indulge in the caribou that my mom had cooked for their homecoming dinner. My siblings said at the boarding school they were told that they could not eat meat that was caught by a family member. They also wanted to go to church much more often than we normally would go as a family because they were told they could lose their salvation and be condemned to hell if they did not. When they had to go back to the boarding school, they brought nothing that would label them as Natives because it would be taken away and others would make fun of them. Decades later, my brother has totally embraced the native culture and is not ashamed, whereas my sister vehemently rejects anything that has to do with our native upbringing.

I witnessed all this unfolding, so when we moved to the city where there was a high school, I was very withdrawn from other students. I did not want others to make fun of my culture. My older sister taught me what to share or not share with my peers so that I would not be ridiculed. I lived my life in two entirely disparate worlds. At home, we lived like we had on the reservation, but at school we assimilated to fit in culturally with the majority of the students in our school. The school staff and my parents did not see the change in me, but I knew that I had to change or else I would be made fun of. As Sheets states, students from non-dominant cultures may feel

pressured to disavow themselves of their cultural beliefs and norms in order to assimilate into the majority culture. This, however, can interfere with their emotional and cognitive development and result in school failure (Sheets, 1999).

The remnants of those experiences continue to have an effect on me to this day. At times, I tend to hold back and not let people know I am a Native American, although on other days, I couldn't care less if people know I am a Native American. I struggled in school because I lived in fear. I did not want to be made fun of because of the color of my skin, therefore learning was a struggle. Many times, the teachers would just give us a passing grade, so we would be passed on to the next teacher and the next grade. When I was 34 years old, I decided I would go to college. I had to take an entrance test, which showed all my levels were below the 7th grade level. I had to put in a great deal of extra work for three quarters in order to get every subject up to college level.

After all of the struggles and changes, my grandma, if she were alive today, would disown me if she knew I married a white man. She would say that it shows clearly that I am ashamed of my heritage. Growing up with this thought in the back of my mind, I continually lived with this strong need to hide my culture. I then passed this desire to cover up my identity down to my children. After coming to grips with the need to not live in shame and to be proud of who I am and where I am from, I now embrace my culture and encourage my children to do the same. As U.S. American educators, we should embrace all cultures and help all students realize the importance of being accepting and educating all cultures. To be educated and to be able to accept each other's differences would prove we are truly the land of the free.

Concluding Remarks

As shown by numerous studies, Native Americans have a record of not being successful in K-12 grade and in post-secondary schooling.

There needs to be a change in the educational system. Teachers need to be trained appropriately so they can reach their Native American students. If this trend does not come to a halt, we will continue to hurt future generations of the Native American tribes who seek success and achievement in the current educational system. Forcing Native Americans to assimilate to white culture does not make it right. We must accept Native Americans and other cultures as equally important parts of our educational system. When we do this, it will show the unquestionable benefits of standing as an educational system that truly embraces all cultures, learns to reach them, and shows educators care about supporting all students regardless of any differences they might have.

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