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CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS

By

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ABSTRACT

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English

Cultural Considerations for Teaching American Indian Students

Faculty Mentor: Dr. David Beck

When working in American Indian communities, educators must be aware of the concerns unique to the populations of students they will serve. The diversity among American Indian tribes and other communities is such that few generalizations will be of much help for real interactions in the classroom and community. Each group or individual must be approached on their own terms, with respect and willingness to learn on the part of the educator. However, some aspects of social and communicational modalities, historical and cultural factors, and spiritual beliefs are common to many American Indian groups. Familiarity with these can help prevent misunderstandings and unintentionally offensive conduct. While the most difficult work must take place in the community itself, educators can prepare themselves to engage productively with American Indian students by adopting certain attitudes and mindsets.

Cultural Considerations for Teaching American Indian Students

Every educator in the United States has a responsibility to be well-informed about American Indian people, their cultures, and their unique position in the society of the United States. The hundreds of distinct cultures that existed on this continent prior to the arrival of European colonists have not vanished or disappeared. To teach in the United States is to teach in Indian Country. While generalizations about all American Indians tend to oversimplify complex issues, developing certain knowledge, mindsets, and practices can help educators with little familiarity with American Indians serve those multiple populations more effectively.

As a group and as individuals, American Indians experience challenges and obstacles in society that non-Indians do not. Oppression refers to these difficulties collectively, and can also be used to refer to similar societal patterns experienced by other groups. The most accurate and useful conception of oppression is one including the idea of intersectionality—as an individual may belong to more than one marginalized group, that person may experience multiple forms of oppression, different than any one form would be individually (Bose 70). This concept originated in Black Feminist thought (Bose 67) and has been applied to other populations as part of a broader theory of social justice. Yet American Indians must be considered apart from other minority ethnic groups, because experience a fundamentally different situation: their culture and stories have existed on this continent since time immemorial. Therefore their experience of oppression takes place within their own homeland, something no other group in the United States can claim.

The idea of historical trauma provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the oppression faced by American Indians in the United States. Originated in the field of mental health counseling, the term historical trauma refers to the traumatic experiences “transferred to subsequent generations through biological, psychological, environmental, and social means, resulting in a cross-generational cycle of trauma” (Brown-Rice). The physical and mental health problems experienced by many American Indians, especially those living on reservations, can be ascribed to historical trauma. Educators’ awareness of this phenomenon can help them understand some of the difficulties their American Indian students may face.

Mental illness is common in many reservation communities, often comorbid with alcoholism and poverty. Suicide rates in American Indian communities collectively are more than three times the national average (Centers for Disease Control). Researchers further note that

“an increase in the number of suicides corresponds to a lack of linkage between the adolescents and their cultural past and their ability to relate their past to their current situation and the future” (Brown-Rice). Educators have a responsibility to be proactive in their implementation of suicide prevention programs, and to ensure that such programs be culturally appropriate for the individuals they are designed to help.

Similar to the issues related to mental health, sexual and domestic violence are shockingly common on American Indian reservations. A National Institute of Justice study found that American Indian women experience the highest rate of sexual assault of any demographic group in the United States (Tjaden et al. 14). Data shows American Indian women are most frequently assaulted by White men (Bachman et al. 38). When considering these issues, it is important to bear in mind that “issues of battered spouses, abused children, alcohol and drug use, sterilization, parent abuse, and other features of social disorganization often overshadow adaptive strategies that have allowed for cultural continuity” (Medicine 202). Educators must consider what cultural factors can be preventative against sexual violence when considering this problem in student populations.

Anti-Indian racism tends to be strongest immediately outside of reservations. Known as “border towns,” these communities frequently depend on the reservation economically, but hold a negative view of the tribe(s) on the reservation, and frequently of American Indians in general. Some of the fiercest anti-Indian organizations, such as All Citizens Equal, recently renamed Citizens for Equal Rights Alliance, are headquartered immediately past the borders or even within reservations—in this case, the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana (“Anti-Indian sovereignty movement and its politicians”). This is important information for educators working on or near Indian reservations, where they are more likely to encounter this type of prejudice.

Cultural inclusivity and cultural responsiveness refer to educational practices that have been devised to respect students’ varied cultural backgrounds and heritage, and actively work against racism, sexism, and other manifestations of oppression (Samuels 10). A foundational practice of culturally inclusive teaching is deliberate and explicit discussion of privilege. Another is “validating and affirming” students’ beliefs and experiences (Samuels 37). These practices, informed by knowledge of the cultural backgrounds of students, are necessary for teachers to affect positive change when working with American Indian students, as well as other marginalized populations.

Oftentimes, teachers less familiar with American Indian culture discover that Indians' ways of being, knowing, and communicating differ from those of non-Indians on a fundamental level. Awareness of these differences as they frequently manifest can aid non-Indian educators in bridging this cultural gap. The following examples come from Linda Miller Cleary and Thomas D. Peacock's text *Collected Wisdom*, which gathered stories and data from "sixty teachers, American Indian and non-Indian, on or near nine reservations ... and in two cities with high American Indian populations" (3). This groundbreaking text represents real evidence for what may constitute best practices for those who teach at schools where American Indian students are enrolled.

One practical aspect of teaching American Indian students that may be different than what educators expect, especially if they are not American Indian or acquainted with Indian culture, has to do with eye contact. In Anglo-American culture, eye contact is expected in virtually all forms of social interaction. Yet in many American Indian cultures, this is not the case: eye contact may be considered a sign of disrespect to an elder. To these students, *not* making eye contact is representative of respect. Cleary and Peacock note this as "often the first difference and the first discomfort new teachers experienced [in schools serving American Indian students]" (28). This is a difficult expectation for non-Indians to alter, but a vital one if they are to make progress as teachers in this multicultural context.

American Indian people sometimes have a different concept and sense of humor than non-Indians do. For example, Cleary and Peacock include the story of a teacher whose students accidentally slammed the door in her face, then laughed. It took some time for this teacher to realize this was not an act of malice, but simply the typical response to such an occurrence for those students (39). It is also worth considering that some things that seem funny to someone from a non-Indian culture might be less humorous to an individual from an American Indian culture.

In addition to developing competency in order to teach American Indian students, educators must develop the abilities necessary to teach American Indian classroom content. In the state of Montana, teaching about American Indians is mandated by law. Indian Education for All was implemented in 1999 to comply with a clause added to Montana's Constitution in 1972, requiring the preservation of American Indian cultures in Montana. IEFA includes provisions for

curriculum designed by the Indian tribes in Montana whose cultures were to be studied in schools.

A distinct advantage of curriculum designed by tribal members comes in the form of explicit instructions about what may be inappropriate for the culturally sensitive content contained in the lessons. For example, in lessons that include Salish Coyote Stories, the following warning is included: “NOTE: Traditional Coyote stories should only be told and discussed in the winter when snow is on the ground. To respect this Salish tradition, teachers are asked to teach this unit only during the winter months” (Montana Office of Public Instruction 57). This is the type of traditional practice educators must be mindful of when including such material in lessons.

On a related note, educators should be mindful of the long history of appropriation of Indian cultural elements by the dominant culture. This continues today: a widely discussed example is the use of American Indian headdresses in fashion. Another is the use of American Indians as mascots for sports teams. In this case, communicating high expectations for a culture of respect to students is vital, as is an emphasis upon the harm caused by cultural appropriation.

Many of the considerations necessary for teaching with American Indian stories and culture are also important for other classroom content that may involve American Indians indirectly. For instance, the Bering Land Bridge theory holds that the first people in North America came from Asia by way of sea ice linking Asia with what is now Alaska as recently as 30,000 years ago. This theory is highly contested, especially by American Indian scholars, because of its political implications for present-day American Indians. A National Park Service document about the theory notes that “even the most current and modern theories we have are entirely speculative and continually evolving. Discontinuity in sparse evidence, combined with weaknesses in dating methods, discrepancies in artifacts and genetics, and our own subjective interpretations provide endless hurdles to overcome” (National Park Service). Educators would do well to include this information if discussing the Bering Land Bridge Theory in, say, a lesson about the science of Paleolithic human migration. This provides one example of an area of classroom content that might need to be critically examined, considering an audience of learners for whom it may relate to personal identity.

One of the most important types of content related to American Indian culture is instruction in American Indian languages. The majority of tribal languages that are still spoken

today are in danger of being lost, as they are no longer learned by children in infancy so as to develop fluency (Cleary and Peacock 124). Whether a language should be written, taught to people outside the tribe, or taught at all are often contentious issues, yet tribal language programs have become prevalent in schools serving American Indians in the past two decades. The role of teachers in the process of language preservation are also matters of debate in tribal communities, but Cleary and Peacock conclude that “if tribal languages are to survive, they need to be supported in homes, in the communities, and in the schools ... reinforced by both American Indian and non-Indian teachers” (143).

The development of an understanding of American Indian cultures and issues as they relate to the classroom is crucial work for every educator. Careful study of books and documents, especially those written by community members, can provide a useful foundation for an educator entering a school with a different cultural context than the educator’s previous experience. However, as every tribe, community, and individual is unique, most of the educator’s learning on these subjects can only take place in the context of the actual classroom and community. Yet with some fundamental background knowledge and strategies for this process, educators will be more successful in adapting to the multicultural environment increasingly characteristic of the classrooms of public schools in the United States.

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