

Issues and Recommendations Related to Educating Native American Students

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This paper addresses some of the issues associated with the education of Native Americans within the public schools of our nation. It is divided into four sections. First, we seek to define exactly who the subjects of this paper are. Second, data is reviewed that verifies some of the cognitive problems of educating Native American students. Third, cultural issues are addressed and the ramifications for learning. Finally, participation and choice that underlie the educational problems are reviewed.

Who is a Native American?

There is no homogenous group that fits the concept of *Native American*. There is no common language that any significant percentage can share except English, no common system of *sign language* with which all can communicate, no common religion, and no common set of customs, beliefs, or behaviors. Not all dress in buckskins or wear feathers. (Kallam, Hoernicke, & Coser, 1994).

There are over 400 entities or tribes in the lower 48 States and approximately 500 in the Alaskan territories, plus many more in Canada. Also, many Native Americans do not identify with any particular tribe. Some Native Americans live a primarily *traditional* lifestyle keeping mostly to their ancestral customs while others are fully acculturated into the mainstream way of life; many more are somewhere in between. The only things that may be more numerous in this equation are the stereotypes and prejudices through which Native Americans are seen.

No single federal or tribal criterion establishes a person's identity as an *Indian*. Tribal membership is determined by the enrollment criteria of the tribe(s) from which *Indian* blood may be derived, and this varies with each tribe. Generally, if linkage to an identified tribal member is far removed, one would not qualify for membership.

The term *Native American* came into usage in the 1960s to denote the groups served by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. To be eligible for Bureau of Indian Affairs services, an *Indian*, or now a Native American, must (1) be a member of a tribe recognized by the federal government, (2) be of one-half or more *Indian* blood of tribes indigenous to the United States; or (3) must, for some purposes, be of one-fourth or more *Indian* ancestry. By legislative and administrative decision, the Aleuts, Eskimos and *Indians* of Alaska are eligible for BIA services. Most of the BIA's services and programs, however, are limited to *Indians* living on or near *Indian* reservations or traditional lands.

The Bureau of the Census counts anyone an *Indian* who declares him/herself to be an *Indian*.

I. Is there a problem in the education of Native American students?

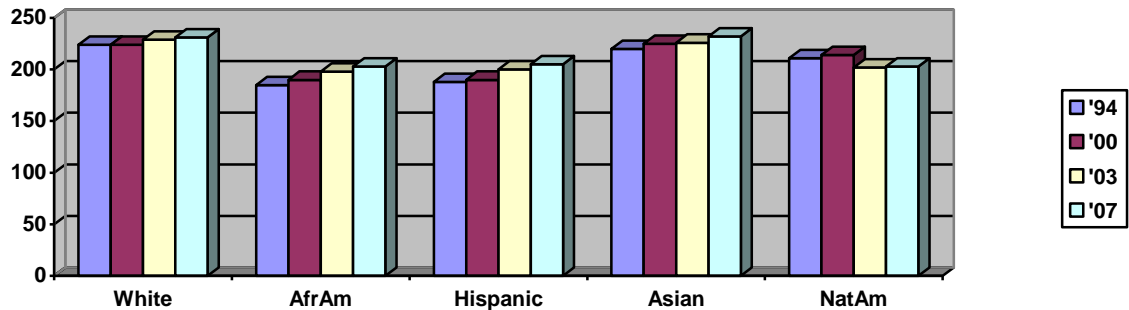
The *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP), the only nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject areas, shows the following national averages for 4th and 8th graders for 2007:

Table 1. 2007 Scores on the *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP) by selected subject and grade (Institute of Education Sciences, 2007).

	4 th		8 th	
	Reading	Math	Reading	Math
Asian/ Pacific Islanders	232	253	271	297
Whites	231	248	272	291
Hispanics	205	227	247	265
American Indian/Alaska Na	203	225	247	264
African Americans	203	222	245	260

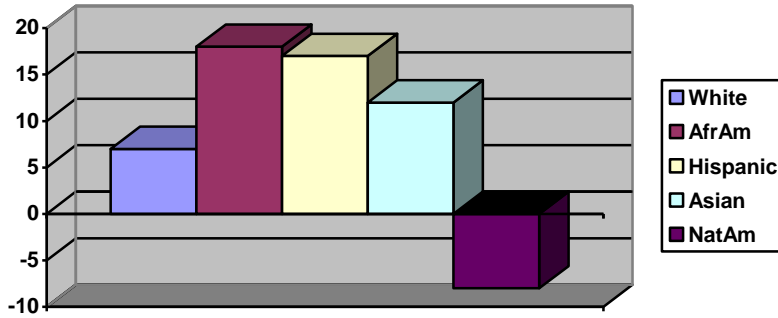
These scores are troubling. The 2007 scores demonstrate a history of continuous improvement in reading as measured by the NAEP for all noticed groups except for Native Americans as demonstrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. 4th grade NAEP reading average scores between 1994 to 2007.



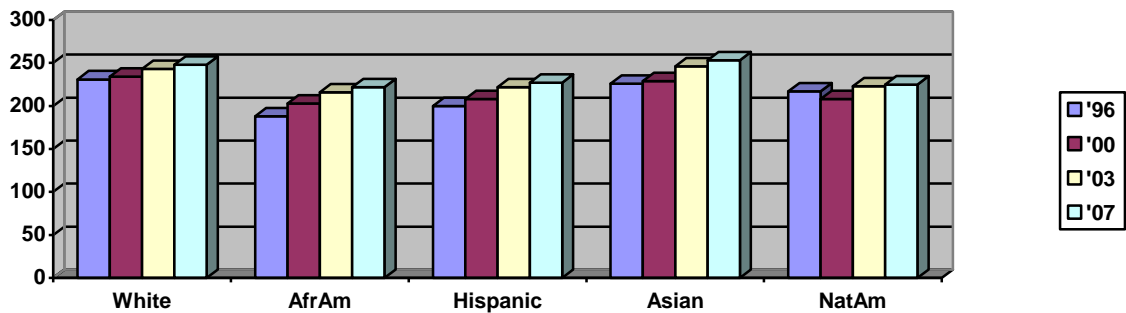
Or to place it in a slightly different context, since 1994 all 4th graders identified racially and/or by language have made progress on this national measure except for Native American students (Institute of Education Sciences, 2007). Figure 2 graphically demonstrates the relative overall progress made in reading by 4th graders during the period of 1994 to 2007. The reading average score of Native American students in 2007 actually decreased by 8 points when compared to the 1994 average score.

Figure 2. Progress by group of 4th graders in reading between 1994 to 2007.



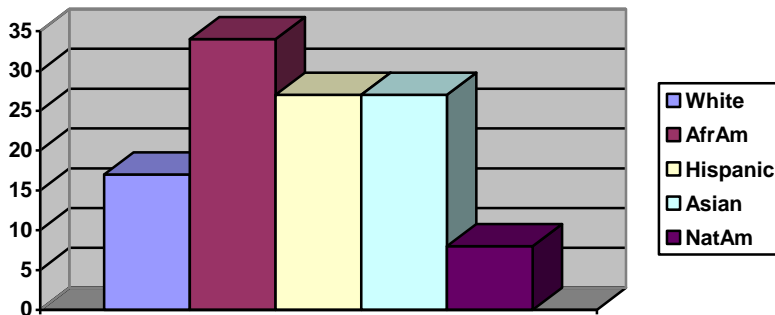
Scores in mathematics as measured by the NAEP represent continuous improvement for all groups of racially and/or linguistically identified 4th graders since 1996. Similar to the results for reading, the progress in mathematics is least dramatic for students identified as Native American.

Figure 3. 4th grade NAEP mathematics average scores between 1996 and 2007.



When compared for overall performance, Figure 4 graphically demonstrates the degree of progress when the 2007 average NAEP score is compared to 1996 average NAEP score in mathematics (Institute of Education Sciences, 2007).

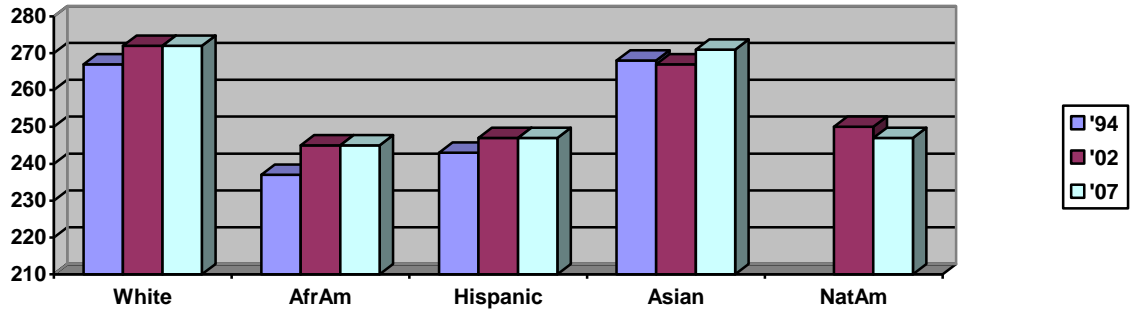
Figure 4. Progress by group of 4th graders in mathematics between 1996 to 2007.



At the 4th grade level all groups with the exception of Native American students have made progress. The average scores of Native American students appear to be regressing in reading and are making minimal progress in mathematics.

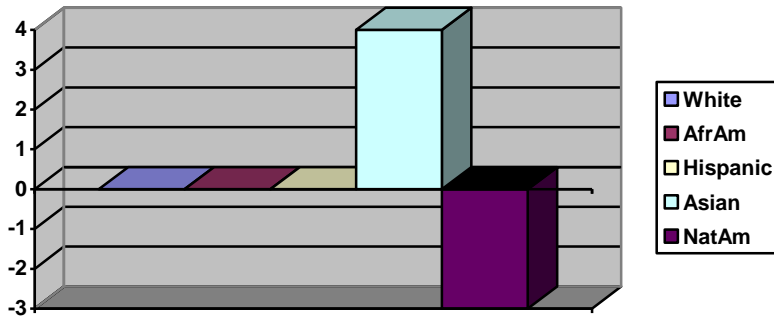
The 8th grade NAEP average scores reflect similar and equivalent findings. (See Figures 5, 6, 7, and 8.) Growth in reading is significantly lower among all groups of students.

Figure 5. 8th grade NAEP reading average scores between 1994 and 2007.



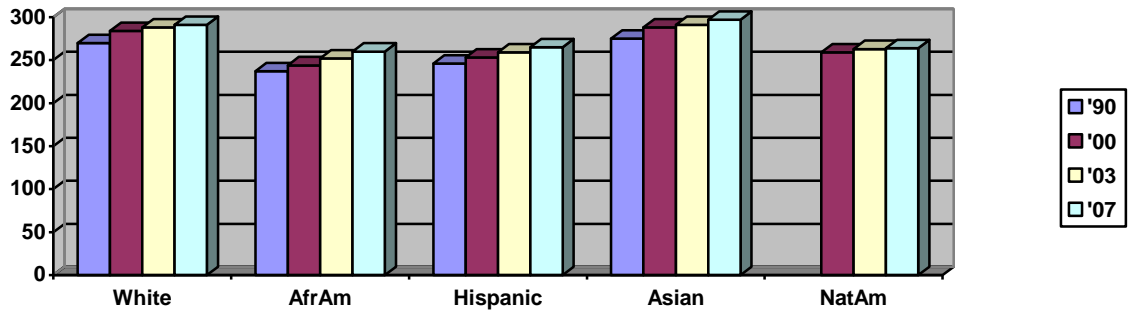
As with their 4th grade counterparts, the Native American group is the only cohort in which average reading scores regressed in the five years from 2002 to 2007 (Institute of Education Sciences, 2007). It should be pointed out that three groups remained at the same average reading score on the NAEP, and only one group demonstrated marginal progress. (See Figure 6.)

Figure 6. Progress by group of 8th graders in reading between 2002 to 2007.



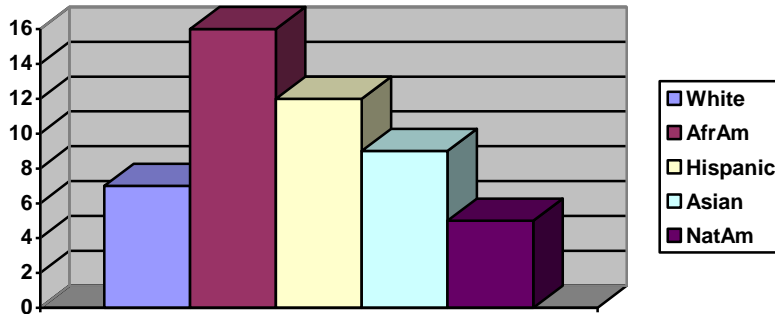
The scores in mathematics as measured by the NAEP represent continuous improvement for all groups of racially and/or linguistically identified 8th graders since 1990 (Institute of Education Sciences, 2007). (See Figure 7.) This may be a deceptive conclusion.

Figure 7. 8th grade NAEP mathematics average scores between 1990 and 2007.



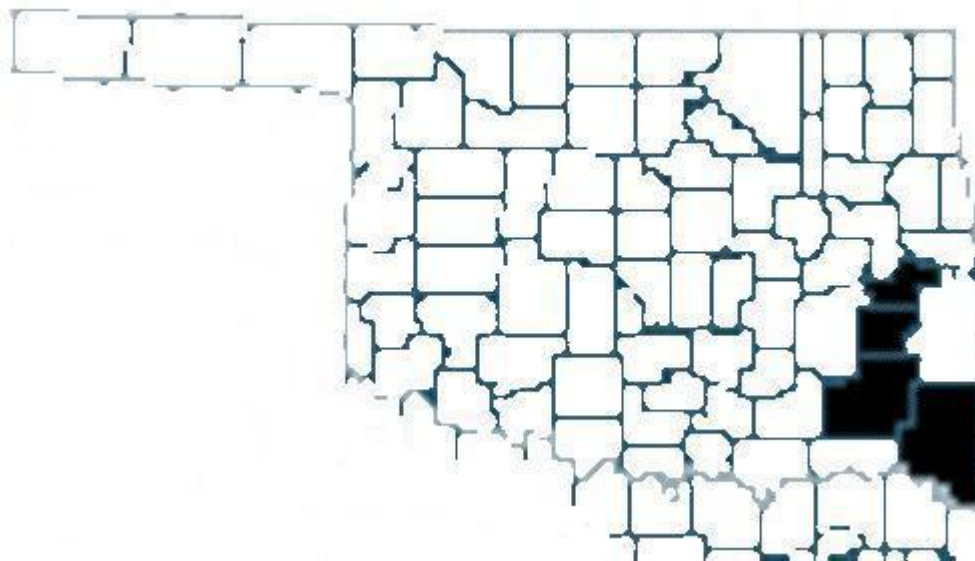
Similar to the results for reading, the progress in NAEP average scores in mathematics for 8th graders is least dramatic for students identified as Native American. (See Figure 8.) It will be noticed that the progress for Whites and Asians is also not as dramatic as for African Americans and Hispanics. It should be pointed out that the 2007 average score for Whites (291) is 27 points higher than for Native Americans (264) and the average score for Asians (297) is 33 points higher. The average mathematics score for both Whites and Asians students is more than 1 standard deviation above the other three racial and/or linguistic groups (Institute of Education Sciences, 2007).

Figure 8. Progress by group of 8th graders in mathematics between 2000 to 2007.



Another puzzling indicator is that low income students have made advances in academics that are not reflected in Native American scores. Statistics indicate that poverty is more prevalent among Native Americans than in any other group nationwide (Institute of Education Sciences, 2007). Among the historically most impoverished counties of the nation, several are found in southeastern Oklahoma (Economic Research Service, 2004). (See Figure 9.) Within these Oklahoma counties noted for their extreme poverty about 25% of the population is self-identified as Native American.

Figure 9. Oklahoma's historically high poverty counties.



Reyhner (2006) reports Native American students have a dropout rate twice the national average; the highest dropout rate of any United States ethnic or racial group. This begs the question: *What is the dropout rate in the United States?*

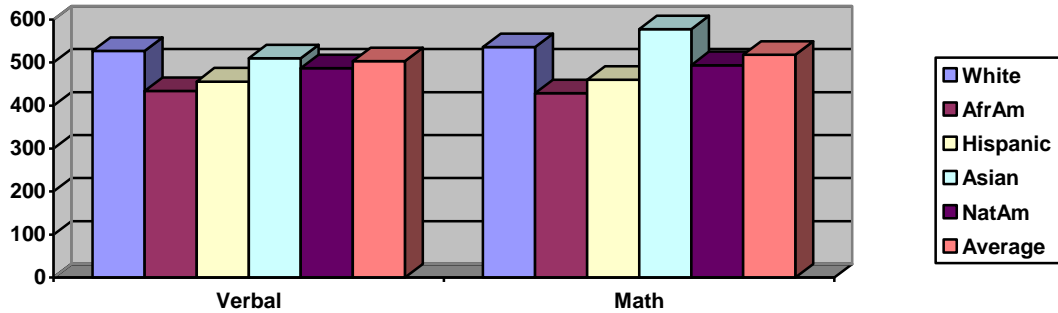
The simple answer is *We don't accurately know how many students dropout each year.* A variation on the answer is provided by Thornburgh (2006) who reports a national average of 29-36% for students aged 15-19. This would indicate a dropout rate among Native Americans of about 60-70%, which most experts would probably agree with. This disagrees with data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) where a 14% dropout rate for Native American students is reported, which is higher than for Asians (2.9%), Whites (6.0%), or Blacks (10.4%). The only comparable group dropout rate is found among Hispanics, which is reported at 22.4%. The problem with this comparison is that a *status* method of counting dropouts is used by NCES, which includes all students 16-24 who are not in school or who did not graduate. Any Hispanic immigrants of that age, who are rarely educated beyond the 8th grade in their countries or origin, who came to this country solely for work would be counted as dropouts.

Reality is that many dropouts don't stay that way, so studies including temporary dropouts at age 15-19 miss the mark. NCES (2006) found that a majority of students who drop out of high school at least once go on to earn a high school diploma or alternative credential within several years (63%), and many enroll in a postsecondary institution (43%). Of the 676,000 students enrolled in the 12th grade in the 2003 Census survey, 97,000 were ages 19 to 22, and 36,000 were older.

The question is actually: *Do Native Americans go back to school or additional educational training?* No answer can be determined at this time. Additionally, the issue is complicated when issues such as poverty and rural remoteness, such as that found in southeastern Oklahoma, are considered.

Native American students who do stay in school and do take the *Scholastic Aptitude Test* (SAT) score at an average of 487 (Verbal) and 494 (Math). This is significantly better than the average scores of African Americans (434/429), Puerto Ricans (459/456) and Mexican Americans (454/465), but not as high as Asians (510/578), Whites (527/536) or the average of all groups (503/518), according to a NCES, 2007, report.

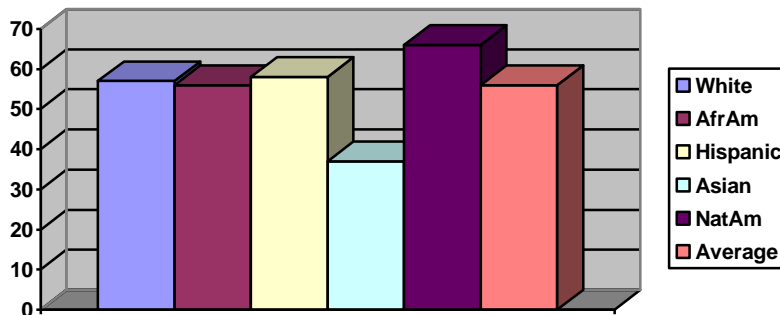
Figure 10. Average SAT scores by groups, 2004.



The same report showed that average scores by group on the equivalent ACT are similar.

Native Americans Indians led the nation for absenteeism at the 8th grade level during 2003 (Institute for Education Science, 2005). As displayed in Figure 11 about 66% or two-thirds of Native American students are absent at least one day a month from school. Children with high rates of absenteeism do not have the same learning opportunities as children who attend school regularly.

Figure 11. Absenteeism of 8th graders for 1+ days/month, 2003.



It would seem that a problem does exist with the education of Native American students.

Obviously, the educational situation begs for improvement. To know where to start, a review of the literature reveals some suggested issues. Conclusions of this nature are, at best, generalizations and based on some stereotypical thinking. One must be careful with generalizations. With that caveat, the identified issues are discussed below.

II. Cultural Issues

The first significant issue is one that Hill Witt (1979) identified as “*controlled schizophrenia*.” Perhaps “cultural schizophrenia” is a more appropriate term. Kallam, Hoernicke, and Coser (1994) report that many Native American students walk a path that has one foot in their traditional culture and one in the dominant culture. Their learned behaviors since infancy (although they vary somewhat by their individual cultures) are not those expected by the normal classroom teacher. A combination of learning styles, values, perceptions, interaction patterns with peers and teachers, and languages may be subtly but demonstrably different from those of students raised in the dominant culture. The schizophrenia, of course, kicks in as the student tries to deal with basic issues of identity and esteem in addition to specific issues of traumatic classroom choices as negativity and even punishments loom for classroom behaviors that are accepted and valued in his/her other world. Some of those behaviors, according to Kallam, et al. (1994) include the following:

Aggression: In some Native American cultures, looking someone in the eyes is an aggressive behavior. If the teacher looks the child in the eye, it is aggressive; if the child looks the teacher in the eye, it is disrespectful. A teacher who doesn’t know this may interpret looking away as an indication of obstinacy, inattentiveness, or withdrawal. A further effect may be the teacher sensing hostility or a lack of participation on the part of the student and this may result in a lowered expectation of academic achievement. All because the student wished to be respectful.

Kallam, et al. (1994) add that aggression can also be a factor in other ways. A handshake is considered by some Native Americans as an invasion of private space. Shaking hands is not a typical greeting. A firm handshake or simply touching outside of a familial relationship is aggressive in some cultures. “Counting coup” on a parent may not be the best way to start a conference. If teachers and administrators know this then they know to take their cue from the parent or student; to not know may cause insulting behavior. Better to not offer your hand until the parent offers his/hers or suffer a limp handshake, and to know it is not a sign of weakness.

Teasing can also be an aggressive behavior, Kallam, et al. (1994) notice, particularly if a personal relationship has not been established. As in many cultures, a friend can tease and it is humorous. If others tease it is aggressive and/or offensive. A teacher must be sure a friendship has been established first before teasing.

Attitude toward deviancy: Some Native American cultures view deviancy (and any remediation of it) differently than the mainstream educator. In the dominant culture a deviant condition (learning disability for example) is a “phenomenon of the natural world.” The therapist asks questions and involves the child actively in remediation. Conversely, writes Kallam et al. (1994), some Native Americans see a deviancy as a “phenomenon of the supernatural world” and perhaps a moral issue. The person who heals should be all knowing. That person should not have to ask what is wrong but should

be able to determine and know and provide the remedy. To not know may raise questions of competency of the healer.

Another difference, Kallam et al. (1994) notes, is that in schools in the dominant culture therapy or an intervention usually takes place in private or within therapeutic groups, between the therapist and student for example. In some Native American cultures the “healing” may be expected to require involvement of all the family and maybe even extended family, clan, or tribe.

Another way this different perspective toward deviancy may manifest itself is that most students from the dominant culture see being wrong (not knowing an answer) as being mildly deviant. A Native American student may not answer a question asked by the teacher, even though he/she knows the right answer because it might be mistaken for showing off. “Showing off” may be considered more deviant than not knowing the correct answer. Also if a classmate has already missed the answer, giving the correct answer now might also “show up” the other student and bring shame to him/her and to the whole group. Again, in some Native American cultures that could be considered a worse infraction than not knowing a correct answer (Kallam et al., 1994, 133).

In an extension of this issue, Trujillo and Alston (2005) remind teachers that Native American students may be reticent to show mastery until they are confident of full mastery and that they may be hesitant to participate as an individual in a large group but would participate actively in a small group.

Another issue arising from cultural schizophrenia is the framework of *differences in family and parenting expectations*, Kallam, et al. (1994) write “In some tribes, aunts or uncles share equally in the childrearing responsibilities and may even have more importance than the birth parents” (132). This has obvious implications for conferences and communications with the home. Some cultures are distinctly matrilineal and others patrilineal. To know this possibility means the teacher and/or administrator would know to be patient enough to let the family group show how decisions are made. Also, Kallam, et al. (1994) notes, decisions are seldom made quickly when so many people have to be consulted. In fact the decision may be arrived upon “when the time is right and the spirit has been moved,” which gives rise to the phenomenon of “*Indian time*.”

Autonomy and individuality: In many Native American families, the child is seen more as an *autonomous* individual than mainstream educators may realize. Parents may not be as directive as expected because the child is seen “as having the power, ability, and right to make important choices.” Developmental milestones are another area of cultural discontinuity. A traditional Native American attitude might be that a child will display behaviors when ready and others should not pressure or force the display of skills. In that same vein, “inappropriate” behavior is seldom overtly punished; a natural process of extinction or a “quiet verbal correction” would be the most likely action of the parent. (Kallam, et al. (1994), p.132)

Another cultural issue the Native American student may find his/her feet straddling is the concept of *individuality*. From a traditional point of view, self-determination is valued highly. Each individual is considered responsible for his/her own actions, but is expected to be sensitive to the group and generally supportive of group goals. As long as an individual's behavior is not detrimental to the group, a principle of "noninterference" is normal. (Kallam, et al., 1994). In a classroom with an educator required to move the students as fast as possible along a continuum of curriculum and standardized skills, the probable conflict is obvious.

Relevancy is a prime factor in motivation, according to Wong (2004). When students see an obvious reason or benefit of learning a skill, they are more likely to participate in the learning exercise. (An operational definition of *motivation*.) One motivation for getting an education is having a better standard of living, but many Native Americans have a *nonmaterialistic orientation*. Kallam, et al. (1994) state that personal worth is defined by behaviors, not measured by how much one possesses. Being fortunate enough to come into some material wealth is a great opportunity to be generous to others. Another cultural divide is created here around the issue of *cooperation versus competitiveness*. Kallam, et al. (1994) note the dominant culture espouses the value of cooperation, but actually encourages competition in everything from school activities to grades to the accumulation of wealth.

A mainstream educator senses time as a linear progression, the ordered segments of which organize the day and its activities. Most educators feel Native Americans put a different priority on time, but that is a misconception. It is a completely different concept in Native American thought, not just a difference of priorities. To be at a place because the hands of a clock are in a certain position may be as foreign to a person with a Native American point of view as is the concept of "I will come to see you when the time is right and the place is in beauty," is to the educator. (Kallam, et al., 1994, 134)

As with other things, there is no one common religion among Native Americans (Kallam, et al., 1994). Many participate with mainstream Protestant and Catholic denominations. There are, however, vestiges of traditional religious thought and practice that are often combined with current participation. "There is much mysticism involved, including a belief in spirits, both good and bad, spells, hexes, (termed by many as being *bothered*), anthropomorphism, and reincarnation. Among members of the dominant culture, expressed belief in any one of these elements, would generate feelings of wariness and impact on social relationships. (134)

Too often in the dominate culture there is a disconnect between the religious tenants espoused on Sundays and the way daily lives are lived the rest of the week. Many Native Americans are much more likely to live their religious beliefs (already inherently different from the mainstream) all day, every day, creating yet another permutated area of potential tension for the educator and Native American family. "... Religion is a way of life and it is involved in every activity of the day" (Kallam, et al., 1994, 134).

It follows that Kallam, Hoernicke, and Coser (1994), whose work is the primary resource for the cultural-behavioral issues listed above, offer these detailed suggestions:

- Taking the time to build relationships with students and parents early in the school year pays off well later on.
- Teachers should be very conscious of eye contact, avoiding it when possible and never requiring it of students.
- Teaching through play is more nonthreatening than traditional methods. The student-teacher relationship will probably improve and carry over into all classroom interactions.
- When students need direction socially or instructionally, role playing is a good way to teach. Teachers should not assume students know the correct way to do things, unless the teacher has taught it of course. When a teacher says to a student, “you should know better,” that is often not true.
- If personal information is needed of a Native American student, the teacher might share personal information first to build trust. “In all things, patience is the key” (p.135).
- The use of humor and self-teasing can be productive sometimes for the teacher.
- Getting out (literally outdoors even) of the classroom, and away from the implied formality of expectations there, may help Native American students relate to the teacher.
- If a child has suffered a death in the family, speaking the name or possessing material items of the deceased may be against tribal custom. If uncertain, the teacher should get direction before proceeding.

III. Issues of Learning Style

The issue of whether or not Native American students have a distinctive learning style has been vigorously argued in the literature (Pewewardy, 2002). While giving a respectful nod to the critics, Pewewardy outlines several areas in which he feels Native American students show tendencies toward particular learning styles. Because most of these areas have roots in the environment in which Native American children are raised, there is overlap with some of the cultural issues already listed. The learning styles areas that have significance for Native American students and educators are:

Field-Dependence/Field-Independence - Native American students tend to be holistic, global learners (field-dependent) that understand best when the teacher begins with the big picture and shows how the smaller details fit into the whole. Teaching with thematic units would be preferable for these students as compared to a sequence of worksheets designed to teach a test objective or skill.

Perceptual Strengths (Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic) –Native American students tend to be predominately visual learners. Modeling behaviors, demonstrating activities, and utilizing visuals such as graphs and pictures help these students learn. Pewewardy also discusses a math curriculum built on beadwork activities that serves double duty, incorporating visual and cultural techniques.

Reflectivity versus Impulsivity – The immediate behavior the classroom teacher sees in this continuum is the response time. A common phenomenon is that many students will raise their hands to answer a question before the teacher has completed the question. Obviously some hands are up when the student doesn't even know the correct answer. This behavior is toward the impulsive end of the spectrum. Native American students tend to be more reflective than impulsive. They may often mull the question, then the answer even if they were originally fairly certain of a correct response. Fluency and speed of responses are often taken into account when a teacher is developing perceptions of students' intelligence. The potential misperception is obvious. This is consistent with the previously mentioned concept of time, that "when" something is done isn't very important. To the Native American student it is more important to be right. The mainstream student, however, may see the production of several "trial and error" responses as just steps on the way to the right answer.

Classroom Management and Behavior – The use of humor and references to community expectations are two effective ways to affect corrective change with Native American students, Pewewardy reports. Eliciting correct behavior is a teaching process; an explanation is given, often by an elder who may also have the role of primary disciplinarian for this child. It is very unusual to strike a child or to use any form of physical punishment with family members in traditional Native American families.

Role of the Family, Tribe, and Elders – In the Native American culture, family is a much more extended concept than the normal educator conceives. Aunts, uncles and elders may have some of the responsibilities that parents have in the "White" culture. This may not be as time efficient but it does provide a broader sense of belonging and security.

Teacher/Pupil Relationships – Teachers tend to have a teaching style just as learners have a learning style. Statistics show that most teachers are from the dominant, White, middle-class culture. If the teacher's teaching style is only reflective of that one culture and there are students in the class from other cultures the opportunity for conflict and lack of learning is evident. No one can change their origins, but they can choose not to be bound by them. Other entities figure into this relationship, however. Teacher preparation programs should make teachers acutely aware of the need for using multicultural techniques as well as teaching prospective teachers what those are and how to use them. Local school districts which have immediate knowledge of the cultures served should provide effective in-service training. Politicians and governing agencies should seek a more child-friendly blend of educational priorities than solely judging educators by a one-size-fits-all testing program.

Cooperation versus Competition – Pewewardy notes that his review of the literature indicates that Native American students show a definite preference for cooperation as compared to competition. "Students do not want to be shown to be better or worse than others," he says. Being part of a group is more important than individual achievement. This impacts the Native American's view of worldly goods, achievement, sense of worth and sense of being. Competition is seldom a motivating factor, a fact which has obvious implications for educators.

While the research on learning styles is open to criticism, Pewewardy (2002) notes, the implications for educators that can be derived from this review are valuable. Native American students, like all students, each have a unique persona, but there do

seem to be “tendencies such as strength in the visual modality and a preference for global, creative, and reflective styles of learning.”

There are many educators who sincerely wish to serve all students well. For teachers and administrators who would like to positively impact educational environments that serve Native American students these suggestions are offered:

No matter how large our educational system, personal relationships are a basic requirement for an effective educational environment to exist. School administrators must create organizational units that allow and promote teachers working with students as individuals. Sometimes that means smaller class sizes. Teachers must know that they teach individuals first before subject matter. The primary reasons students give for dropping out is lack of relevancy in the curriculum and lack of caring by teachers (Reyhner, 2006).

Reyhner (2006) also advocates curriculum that is culturally appropriate and that connects to real-life experiences and with vocational opportunities. He goes on to mention that the more traditional textbooks are used the less likely it is that the curriculum will serve Native Americans well.

Cummins, as cited by Reyhner (2006) suggests:

- (1) Teachers should utilize the real environmental experiences of students as a primary curriculum source.
- (2) Teachers must patiently form a relationship with parents and the family, then listen to them.
- (3) *Experiential-interactive* teaching methods should be employed
- (4) Use tests for student assistance instead of student screening

Reyhner reports that Cummins experiential-interactive teaching method shares many characteristics of the “project method” that was used successfully with Indian students in the 1930’s and 40’s in South Dakota. This is a method advocated by Dewey (1909) when he advocated that projects should engage students’ interest, have intrinsic worth, awaken curiosity, and (be) carried out over a period of time. The idea was to integrate normal subjects within or in response to needs shown by those projects.

Trujillo and Alston (2005) advocate the utilization of culturally-relevant materials for Native American students. Sensitivity to culturally-relevant materials is, of course, a good idea for all classrooms. According to Trujillo and Alston a teacher would be wise to “establish one-on-one relationships with Native American students and their parents to help them understand and respect cultural differences. The more exposure teachers have to the culture of their students, the better. Trujillo and Alston also state, “When educators understand how students are valued in their homes, how children are reared, and how youth relate to the adults in their communities, they are better able to establish relationships with Native American students that foster success in school and in life. The reality of Native American students is that their differences in learning styles are

probably as great as their commonalities.” Teachers should always be careful to use a variety of methods and increase the probability of involving students in a learning style that works for them. Trujillo and Alston go on to say that methods that are likely to work in multicultural classrooms are “cooperative learning, instruction that supports multiple sensory modalities and the use of thematic units that support a more global style of learning” (14). To model behavior as part of the teaching process is important for Native American students according to Trujillo and Alston, as is the utilization of concrete examples of why processes or actions are required (14).

IV. Participation and Choice Issues

Stepping back from classroom, school, and immediate family types of issues, there are broader issues involved. The identity of the Native American comes to mind. Identity development is crucial, as we know from the work of Erikson (1950), in the process of intellectual development. A healthy self-esteem is essential to an individual before one can begin to meet the needs to know and understand (Maslow, 1998). One can only speculate how pernicious has been the collective lack of trust that Native Americans must have in the dominant government and as an extension, the educational system.

It is wrong, however, to paint all members of the dominant culture with one, broad brush. Not because of any required sense of fairness toward them, but purely from a standpoint of what is best for the collective mental state of Native Americans.

Ogbu (1978) recognized that cultural discontinuities exist, and that they negatively impact minorities in linguistic, cognitive and social interactions in the classroom. However, the fact that many minorities succeed under these conditions indicate there are other concepts that also should be considered. In other words, what are the factors that differ between those many Native Americans who overcame “cultural schizophrenia” to become successful in mainstream America and those who could not? A bigger perspective is why some groups of minorities overcome cultural discontinuity do and some do not?

Ogbu (1978) saw a distinction between immigrant minorities and involuntary minorities. Those who choose to come to America for the opportunity it presents, such as the Japanese and Chinese are immigrant minorities and those who were brought into the culture because of slavery, conquest or colonization, such as Native Americans or African Americans are involuntary minorities in Ogbu’s framework. He notes that while both groups routinely suffer discontinuities in their educational experiences, “immigrant minorities tend to have a much higher degree of academic success than involuntary minorities” (1991, p.9). He contends the difference begins with the perception and response of the cultural group. Does the group see the barriers as insurmountable or as just another obstacle to be negotiated?

While there are valid reasons for Native Americans to be distrustful of the dominant culture and even choose not to participate in it, the reality of today is that public education can be beneficial and may be essential to most Native Americans. There

are research studies that show students can have a Native American orientation, maintaining a strong cultural identity, and still be successful in America's educational system. Reyhner cites the Navajo Dropout Study, done in the 1980's, and Angela Willieto's 1999 study of 451 Navajo high school students, which both concluded that a high degree of participation and identity with traditional activities was not detrimental to high educational achievement. Reyhner (2006) wrote:

Education does not have to be for assimilation. It can focus on local challenges – whether they are environmental, social, or economic – and they can be dealt with using traditional Indian values and a technical/scientific education that is not the property of white Euro-Americans. The Chinese, Japanese, and many other peoples around the world are showing us that every day. To study important local challenges is to take control of them and work to improve them. Local issues need to be studied and that includes, but is not limited to reading up on them and writing about them. So how do Native Americans become better readers and writers? (1).

There is a persistent need (many of us feel this is a moral imperative) for all teachers in American classrooms to have the skills, attitudes and time to establish a nurturing, stimulating environment for all students, irrespective of their backgrounds.

There is a persistent need for colleges of teacher preparation to ensure that teachers go to classrooms with the knowledge, skills, and experiences they need to serve all students, particularly those from different cultural backgrounds.

There is a persistent need for school administrators to provide whatever support is required; and work to educate themselves so they know how and what to support.

There is a persistent need for politicians to provide more enlightened policy and adequate funding to allow educators to do what most every classroom teacher knows needs to be done.

There is a persistent need for Native American leaders to continue to promote the collective mentality of their nations to be people who fight through barriers and not become victims to them.

There is no question that Native Americans have been treated poorly by Eurocentric explorers, conquerors, expansionists, and occupiers of their native lands. The educators from the past, except in some isolated situations, have not served any better. Since the beginning, for over 500 years, educational efforts were primarily an attempt to complete the conquest by ensuring assimilation of Native Americans into the dominant culture. While there were many educators in this effort who actually meant well and some who actually served well, there were many others who exploited the situation for personal reasons. There are volumes that exist that delineate the incompetence,

insensitivity, and too often cruelty involved. There should be little surprise that Native Americans have a pervasive lack of trust of the current educational system.

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