

# **An Issue of Culture in Educating American Indian Youth**

John B. Love, Michael Kallam, and Melanie Price  
Southeastern Oklahoma State University

## **A Brief History of Indian Education**

For thousands of years Indian youth were educated in a tribal system that was informal, subtle, complex, and arguably successful. Indian children had many teachers from parents to extended family and various tribal members. Children grew up with comprehensive instruction in socialization, occupationally required skills, survival skills, health and nutrition skills and spiritual development. Children were treated with respect as an individual; the shame of not meeting expectations usually was motivating enough that physical punishment was seldom needed.

Then Europeans conquered the Indian nations and began to educate Indian youth in a “civilized” manner. The end of the Civil War created a scenario for the U. S. Government to focus enough resources to conquer the West, in general, and the Indians, in particular. As an extension the question then arose of what to do with the Indians. Education (particularly of the youth) was seen as the best way to assimilate them into American culture. One loosely structured and well-intentioned group, the *Friends of the American Indians*, was very influential in swaying public opinion in this direction.

The era of the Indian boarding school began in the late 1870’s when Richard Pratt was given an opportunity to educate a group of Indians instead of continuing their incarceration. Pratt actually had a very positive view of Indians from his experiences commanding them in the recent Indian wars. However, he, as well as the *Friends*, felt the Indian culture was inferior to the White man’s and needed to be overcome. Although this source and several others frame the boarding school era as 1870 to 1930, many boarding schools remained open; Chilocco Indian Agricultural School in Oklahoma for example was open and operating until 1980.

The boarding school era was an extended period of misplaced assimilation that was inhumane (brutal even in many cases) and largely ineffective. Although some students were “educated,” many students literally died; many others had their families or lives destroyed. The conditions at the schools ranged from Spartan to disgusting. Nutrition was generally poor, even though most schools ran significant agricultural enterprises, using the students as labor. The produce and animal products, however, were usually sold to offset school expenses instead of feeding the students a well-balanced diet. Due to inadequate diet, crowded and unsanitary conditions, and the stress of forced isolation from family, many students succumbed.

Trachoma is an eye infection caused by unsanitary conditions, which can cause blindness if not treated correctly. Over half the boarding-school students suffered from in

at one point in the early 1900's. Unlike in the white population, boarding-school students with tuberculosis were left in the boarding school. A 1912 ban of that practice was too late to save many lives, but the ban was not strictly enforced. As late as 1924, active cases of tuberculosis in boarding-school students existed.

The issue of whether or not to send their children to a boarding school was obviously very controversial among Indian families. Some did see it as preferable to the dismal conditions on tribal lands, but it is unclear if they knew just how dismal the distant boarding schools were. Often parents did not have a choice; sometimes their children were simply remanded. Students generally did not return to their families for a number of years. The ones who did return after a time often no longer seemed like the children of that family.

The educational practices of the boarding schools were characterized by a strict *English only* approach. Indian cultures and languages were vilified. Use of one's native language was cause for quick and sometimes severe punishment. Indian practices were scoffed at and referred to as tainted and uncivilized; thus, children were taught that their parents and families were idiotic and uncivilized. In the early stages of the era, academic and vocational skills were emphasized. Part of the vocational effort involved "teaching" students about hard labor. Students were often hired out to local farmers for field work. Summers (instead of students being allowed to return home) were generally spent working. Female students were often employed as domestic help while male students worked in trades such as carpentry or agriculture.

Although some educators, such as Richard Pratt and Thomas Morgan (who became the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1889) believed Indians had intellectual potential, many did not share this belief. By the early 1900's it was concluded that the academic efforts in the boarding schools were not successful and more emphasis should be put on vocational activities. Estelle Reel was one who believed this, and in 1901, as Commissioner of Indian Education, she instituted a curriculum weighted heavily toward vocational activities and away from academics. Interestingly enough, this shift in emphasis now allowed traditional Indian arts and crafts to be a part of the curriculum. Earlier they were discounted (some students were punished for weaving baskets or expressing any Indian craft form) because of their cultural association, but now they were viewed as having economic potential and were encouraged.

The emotional, physical and educational mistreatment of Indian students earned a great deal of criticism. The Meriam Report, a 1928 study by the Brookings Institute, urged a complete reconstruction of Indian education. One of the recommendations was that Indian culture be included as a key element in a more child-centered approach to Indian education. When *Good Housekeeping* published a series of articles highlighting this report and the generally shameful boarding-school system, the public outrage was significant. In response, the government doubled spending on Indian education between 1928 and 1933. The increased funding did improve the deplorable physical conditions, including nutrition, but the curricular approach was little changed (still following the model of Estelle Reel) until World War II.

Sharpes (1979) reports that the Johnson-O'Malley Act (JOM), originally passed in 1934 then amended in 1936, was passed to give authority and funding to integrate Indian students into state-supported schools and get them out of the boarding-school system. This act remains today one of the primary means of supporting Indian education. But the issue of how to work through the culture of Indian students to promote their education has never been definitively settled, as it has not for any group of students whose culture is outside the mainstream (Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2008). There is a large group of educators who feel that our public schools should promote, "one set of common beliefs based on our English and European traditions" (Sadker, Sadker & Zittleman, 2008, p. 82). Others claim that multiculturalism must be honored and all must be educated, and the inequity that exists in scores of culturally- and ethnically-identifiable groups is evidence that respective cultures must be accommodated for the learning of all students.

In Oklahoma today, Johnson-O'Malley funds are dispersed to the respective Nations, who then fund grants to Oklahoma school districts (according to the websites of the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations). The National Johnson-O'Malley Association states that the purpose of the effort is to provide supplemental funds to address the *unique cultural needs* and the *specialized educational needs* of American Indian students. Two general requirements of any school district receiving JOM funds are that there be an Indian Education Committee, comprised of parents of eligible students, and an Education Plan detailing a needs analysis, objectives, planned activities, and assessment.

A second funding source that has influence on Indian education today originated in the 1970's. Sharpes (1979) reports that in 1972 Congress passed the *Indian Education Act* to authorize funds to provide supplemental support for public schools educating Indian children. Today this support still exists under Part A of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. Title VII monies (nationwide) are extended to schools as grants based on the number of students who are American Indian, and qualification for grants is decided on a district-by-district basis. In Oklahoma, all school districts qualify, and Title VII grant money can be used for:

- Culturally-related activities
- Early childhood and family programs
- Bilingual and bicultural programs and projects
- Special health and nutrition services, and other related services
- Enrichment programs that directly support the attainment of challenging state academic content and student academic achievement standards
- Activities that incorporate American Indian – and Alaska Native – specific curriculum content, consistent with state standards, into the curriculum
- Family literacy services. (Great Source, 2006)

The issue of the importance of Indian culture in the education of Indian students was promoted during the 1970's. The societal upheaval of integrating African American students into public schools advanced the support for multicultural classroom strategies in general. Over time they expanded to address cultural issues revolving around "gender, social class, disability, and sexual orientation" (Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2008, p.

83). Multicultural education, of which the issue of Indian culture in the education of Indian students is a subset, has different meanings to different educators today:

Some focus on *human relations*, activities that promote cultural and racial understanding among different groups. Others teach *single-group studies*, which you may know as Black Studies, Hispanic Studies, or Women Studies programs. Some educators believe multicultural education is all about creating close links between home and school so that minority children can succeed academically, an approach termed *teaching the culturally different*. Another tack, called simply *multicultural*, promotes different perspectives based on race, class and culture; in a sense developing new eyes through which students learn. And, finally, the *multicultural reconstructionist* approach mobilizes students to examine and work to remediate social injustices. (Sadker, Sadker & Zittleman, 2008, p. 85)

While some might ascribe different meanings to multicultural education, the federal government, our state government of Oklahoma and the accrediting body of many higher education institutions, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), are consistent. Their usage is that while *teaching the culturally different* all children must succeed academically. The last published comparisons of ethnic groups by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2008) indicate that American Indians are not performing as well academically and are dropping out of school at higher rates than other ethnic groups.

### **Including American Indian Culture in Education in Oklahoma**

One critical issue is that the term *American Indian* is not nearly as definitive as the reader might think (Kallam, Hoernicke, & Coser, 1994). There is no single American Indian culture; there is no common American Indian language. As Sharpes (1979) noted, “Unknown to most Americans, American Indians live in all 50 states, speak more than 300 languages, and are extraordinarily diverse ethnically among themselves” (p. 1).

To expect language or cultural support every time an activity occurs even within programs that are labeled *Native American* or *American Indian* can be very misleading. For example, in the eighth category below, “languages,” some school districts and tribal entities teach an American Indian (AI) language. Edmond public schools do. The language taught is Osage. There are approximately 1,060 AI students in Edmond; only 16 of whom are Osage. There are 99 students who are Chickasaw; 97 who are Creek. For all the other 1,044 students who are not Osage, this may be very little cultural or learning support and largely more of a curiosity.

Knowing that funding from JOM and Title VII is invested in Oklahoma school districts to support the education of Indian students, the purpose of this study was to determine how Indian culture is being supported in the public schools. Through review of Oklahoma State Department of Education information, review of numerous school-district websites, and on-site visits, a general picture of the types of cultural and/or

linguistic supports available to Oklahoma American Indian students comes into view. Common elements of programs could be categorized as containing:

1. *Designated person to administer*: Many school districts in Oklahoma have a person designated to administer supporting activities for American Indian students. Often this person is paid for with funds from Title VII and/or Johnson-O'Malley.
2. *Personnel*: Some school districts employ additional personnel to tutor AI students, work with parents, conduct activities, etc.
3. *Parent committee*: Any school that gets Johnson-O'Malley money is required to establish a parent committee.
4. *Tutoring programs*: Some aspect of tutoring seems extant in every program. This is an excellent support and, of course should be a priority, but may or may not have a direct connection to preserving or using American Indian culture to support AI students. This effort, of course, connects to the central purpose of education or a school district - student achievement and competency in skills necessary to participate and compete in the dominant culture. Along this continuum the self-concept of all students is impacted.
5. *Data gathering*: Collecting and maintaining data is a process that often has many benefits in the future, even if those benefits were not originally objectives of the data gathering. Keeping a record of how many AI students are in a district and what tribes they represent has an obvious cultural connection and is a support to the culture as much as the students. As a starting point for action, data collection and disaggregation by ethnicities has demonstrated benefits; simple attention to a situation and explaining or describing it with data, often (in and of itself) improves that situation, for several reasons.
6. *Testing/assessment (beyond what the school district normally does)*: Some districts may conduct some assessments in which regular students do not participate – for example Colbert ISD tests AI students during summer camp. Edmond ISD assesses and uses the data for counseling and individualized tutoring for AI students only.
7. *Creation of partnerships*: Many districts establish partnerships to enhance efforts and extend resources. Examples include Edmond High School English Department and the Indian Education Staff working with the University of Central Oklahoma, and/or metropolitan area school district Indian education Programs, district-wide school networking. A district joining into a partnership is also a commitment.
8. *Teach languages*: One of the most obviously beneficial things a district may do to preserve a culture is to preserve the language of that culture. Many entities do this. Some teach more than one language. Sometimes, however, the language taught is limited by the resources or personnel available for teaching it. Oklahoma City Public Schools (OKCPS) has students from 46 tribes and they offer language

- classes in three. The Choctaw Nation in Durant teaches Choctaw only, but is a resource to many school districts through distance learning.
9. *Teach American Indian Literature*: Some few school districts actually offer an entire secondary English course in the study of Native American Literature. Edmond does this. There is a parent committee that has input to this partnership effort of the English Department and the Indian Education Staff. General education students from many cultures as well as American Indian students may take this for a humanities credit. In many school districts, American Indian literature is often supported in summer camps, in-school assembly programs, or other singular events.
  10. *Teach Native American Expressions classes*: Edmond Schools also offers an example of this. Any student may take the class for a humanities credit. Primarily a writing class, this approach meets the needs of a “narrative-based” approach to learning (Bruner, 1996). This concept is carried to full fruition in the Four Directions Charter School in Minneapolis. *Through the Eagle’s Eye* is a digital storytelling curriculum that is offered at Four Directions as part of the summer program (Buckanaga, 2009).
  11. *Involve (all) students in making or doing culturally-related products or activities within the school day*: Arts, crafts, dance, song, weaving, basket making, drum playing, etc. These types of activities may be within an art or music class, a social studies activity, or some other instance of curriculum enrichment.
  12. *Involve (only) Native American students in making or doing culturally-related products or activities (primarily) outside the school day*: Arts, crafts, basket weaving, and similar activities may be done, but often it is a more in-depth activity such as *Learning to sing Powwow Style*, Indian hand games, drum players, etc. Sometimes parents and students of many ages have weekly sessions for practice and fellowship leading up to multi-school-district competitions. Indian hand games and activities for the Language Fair competition are examples. (This varies significantly from category 11, above, by being exclusively for AI students but more so because of the depth and/or specific level of cultural involvement.)
  13. *School presentations/assemblies*: Many school districts have Native American storytellers, authors, and artists come in for presentations or exhibitions attended by all members of the school. (This differs from the category 11, above, because it is a large group activity and students are passive listeners or observers instead of active makers or participants.)
  14. *Celebrations*: (In school day or external): In-school examples are Native American Heritage Day; Out-of-school examples are various Powwow’s, sings, stomp dances, Red Earth (OKC) Children’s Festival, Chickasaw Festival (Tishomingo), and the Gathering of Nations.

15. *Summer camps*: A number of school districts (and tribes such as the Choctaw Nation) offer summer camps, exclusively for AI students, which include many of the activities listed above. Usually students are grouped by age, the camp is 2 to 3 weeks long, and often run by a few paid staff and several volunteers. Percentage-wise there tends to be more field trips during the summer camps than during the school year.
16. *Field trips*: There are many historical and natural sites available in Oklahoma that enhance educational opportunities. Some of the field trips taken by just the Colbert school district are the National Cowboy and Western Museum, The Five Civilized Tribes Museum, Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, Goddard Youth Camp (Sulphur), Camp Chepota (Milburn), and Fort Washita.
17. *Career/college preparation*: American Indian students attend a variety of activities such as Indian Youth Career Day and Higher Education Awareness activities. Some school districts arrange actual courses in college preparation for American Indian students. Most of these opportunities are also open to all students.
18. *Parent involvement*: Most school districts encourage parents to come and participate with their child, but there is probably a huge discrepancy in how active or successful the various programs are.
19. *Attend competitions*: Examples of competitions American Indian students attend are events such as the Indian Education Exposition and the Oklahoma Indian Language Fair.
20. *Incentive programs*: Oklahoma Indian Student Honor Society, Choctaw Star Program, and Indian Student Honors are examples of programs that provide incentives for AI students to do well in school.
21. *Professional development for teachers who teach AI Students*: Some school districts with Indian Education Programs include staff development for all school district staff to promote more effective teaching strategies for AI students.
22. *Promote positive Native American identification*: Some programs have an *identification element*, a symbol or theme, to the program to which AI students can positively connect. For example, OKCPS' Indian Education Program has the name *Eagles in Flight*. The concept is carried throughout the program.

*Eagles in Flight*

Every Child can fly....

Every accomplishment earns a feather ....

*Teachings of the Eagle* – respect, honor, pride

## Summary

The purpose of this research was to survey Oklahoma school districts to see how American Indian culture is being utilized to support the education of Indian students. Another purpose was to formulate future research questions.

Many school districts in Oklahoma have an *Indian Education Program* that has a stated mission to address the unique cultural and learning needs of AI students. Most programs seem to spend a significant share of their money on personnel to provide basic academic support for the regular program. Most programs receive funds from Title VII and Johnson-O'Malley. Academic tutoring is the most common support, and basic academic support priorities are reading, language arts, and math. Often computer-assisted instruction is a staple of the academic tutoring.

While this is in keeping with the basic mission of a school district, and is allowed under funding guidelines if it meets the definition of *enrichment*, it begs the question of acceptance and use of cultural background to enhance the learning experience for AI students. Use of aspects of AI culture seems in most cases to be somewhat superficial, or "added on." Consider the writings of James Banks (as reported in Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2008) referring to the levels of inclusion for a multi-cultural curriculum:

First level – *Contributions Approach* – At appropriate times cultural activities are mentioned, food is included, or ethnic heroes (Rosa Parks or Booker T. Washington, for example) and their contributions are celebrated.

Second level – *Additive Approach* – A more formal body of study is added to the curriculum, but it is not fully integrated, nor does it lead to any substantial rethinking of the curriculum. Black History Month is the most ubiquitous example.

Third level – In the *Transformational Approach*, there is a huge leap from a Eurocentric-only point of view to that of another culture. The change in perspective is pervasive throughout the curriculum. For example, the story of Manifest Destiny reflects the Eurocentric point of view, but in a *Transformational Approach* the story is also told from the perspective of the American Indians' country being invaded.

Fourth level – *Social Action Approach* – Students are involved in reviewing community and cultural problems and finding solutions.

This study found that most American Indian cultural activities being conducted by Oklahoma school districts are relatively shallow on an inclusion index. It is interesting to note, however, that the students identified as AI in the three programs that are most heavily involved in presenting cultural experiences for their students are all performing better academically than the rest of the student populations of those school districts. This, of course, is in direct conflict with statistics nationwide which indicate AI students (when

identified as a cultural group) are the lowest performers academically, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2008). It is quite possible, however, that research at a more definitive level than this survey might establish a correlation between AI achievement and the level of cultural inclusion achieved by the respective districts of those students. For example, it is noted that the three districts who report elevated AI academic achievement, Colbert, Edmond, and Oklahoma City, have very robust Indian Education programs. A simpler explanation might be that the amount of time and attention those students receive produces a significant effect in increasing academic performances.

It is hard to argue that generic academic tutoring, the way most Title VII and JOM monies seem to be expended, is not beneficial for American Indian students, even while many educators cringe at the thought of the underlying narrow road it forges through the actual complexity of intellectual development. If the end result is a higher test score on what the politicians and bureaucrats claim is essential knowledge, how bad can that be? Without exploring the case that could be made that this use of funds is supplanting, we would like to encourage another point of view.

Proficiencies in basic skills are very important as they provide tools to extend learning to more complex cognitive development. While tutoring for correct test responses is a necessary activity, especially if remedial, it is hardly an authentic learning activity. It seldom leads to learning that will be recalled in long-term memory and employed after the test is forgotten, and if a major portion of learning time is spent in this manner, students are being shortchanged. "Learning without meaning is not learning and can never be retained," says Bruner (1996). How bad can that be if the result of tutoring is improved test scores? If real, permanent learning did not happen at all, how bad can that be?

Bruner (1996) goes on to argue that learning about science is not the same thing as learning to be a scientist. Giving a correct response is not the same thing as being able to develop the correct question. The authors contend that one of the ways *Indian culture* varies from our mainstream culture is somewhat embodied in the *narrative* style of learning, thinking, and communicating that Bruner defines.

Bruner (1996) discusses the pervasive nature of culture in our learning processes. He goes on to build a solid case that meaning comes through narrative. Humans actually live a narrative life, not a logical, scientific-method-oriented, pick-a-multiple-choice-answer way of life. For example, in his discussion of the "nine universals of narrative realities" the first is, "A structure of committed time" (p. 133). In narrative time (as in the telling of a story), Bruner says, time is relevant to humans, not to clock-oriented segments: "Time is given significance by the meanings assigned to events by either the protagonists ... or the narrator, or both" (p. 133). All those who truly understand *Indian time*, just got a mental *Aha!* Schools tend to favor the logical-scientific approach to constructing reality, not the narrative approach. Bruner takes the position that an identity in one's culture can only be constructed through the narrative mode. We argue for a more balanced approach.

Indian culture and the thinking, experiencing, learning of AI students is more oriented to a narrative format than an *ordered-for-content-and-achievement-so-we-can-compete-with-the-world format*. Of course, the same could be said for all students, but in this case the issue is that public tax dollars are being expended to enrich the learning of American Indian students. There are many *narrative* approaches to curriculum where the activities are both receptive and expressive in which students can be engaged in authentic learning and would acquire basic skills along with a richer, more authentic curriculum.

It is unclear how much Indian Education money or time is spent on staff development; this brief review did not provide in-depth information. We believe that staff development for all who teach American Indian students is essential – not only awareness and sensitivity to American Indian students but a multicultural approach that speaks to general, multicultural sensitivity and techniques. This is especially valid considering, as already noted, that there is no single American Indian culture. School districts as well as colleges of teacher education should ensure that such training is part of initial preparation and ongoing teacher/staff development.

So the answer to the stated research question is that a huge amount of time, money, and effort is being spent in Oklahoma public schools to supplement Indian education. Many AI students are responding positively to these efforts. Cultural support is involved but the curricular level of authentic cultural support tends to be shallow and varies by school district. The major languages such as Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw have strong programs, but it is more through the Tribal Nations than the school districts.

Several questions for future research have been articulated:

- Is there a correlation between the levels of inclusiveness of school districts' Indian education programs or the time spent in a mentoring/tutorial relationship and the academic achievement or drop-out rate of AI students?
- Are there correlations between a positive cultural identity and academic achievement or drop-out rate for AI students in Oklahoma schools?
- What is the format and content of staff development programs for staff working with AI students, and are there any correlations with academic achievement or drop-out rates?
- How involved are parents, family, and/or tribal family in the development and implementation of the Indian Education program as program resources, with small groups of students or with individual students?

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