

Feature Articles

Multiculturalism: A Native American Perspective

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I firmly believe that America will never be a great nation until it learns to deal with its indigenous people. It is never too late to correct the wrongs of the past. The greatest sin of all is to pretend there is no problem. The greatest truth is to face the problems head on and begin to solve them. Isn't that the legacy of America?"

Tim Giago, Publisher, Lakota Times

The year 1992 commemorated the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival—for some, this represented a time to celebrate the discovery of the new world, but for Native Americans, it represented 500 years of loss, suffering, and survival. Since Columbus' landing, Native Americans have experienced disease, cultural genocide, domination, and the destruction of their traditional ways of life. Native Americans continue to face tremendous challenges today; health problems, unemployment, poverty, poor educational performance and participation, job training, and illiteracy plague the population. The quincentennial observance is a reminder that rather than ignoring, trivializing, or romanticizing Native Americans we are challenged to overcome stereotypes, myths, and misconceptions, and to take actions necessary to restore the rights and opportunities of this group of people. American Indians continue to struggle to find a way to honor their traditional ways while living in an increasingly diverse society; their experience is laden with a long history of events and relationships with non-Indians and a multitude of issues that affect their status in a multicultural society.

The term "multicultural" implies cultural diversity and pluralism within a nation of nations. In order to better understand what multiculturalism actually means to a pluralistic society, examination of particular ethnic groups of people and individual cultures by themselves and then collectively must be taken into account. Dupris (1979) states that "multicultural education is a rather ambiguous term as it relates to knowledgeable practitioners and

Native American tribes and communities” (p. 44). Forbes (1979) suggests that the term must be understood to mean “many paths, many roads” (p. 4). For the purposes of this paper, multicultural education will refer to the “many paths or roads to education.”

Adult educators must be aware that the future will bring many challenges. According to Hodgkinson (1985):

- Only three workers provide the funds for each retiree and one of the three workers is minority.
- Half of all college students are over 25 and 20% are over 35.
- By the year 2000 one out of every three Americans will be non-white, and they will cover a broader socioeconomic range than ever before.
- By the year 2000 nearly 42% of all public school students will be minority children or children in poverty.
- In the year 2025, 40% of all 18-24 year-olds will be minority.
- The next few years will witness a continued drop in the number of minority high school graduates who apply for college.

The Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life (1988) provides the following information: By 1988 one-third of the U.S. population consisted of Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asian Americans, and 20% of children under 17 today are members of these groups. The Native American population consists of about 2 million people. There are over 300 Federal Indian reservations in the United States (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1987). There are over 500 federally recognized tribes that speak at least 250 different languages and comprise various cultural groups; this includes 197 Alaska Native village groups. It is important to note that interchangeable terms such as “American Indians,” “Indians,” and “indigenous peoples” are used to describe Native Americans, but refer to that sector of the American population who can trace their ancestry to the native inhabitants of what is now known as the United States of America. In addition, “accurately assessing Indian population is complicated by the fact that blood quantum is the criteria for official recognition” (Russell, 1992). Although this is clearly a diverse population, they share some of the same basic values such as respect for elders, cooperative learning environments, extended family, nonmaterialism, the concept that time is relative, and reliance on the spoken word.

Historically, Native American people have been burdened by various oppressive and discriminatory forces in the United States; they are often roman-

ticized, stereotyped, and/or forgotten. Indians have been studied as subjects, exploited as people, and labeled as sub-human. John F. Kennedy stated in his Native American Proclamation that "for a subject worked and reworked so often in novels, motion pictures, and television, American Indians remain probably the least understood and most misunderstood Americans of us all" (cited in Russell, 1992). Most Americans are ignorant of Native American history, spirituality, and current Native American political issues.

Many effects of oppression and discrimination are visible when past systems of higher education and policies implemented by the non-Indian educators upon the Native Americans are examined. Past attempts to provide post-secondary education to Native American adults can be summarized as a pattern of dominance, paternalism, religious evangelism, and neglect (Olivas, 1981); before the late 1960s, educational institutions for American Indians were dominated by the federal government or by religious organizations, and inherent in both efforts was a missionary zeal for assimilation (Boyer, 1989).

It is a frequent observation that Native American students, like other ethnic minorities, "have developed an insecurity and ambivalence about the value of their own cultural identity as a result of their interactions with the dominant [society]" (Cummins, 1989, p. 112). For many years, participation of Native American adults in mainstream post-secondary education was very limited or nonexistent. Most Native Americans were not satisfied with educational institutions provided by the states, federal government, and private agencies. Native Americans were the most underrepresented in higher education and had the highest attrition rate of all minorities in the United States (Astin, 1982). "The basic premise of white education—all persons were to be assimilated into white middle class values and behaviors—was antithetical to tribal desires to preserve some of their culture . . . [t]his long standing conflict of educational objectives was the primary impetus for the significant changes in Indian higher education" (Szasz, 1974, p. 156). In the 1960s, social conditions prompted major changes in Native American post-secondary education.

Current federal government policy for American Indians is underpinned by the concept of self-determination. "The United States government and other institutions in both the public and private sectors have begun to recognize the expressed needs set forth by Indian people as a legitimate basis for Indian social, educational, cultural, and economic self-determination in this multidimensional, multicultural nation" (Peregoy, 1981, p. 35). Native American adults who participate in modern post-secondary education bring with them a whole host of experiences which reflect current trends taking place in educational and federal policy for all Native Americans. Those Native Americans students

who have chosen to pursue and complete a post-secondary education and those who continue to attend institutions of higher learning represent the changing status of Native American people in the attempt to gain control of their lives and thus exercise the right for self-determination. "Education, in general, and post-secondary/higher education, specifically, have been identified by Indian people as a key vehicle to individual and tribal self-sufficiency" (Peregoy, 1981, p. 35). "Today's era of Indian self-determination reveals that constructive change in Indian society can occur when it is self-directed" (Boyer, 1989, p. 40). Conventional adult education practices can enhance the ability of practitioners to be responsive to Native American adult learners in most situations, but adult educators are challenged to build practical services and programs that recognize Native American languages and cultures.

In addition, the adult educator must recognize that the educational attainment of American Indians in general is much lower than that of the majority population. High school graduation and college attendance rates remain the lowest for any minority group (Commission on Minority Participation in education and American Life, 1988). While assessing further information about the problem of high attrition rates at the post-secondary level for Native American students, McDonald (1978, p. 73) listed financial hardships, cultural conflicts, the nature and quality of previous education, discrimination, and the lack of role models. Also, when Native Americans try to participate in any formal education setting, they often face stereotypical views such as Indians are slow learners, Indians are good with their hands, or Indians tend to be more right-brained. Obviously, these types of generalizations leave serious implications for the adult educator to address.

The National Education Association (1991) has collected other data on Native Americans that reveal a wide range of both problems and successes to challenge the adult education practitioner:

- American Indians/Alaska Natives (AI/AN) have been either ignored or placed in the "other" category for most national education data.
- Three of four AI/AN students who enter college drop out without earning a degree. (Despite their high dropout rates, a higher proportion of AI/AN youth are preparing to go to college than of any other ethnic minority group.)
- Thousands of AI/AN are enrolled in colleges and will move to a professional life.
- AI/AN students represent the only ethnic group in which females drop out of school more often than males.

Possible methods for practitioners to consider when working with Native Americans include humanistic, affective principles; Native Americans tend to support educational systems which are in harmony with their cultural practices. Decreasing stereotypes and breaking down ignorance are also keys to success in working with Native Americans. Being culturally sensitive and truly responsive to the Native American adult learner as an individual within a larger society will encourage effectiveness. In this setting, practitioners who can help foster and promote understanding and appreciation of the diversity and the traditions of various cultures will be valuable.

The increasingly diverse nature of the many minority groups in our country, which include the diverse Native American peoples, indicates that further accountability within the post-secondary education system is necessary; it is no longer desired that educators attempt "mainstreaming" culturally different students into the "melting pot." Rather, practitioners should recognize and appreciate the various cultural groups with which they most often interact. Adult educators should focus on a wide variety of teaching techniques since "there will be barriers of color, language, culture, attitude that will be greater than any we have faced before. . . the task will be not to lower the standards but to increase the effort. To do so will be to the direct benefit of all Americans, as a new generation of people become a part of our fabric, adding the high level of energy and creativity that has always been characteristic of groups who are making their way in America" (Hodgkinson, 1985, p.22). Students themselves will be the ultimate measure of accountability and responsiveness.

Chavers (1979) maintains that it will be some time before Native American people have an equal educational opportunity with the majority population. In the meantime, it should be realized that gaining knowledge about their students' ethnicity and culture will facilitate adult education practitioners' ability to adjust their own teaching style and effectiveness to meet the needs of all learners in a multicultural society.

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