American Indians and Special Education in Early Childhood

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ABSTRACT

American Indian children are placed in special education classrooms at a higher rate than any other minority group. This paper examines existing theories as to how to correct the imbalance. The paper also looks at a tribally run Head Start located near Cloquet Minnesota on the Fond du Lac Band of Chippewa Reservation. The paper examines the practices of the early childhood special educator and how they relate to the theories in existence.

The paper primarily examines standardized testing, culture and values. The paper demonstrates how existing standardized tests do not accurately reflect the world of American Indian children. Until such a test is developed, test results should be viewed as unreliable. The paper shows that the culture in which American Indian children are brought up differs drastically from mainstream culture and the child should be viewed in terms of his or her culture. If the educator takes time to view the child as a product of his or her culture, the child is less likely to be inaccurately placed in special education. If the culture is not integrated into the classroom and appreciated, the child will suffer. The paper also shows that the value system of American Indians is different from that of the majority culture. The educator should try to understand the value system of the tribe with which the child is affiliated in order to better understand the child.

Introduction

American Indian children are being placed in special education classrooms at a rate higher than any other minority group (O’Brien, 1990). Many theories exist as to the best way to combat the problem. However, most of the theories are opinions with little evidence to back their claim. This research looks at the policies and procedures of a school with a lower rate of American Indian children in special education than majority children and compares the policies and procedures of the school to the theories in existence.
The school is the Fond du Lac Head Start, located on an Ojibwa reservation in northern Minnesota. Head Start is a program that services low income children, ages three to five. The purpose of the program is to introduce children to concepts such as numbers, letters and appropriate social behavior. The program aims to prepare the children for kindergarten so that when the school year starts, the kindergarten teacher will not have to address such basics.

For 28,000 American Indian children a year, Head Start is the first exposure to a classroom setting (Head Start Bureau Website 2003). It is important that the experience is a positive one because the children will carry their feelings about Head Start into the kindergarten classroom. All children enter school with fear and misconceptions, however for minority children the feelings are intensified (Nel 1994). If these fears are confirmed, the child will enter the kindergarten classroom with distrust and hostility. Because the group is so important to many American Indian communities, being identified as better than or worse than others is stressful for a child (Mitchum 1989). Therefore, being placed in special education can confirm the child’s worst fears. According to Bruneau (1985), the self concept of American Indian children is similar to Euro American children before they enter school. However, Soldier (1985) has found that once American Indian children enter school, their self concept drops. It is important that an inappropriate placement in special education does not compound the already stressful situation in which American Indian children find themselves.

Fond du Lac Head Start

The Fond du Lac Head Start is located on the Fond du Lac reservation and operated by the Fond du Lac band of Chippewa’s Reservation Bureau Committee. The school has around a hundred students a year. About eighty percent of the school is native and twenty percent is non-native (Stevens 2003). The school combines traditional culture and religion with the mainstream classroom education. The school encourages native people to apply and assists in furthering the education of all their staff.

The school is located two miles from the city of Cloquet (pop. 12,000) and twenty miles from the city of Duluth (pop 80,000) in Minnesota. The children that attend the school live either on the reservation or in the city of Cloquet. The students are separated into eight classrooms, six located in the Head Start building and two located at outlying centers. The classrooms consist of around fifteen children, a teacher, a teacher assistant and a “grandma”. The grandmas are volunteers who assist in an assigned classroom. They are usually of Ojibwa decent and are a source of
information regarding culture and language. The classrooms are similar in terms of race, age and gender composition.

The Fond du Lac Head Start Special Education program consisted of thirteen children in the 2002-2003 school year. Of the thirteen students, six were non-native and seven were native. The numbers in the previous years have been similar to this figure (Stevens 2003). The racial composition of the special education program differs greatly from the school’s overall racial composition. The information in this paper regarding the Fond du Lac Head Start is from a 2003 personal interview with Kay Stevens, the early childhood special educator at Fond du Lac Head Start. Stevens is in charge of all special education matters at the Fond du Lac Head Start. The author worked at the Fond du Lac Head Start and has seen the policies in place and the positive results that are obtained.

**Standardized Testing**

American Indian children are often placed in special education based on false positives on standardized tests (Chinn & Hughes 1987). Reliance upon standardized testing alone to determine if a child is to be placed in special education is foolish when such tests have been normed to a certain population, often Euro-American children. Because of the inaccuracy in standardized testing, Dodd (1992) believes it may be necessary to rely on observation when deciding ability. Dodd writes “If a youngster functions within the community and can perform verbal tasks and understand and carry out the requirements for various other tasks as well as most youngsters of the same age in the community with the same language, it may [be] reasonable to assume that the child has similar abilities.”

However, others feel it is important to test the children, but to look at the test results in the context of the child and his or her upbringing. According to Bert & Bert (1992) American Indian children bring three determinates of learning to the classroom: maturation, life experiences and interactions with others in the environments, and the student’s own psychological and physiological biology. The educator must look beyond the test results to understand what aspect of the child’s life is contributing to the low score. If the child has not been exposed to certain concepts or behaviors, it is understandable that the child will have no knowledge of it.

American Indian children perform consistently lower on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised (WISC-R) (McShane & Plas 1984). However, Dever et al (1994) found that if the Ojibwa children were given token reinforcement (i.e. tokens which can be redeemed for prizes) for their correct response, their scores improved dramatically. Seven of the twelve children in the experimental group scored higher than
the highest score in the control group. If the children see no reason to score well on the test, they will not perform as well as if they have a reason. Sattler (1988) suggests that when working with minority children, one must gain the child’s interest and motivation or the test will not be accurate. The children need not be bribed. Often, if the child is given a reason as to why it is important to know the information, they will be more likely to remember it. For example, if a child is learning his or her telephone number and not told why they must memorize the seven digits, they often will not learn it. However, if one tells the child that once they know the number they can call their parents if they are lost or away from home, they are more likely to become engaged and have better results.

One barrier in the testing situation are language differences between American Indian children and mainstream America. Even when the children do speak English as a first language, it is often not Standard English (Dodd 1992). Many tribal groups require a longer wait time between question and answer (Dodd 1992). If a child does not answer a question right away, they may be viewed as not knowing the answer, when in fact they are simply contemplating the question and formulating a response the way they have been taught. Rowe (1987) found that teachers who increased the wait time elucidated more responses from minority children.

Long (1998) tested sixty Head Start Cherokee children with the Preschool Language Scale-3 (PLS-3). She found that the children routinely missed a question not missed by many Euro American children. The question involved the child acting as the teacher, something that Cherokee and other tribal groups teach their children as being disrespectful of elders. Each wrong answer at that age group lowers the child’s score by three months, so one culturally inappropriate question can have dramatic results. Long found that the American Indian children performed better at ages three and four than at age five, perhaps due to each question being weighted more at age five. However, Long also suggests that because American Indian children are routinely reinforced to listen and not to talk, the difference may become more dramatic as the child becomes older and more accustomed to social behavior.

Kay Stevens (2003), the early childhood special educator at the Fond du Lac Head Start, understands the inadequacies of standardized testing in regard to the American Indian population. When children enter the program, they are routinely screened using the Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning-Third Edition (DIAL3). If a child scores below what is expected of his or her age group, he or she is observed in a classroom setting and more intensive testing is done, depending on in what area the child scores low. Stevens also looks at the siblings of the child, if any exist. Stevens claims that some families she has
encountered have children who do not talk at all until an older age, at which point their vocabulary quickly catches up to their peers. Stevens will not put a child in the program if she sees other explanations for the low score.

**Culture**

“Culture is a variable not a deficiency to be remedied” (Loftin 1989). Bert & Bert (1992) insist that style of learning and learning disorder must be defined when working with American Indian children. A child who learns differently from majority children is not necessarily a child who learns less effectively. Long (1998) found that Cherokee Head Start children scored better on the Auditory Comprehension section of the PLS-3. Long explains that the high score may be the result of Cherokee children’s being reinforced by their elders for listening, not talking, as many Euro American children are.

If the educator is made aware of certain small differences, the child will be less likely to be viewed as mentally deficient. Some tribal groups find question answer sequences to be rude; the groups require more discussion than question asking (Devers et al 1994). American Indian children are more likely to respond when a teacher makes comments or observations as opposed to only asking questions (Bert & Bert 1992). Cummins (1989) found that when minority children come into contact with the educators and staff at school they become “empowered” or “disabled” by the experience. Cummins attributed the result to four basic occurrences: the extent to which the student’s culture and language were incorporated into the program, the extent to which the community was encouraged to participate, the extent to which the language use was promoted and the existence of a minority advocacy policy. Other studies have shown that school failure does not occur often when minority group members are positively orientated toward the dominant culture as well as their own (Feuerstein 1979 & Ogbu 1978).

American Indians do not wish to be assimilated into dominant culture (Bert & Bert 1992). If the children feel as though their culture is being taken away or devalued, they will withdraw. It is important to convey to the children that school and home are different, but that does not mean that their home life is worse (Dodd 1992). Dodd (1992) also warns that “services may be appreciated, but imposed services may be viewed as an unwelcome intrusion.”

The Fond du Lac Head Start incorporates culture into their curriculum everyday. Each classroom has an animal name in Ojibwa and school concerts often include a song sung in Ojibwa. Twice a month a cultural elder comes in to tell traditional stories. Every Monday the week begins with a smudging and a blessing. The school has a powwow in the
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spring that all families are welcome to join. The children practice for the powwow several times beforehand. Students from the Ojibwa secondary school next door come to play the drum and show the children how to dance.

According to Stevens (2003) one important factor for the children’s self esteem is that the American Indian children become the majority. The non-Native children, who are used to being a part of the majority, are in situations that are foreign and require adjustment. The difficult adjustment is made easier for the Native children because the staff and their peers are of similar background and better understand their perspective. The transition from home life to school life is very difficult for American Indian children and by making the transition as less stressful as possible, the school enables the children to feel more comfortable in their new surroundings. The more comfortable the child is, the more likely he or she is to succeed.

Values

The value system of American Indian culture is often at odds with the value system of majority culture. One of the fundamental values in many American Indian cultures is the importance of the group and one’s friends and family (Nel 1994). When a friend or peer is struggling, many tribal cultures dictate that one’s obligation is to assist him or her. However, in some cases, such as a child’s helping a friend on a test, the child will be punished for such actions (Nel 1994). American Indians typically perform better when working in groups (Bert & Bert 1992). American Indian children often feel more comfortable when praise is given to the group and they are not singled out in front of their peers (Swisher & Deyhle 1989).

Family is an integral part of American Indian society. The family is not limited to brothers or sisters, but to the extended family as well. In many tribal groups, one’s clan is one’s family. Therefore, American Indians will recognize people as family even though their shared lineage dates back generations. Being civil to one’s family is more important than being on time for events or completing assigned tasks (Morgan, Guy, Lee & Cellini 1986). Therefore, a child may not attend school or complete an assignment if it interferes with a familial event, such as a wedding. It is important to remember the child and his or her family see their behavior as appropriate and are not being disrespectful. The educator needs to explain that the child is welcome to attend such events, but should inform the school before an absence, so teacher’s can prepare the child for the absence.

Concept of time can differ dramatically for American Indian children. As has been discussed, wait time is longer. American Indians traditionally wait for everyone to arrive before beginning an event. The
foreign concept of relying on a clock to inform one when it is time to start
can lead children to be late for school or turn in assignments past their
deadlines (Nel 1994 & Dodd 1992). Again, if the child is informed why it
is important to be on time, such as the teacher has to repeat information to
late students, he or she is more likely to show up on time (Dodd 1992).

Kay Stevens (2003) understands that cultural differences must not
be ignored. Stevens sees the child as a member of a family and not only as
an individual. Stevens believes that the family’s opinion is important when
deciding what is best for the child. When Stevens has concerns, she invites
the family in and listens to their opinion instead of only telling them what
she believes.

Stevens also understands that the children feel comfortable with
peers. Stevens often invites the children with whom she is working to
bring a friend during their sessions. Stevens believes that observing the
child’s interaction with peers is as important as seeing them individually.
Also, Stevens understands that the child is more comfortable by not being
singled out. All children at the school meet with Stevens each semester, so
that the children who see her on a regular basis are not seen as “different”
by their peers.

The Fond du Lac Head Start cooperates with the families to create
a welcome environment. The school has monthly family nights where
family members come with their children and are able to voice any
concerns they may have. Each comment is typed and given to all staff the
following day, regardless of topic. Stevens realizes that the Fond du Lac
Head Start has a good reputation in the community for a place where
families are heard. Stevens has encountered parents who refuse to meet
with staff at the elementary school, but will meet when a Head Start staff
member is in the meeting. Stevens believes this is because they feel they
are listened to by Head Start staff and often ignored or patronized by the
staff of other schools. The staff members are not trying to be disrespectful,
but often do not understand the value system of the Ojibwa people and
therefore behave in a disrespectful manner.

Conclusion

It is important to keep in mind that if a child needs special
education and it is not available, the child suffers as much as if the child is
placed in special education unnecessarily (Dodd 1992). There may be
legitimate reasons for American Indians’ being placed in Special Education
classes. American Indian children have higher rates of otitis media, middle
ear infection, than other children (Goinz 1984; McShane & Mitchell 1979;
Paradise 1980; Scaldwell & Frame 1985). Several studies have linked
otitis media to several learning disabilities (Bennett, Ruuska & Sherman 1980; Reichman & Healey 1983).

It is important to remember that within the American Indian people there exist many distinct tribes, bands and nations, each with their own language and culture (Churchill, 1985). It is important not to think of American Indians as a homogenous group. Many of the cultural values and practices are specific to a percentage of American Indian tribes and do not represent the beliefs of all native people. Also, there are many stereotypes that are not true. Most American Indians do not live on reservations; they live throughout the country, not only in the northwest and southwest; and they attend public schools throughout the country (Dodd, 1992). It is also important to remember that not all children who are American Indian are traditional. As in every other ethnicity in this country, some are more assimilated into mainstream American culture than others. The findings listed above may not apply to other tribes, other areas in the country or other age groups within the tribe.

Stevens (2003) also admits that there may be a large number of non-Native children with special education needs attending the Fond du Lac Head Start because they have special education services on the premises, something that other preschools in the area do not have. However, the parents of the Native children send their children to the Fond du Lac Head Start because it is tribally run and not specifically for the special education services. The Native school population may be more varied because of the different interests that parents have in enrolling their children.

Some further areas of study are suggested. It is important to create a standardized test that reflects the culture of American Indian children. Also, it would be informative to follow the children from the Fond du Lac Head Start into elementary school to see if they perform better than the American Indian children who did not attend the Fond du Lac Head Start. It also would be informative to find other tribal run schools that function in a culturally appropriate manner to see if the findings are similar.
Works Cited


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