

Archived Information

Reading and Writing Practices of

Native American Students as Preparation for University Work

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Approximately 41% of the Native American freshmen entering the California State University (CSU) System require remedial English as determined by the English Placement Test (EPT). This purpose of this research was to determine effective literacy development practices in high school that prepare Native American students for success in higher education. In the same vein that the proficient reader research has informed our practices in teaching reading, this research project seeks to identify effective high school literacy experiences of successful Native American university students in an effort to inform the teaching practices of their high school teachers. A review of the literature and interviews with successful Native American University students delineated consistent challenges faced by successful Native American students in high school and the support necessary to persist. Concurrently, interviews were conducted with current Native American students in a charter high school on the reservation to ascertain their literacy practices and perceptions regarding success in college. Subsequently, four instructors, who teach English to College level freshmen from the nearest university to the charter high school, were interviewed to ascertain their expectations for success in writing for college.

Perspectives:

Statistics present a clear picture documenting the failure of Native Americans in the mainstream educational system. A Board of Regents study by the Arizona state

universities entitled *Better Schools for Arizona* (1990) found that for every 100 undergraduate Native American students admitted to the three universities, only 14 graduated in five years. According to the United States Census Data from 2002, only 1.1% of the American Indian population earned an Associates degree, 0.7% earned a Bachelor's Degree, 0.5 % earned a Master's Degree, and 0.4% earned a Doctor's degree. In San Diego County where the research for this project occurs, there are not large numbers of Native American students flocking to the universities, despite the presence of several American Indian tribes. In 2004, of the 4,093 freshmen entering San Diego State University, only 20 were Native American. At Cal State San Marcos, only 4 of the 659 freshmen in 2004 were Native American.

While there are several documented factors related to cultural preference and learning style discrepancies with Native American learners and mainstream education, at least part of the reasons for those low numbers at universities can be attributed to lack of achievement prior to entering the university. System-wide California State University Data indicate that 41% of its Native American freshmen require remediation in English, according to the English Placement Test. It is estimated that between 40-60% of American Indian students drop out of high school each year (Klug and Whitfield, 2002) resulting in only 51.1% of those students completing high school with a regular diploma according to a recent Harvard Civil Rights project (*Focus On*, 2005). Among other factors, a direct contributor to that dropout rate is likely the English literacy rates of Native American children. According to a recent longitudinal study of preschool children, Native American students “enter kindergarten with significantly lower reading,

mathematics, and general knowledge achievement scores than other students” (Demmert, 2004). The trend extends into higher education with Native American students having the highest university drop out rate of any group in the United States (Garrod & Larimore, 1997).

Knowing that their Native American students are generally not as successful as other groups of students, teachers can unwittingly become negative contributors to the high failure rate of Native American students. According to Good and Brophy (1994) teachers quickly form expectations for individual student’s learning, based on such characteristics as the student’s race, socioeconomic class, physical appearance, and gender. Furthermore, the teacher’s expectations often directly affect the student’s potential for successful achievement. Specifically in regard to minority students, Kleinfeld (1972) and Leacock (1969) found that teachers held lower expectations for students as a result of their ethnicity.

Even though the statistics paint a bleak picture, there are obviously Native American students who are successful in high school and college. Those students identify the following themes as related to their persistence in college: family support, structured social support, faculty/staff warmth, exposure to college and vocations, development of independence, reliance on spiritual resources, and ability to deal with racism (Jackson, 2003; Garrod, 1997; Demmert, 2004; Swisher, 1999). In his study of Native American high school students’ success in science, Keating (1997) found distinct factors affecting their success: cultural traditions, language and school environment. American Indian languages have little or no correspondence to the technical language of science; thus,

English literacy has a direct effect upon academic success in all content areas. Further, cultural taboos may cause conflict between some of the materials or concepts used in content areas, resulting in the high school students' perception of irrelevance for the material in their lives. Keating found that the typical teaching styles observed on reservation high schools include a heavy emphasis on strategies such as direct instruction (lecture), use of textbooks as the primary source for information, individualized seat work and standardized short answer assessments, none of which made any attempt to relate to their Native American students' learning styles or lives. Implications for teachers at high school and university levels include creating a nurturing environment and providing support systems for Native Americans who are often first generation college students. Moreover, English literacy must be developed with culture and learning styles as a basis for instruction (Hilberg, 2002).

In addition to affective issues related to success in college, it goes without saying that Native American students must have critical reading and analytical writing proficiency in English. In 2002 the California Community College, the California State University and the University of California conducted a web-based survey submitted to faculty across disciplines to determine expectations faculty have for the critical reading, writing, and thinking abilities of their entering students. Of the responding faculty, 83% said that the lack of analytical reading skills contribute to students' lack of success in a course. They also indicated that only one-third of entering college students are sufficiently prepared for the two most frequently assigned writing tasks: analyzing information or arguments and synthesizing information from several sources. The

subsequent report, *Academic Literacy: a Statement of Competencies Expected of Students Entering California's Public Colleges and Universities*, recommended that in high school, students need to be given instruction in writing in every course as well as instruction in reading that makes students active meaning-makers and teaches them strategies all good readers employ.

Research Methods:

This purpose of this study was to identify the literacy experiences of successful Native American University students to serve as information for the teaching practices of high school teachers so that Native American students are better prepared for the rigors of university level reading and writing demands. Concurrently, students at a Charter High School for Native American students were interviewed in focus group sessions to determine similarities and differences in their experiences and those of the successful university students. Conclusions from the interviews indicated the extent to which the current high school students' literacy experiences correlate with those identified by successful university students. Subsequently, four instructors who teach English to College level freshmen from the nearest university to the Charter High School, were interviewed to ascertain their expectations for success in writing for college.

Findings:

Results of the interviews with successful Native American university students were consistent with the existing literature. They were able to identify specific high school teachers who they thought were "good" teachers as being instrumental in their preparation for success in college. Characteristics of those teachers included exhibiting a

positive demeanor and respect for the students. The teachers had high expectations and taught their students knowledge necessary for college, such as symbolism in literature and poetry and argumentative writing. Basically, these teachers were motivational. Unfortunately, the participants in the focus group session indicated that they were not treated well by other students in their mostly Anglo high schools. All attributed their resiliency and persistence to supportive home environments.

Conversely, the focus group session at the Native American Charter High School in the fall 2005 provided some insight into the personal and academic lives of students who do not necessarily have supportive home environments and are in direct danger of being on the other end of the success spectrum. According to the principal at the high school, 100% of the 72 current students live on the reservation in homes with alcohol and drug involvement. About 95% of the students are considered “drug babies” with predictable accompanying challenges. Approximately 50% of the students use drugs and alcohol themselves and 65 of them have various behavior problems. Almost all of the students read below grade level.

Their attitudes and experiences exhibit a distinctively serious disconnect between their perceptions and the realities of college preparedness. About twenty-five percent of the eleventh and twelfth grade students who participated in the focus group sessions, indicated they either intended to go to college or were thinking about going. Subsequent questions focused on the students’ current literacy practices and their expectations for university success. In the focus group session, several typical adolescent practices emerged. Some students felt like they read a great deal, while other read almost nothing

and were not interested in reading. When asked what types of materials they read, students mentioned novels, magazines, and textbooks. Some of the students were able to identify specific comprehension strategies they use when reading textbooks, e.g. sticky notes, skimming for specific information, taking notes. Continuing with the metacognitive awareness line of questioning, students were asked to identify what they thought was hard for them when it comes to reading. The first answer was, "Reading is just hard" Students indicated other difficulties such as remembering and understanding what they read and knowing what is important. Other students indicated a lack of interest in the topics and were blunt about the fact that they just "don't care about the reading." When asked about the number of pages they typically read per week in high school including textbooks and novels, answers ranged from "about two" to "maybe thirty." When students were confronted with the news that in college they would have minimal weekly reading of anywhere from 3-5 textbook chapters consisting of 20-50 pages each, about three novels over the course of the semester, and other shorter readings in between, all were visibly surprised at the amount.

When the high school students were asked, what they perceived to be hard about writing, some responded that they "just don't know what to write about." Other difficulties included coming up with ideas, starting out, getting it done, and dealing with syntax and grammar. The writing requirements in their high school were minimal, in some cases consisting of a 3-5 page report and a few shorter writing assignments sprinkled in over the course of the semester. Once again, they were stunned to discover that the nearby university has a writing requirement in every course, which includes a

minimum of 2500 words. That translates into about ten pages throughout the semester. If a student is taking five classes, that means a minimum of fifty pages of writing in a semester. While their memories may be somewhat faulty, some of the students did not think they had written fifty pages in their entire lives.

Subsequently, a focus group of four freshmen-level English instructors, from the local university, were interviewed to ascertain their overall expectations regarding literacy practices and university success. They explained that the 2500 word writing requirement in each course is in recognition of literacy expectations in the twenty-first century. Regardless of their chosen profession, college graduates will be writing. The instructors acknowledged that students may be thinking and learning in college, but they have difficulty putting that on paper. The rationale for the writing requirement is that the more practice students get, the better they will become.

Overall, the instructors indicated that most new university students can supply a summary of what they read, but that deeper analysis and critical understanding of a text is not well-developed. The focus in writing assignments is not to “lead” the students to certain points; rather, to identify what the author’s agenda is in their mind and then to formulate an opinion as to personal significance of the text. In other words, students must learn to make the implicit, explicit. They acknowledged that this is difficult writing, which not only takes four years of high school, but often four years of college to develop. Certainly, if this is not occurring at some level at high school, the learning curve in college becomes much steeper and may even seem to be insurmountable for freshmen who enter with a substantial literacy disadvantage.

Educational importance of the study and recommendations:

From all of the interviews and literature review, there emerged a clear disconnect between the students' high school literacy experiences and the reality of what is required for success at the university level. Preliminary recommendations to better support our Native American students for success at the university level, include providing AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) programs for all students. AVID is an in-school academic support program for grades 5-12 that prepares students for college eligibility and success. The goals are to place academically average students in advanced classes and to level the playing field for minority, rural, low-income and other students without a college-going tradition in their families. At the Native American Charter High School, AVID training has recently been provided to a majority of the faculty.

It is clear that Native American students need and deserve supportive teachers who have high expectations and are willing to learn about who their students are, including their cultural values and traditions. More rigorous reading and writing requirements in high school will certainly make the bridge to college more of a solid concrete structure as opposed to the swinging variety over the great crevasse that leaves the learner hanging on for dear life. That solid bridge includes explicit instruction for critical reading and analytical writing in high school beyond mere summary. Additionally, curricular concerns must be a priority. Teachers should use culturally relevant materials to address state standards while providing reading and resources that address multiple perspectives of historical and current events.

Educating a student in an environment that has little respect for the student's culture is not only frustrating for the teacher and student alike, it is actually counterproductive. In their studies regarding the mental health and self-concept of Indian youth, Fuchs and Havighurst (1972) concluded that "...the great majority of Indian youths see themselves as fairly competent persons within their own social world" (p. 147). According to Joseph Suina, former Chairman of the Cochiti Pueblo, the feeling of success must also permeate the school learning environment, and a key factor is the teacher who must be sensitive to the emotional conflicts within each student. If a teacher does not recognize and respect the culture of the students, it is difficult to recognize their potential and hold high expectations for success (personal communication, October 27, 1993).

As an educational community, it is incumbent upon us to take responsibility for the achievement of all students. Native American students must be better prepared for the rigors of academic reading and writing at the university level. The ultimate aim is to increase the numbers of Native American students at the university level, thereby providing them with opportunities related to higher education.

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