American Indians/Alaska Native Families: Current Status and Implications for Student Achievement

John W. Tippeconnic, Ph.D.
Professor and Director
American Indian Studies
Arizona State University
Context: Complex and Challenging

- American Indian history, including Indian education, in this country has been a difficulty one. Formal school based education has been used as the tool to change the American Indian – at the expense of tribal languages, traditional cultures, and lives of families and individuals. Schooling has attempted to Christianize, civilize, and “kill the Indian, save the man.” Forced assimilation has been the approach used. Parents were excluded. The past impacts the present.

Tribal Nations

- Over 563 federally recognized tribes speak over 160-200 different languages. There are over 60 state recognized tribes.
- There are great differences between and among tribes / tribal members.
- Approximately 310 Reservations. Over half (66%) live off reservations, many in urban areas. Many go back and forth between urban and reservations areas.
Population Data

- Census (2004) reported 2.2 million or 0.8 percent reported only to be AI/AN. An additional 1.8 million reported AI/AN as well as one or more other races. The overall total of 4 million represents 1.4 percent of the U.S. population
- Median age of 31.9 years; 30% under 18; 7% are 65 & older
- 42% married; 35% never married; 1 in 6 separated or divorced; 20% of households were maintained by women
Research

- There is limited research dealing with Indian education; including parent involvement and student academic achievement, especially evidenced based research.
- There is more descriptive research, narratives based on experiences – more in the qualitative methods area.
- There are national studies including Census data and recent National Indian Education Study reports. NCLB has generated some data & there is more data at the state level.
- Often AI/ANs are left out of national studies/data/reports.
- Tribes are also taking control of research by developing and implementing tribal protocols and Institutional Review Boards.
Families / Parents

- Family/ Extended Family / Community are valued and considered strengths by AI/ANs
- Strengths: Helping Systems, Personal relationships based on mutual respect (Light & Martin, 1996)
- Economic, health, social, political, and cultural conditions impact families in different ways depending on place and tribe
- 1 of 4 AI/AN live below the poverty level; the rate for children was higher at 31%.
- Unemployment rates are high. The median yearly income is $31,600
- Likely to experience personal losses; violence and aggression (Jackson, A.P., et.al. (2010).
Families / Parents

- National Indian Education Study Findings (2009)

- 49% of 4th graders and 57% of 8th graders attended schools that provided opportunities for daily communication with parents by phone.
- 45% of 4th graders and 63% of 8th graders attended schools where opportunities for daily communication were provided through websites or email.
- 26% of 4th graders and 33% of 8th graders attended schools where members of the community visited to discuss education issues with students or staff 3 or more times a week.
Multiple Context of Schooling

- Over 90% of the approximately 644,000 American Indian and Alaska Native students at the k-12 levels attend public schools.

- In 2009-2010, there were 183 Bureau of Education funded elementary and secondary schools, located in 23 states, served approximately 42,000 Indian students. 124 schools are tribally controlled. 59 schools are operated by the Bureau of Indian Education. BIE also oversees 2 post-secondary schools. BIE is a national federal school system.

- There are approximately 70 tribal charter schools.

- There are 39 tribal colleges and universities that serve over 25,000 students. Another 190,000 or more attend other colleges and universities.
Although many Native students are successful in schools, too many are not. Long-standing issues exist in Indian education, e.g., high dropout rates and low graduation rates; lack of Native administrators, teachers, and counselors; relevant curriculum, absenteeism, lack of funding, old facilities, etc.

Economic (poverty), social, health, political and cultural issues influence student learning and family focus on education.
Student Achievement

National Indian Education Studies (NAEP Data)

- At both grades 4 and 8, AI/AN students scored lower in reading and mathematics than White or Asian/Pacific Islander students in 2009.

- **Reading:**
  - Grade 4 AI/AN students scored 26 points lower on average than White students and 31 points lower than Asian/Pacific Islander students.
  - Grade 8 AI/AN students scored 22 points lower on average than White students in reading; 23 lower than Asian/Pacific Islander students.
Student Achievement

- **Math:**
  - Grade 4 AI/AN students scored 23 points lower on average than White students and 30 points lower than Asian/Pacific Islander students.
  - Grade 8 AI/AN students scored 27 points lower on average than White students in reading; 35 lower than Asian/Pacific Islander students.

- **Other factors**
  - Student drop-out rates are high and graduation rates are low. On average, 50% of Native students graduate in the twelve states with the highest percent of AN/AN students.
Parent Involvement

- How to get parents involved in education has been a long standing issue in the education of AI/AN students. Continues to be a struggle.
- Historically, parents were excluded from schools (boarding schools, BIA and Public schools).
- Initial involvement was through JOM, Title I and Indian Education Act programs and advisory boards.
Parent Involvement

What AIs perceive as parent involvement? (REL Study, 2008)

• Parents get involved to help children succeed and build confidence, connect to school, monitor children’s progress, address problems, respond to school’s request/invitations
• School involvement
  ◦ Communicating about children
  ◦ Attending student events
  ◦ Volunteering
  ◦ Advocating for their children
• Home Involvement
  ◦ Showing interest in children’s education and life
  ◦ Helping with school work
  ◦ Encouraging / rewarding children to do their best
  ◦ Reading to children
  ◦ Involving the extended family and community
Parent Involvement

Barriers: (REL Study, 2008)

• School Based:
  ✓ Unwelcoming environment
  ✓ Past negative experiences
  ✓ Lack of cultural sensitivity
  ✓ Different types of interpersonal communication

• Family or Home Based:
  ✓ Scheduling
  ✓ Childcare
  ✓ Transportation
  ✓ Time
  • Economic
Policies / Approaches with Potential

Strategies to encourage involvement (REL Study, 2008)

• Correspondence
• Communications about children
• School staff respectful of parents’ educational and cultural values
• Open-door policy
• Culturally respective environment
• Cultural activities and resources
Policies / Approaches with Potential

- Holistic approach to education has the potential to improve student learning and teaching. The concepts of full service schooling or integrated schooling and community schools show promise. And relating education to economic development, natural resources, environmental issues, health, etc.
- Early childhood programs (FACE)/Family Literacy Programs
- Emphasis a broader concept of student success; not a test score
- Programs that inform parents about how schools operate and function in their communities
Policies / Approaches with Potential

- Partnerships / Collaborative efforts between schools Tribal Nations / Tribal Education Departments and Community Based Organizations
- Create welcoming climates in schools
- School based efforts that create better understanding and respect of AI/AN communities, families, histories, cultures and languages
- Programs to prepare AI/AN school administrators, teachers, and counselors
- Offer incentives to parents
Implications

- AI/AN family situations are complex and vary by location and impacted by economic, social, health, political, historical, and cultural conditions and situations. The concepts of family and communities are important tribal values and parents want the best, including education, for their children so they can be successful in life. It is imperative that schools take the leadership in involving parents in meaningful ways.
References


