Culturally Relevant Classroom Management Strategies for American Indian Students

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ABSTRACT

This study contrasted the perspectives of families of American Indian students on discipline issues to the typical classroom management practices of K-12 schools on two rural reservations. In general, school strategies used for behavior improvement focus on individual students and are micro-managed by teachers. Families were concerned that these practices may elicit resistance in children who were raised to evaluate their conduct and self-impose behaviors that meet the standards of the group. Results suggest that American Indian students respond to modeling in a context that supports independence and the practice of humility to facilitate group process.

Teachers are highly concerned about the behaviors of their students (Brock & Grady, 1996; Latz, 1992). Usually, teachers spend a great deal of classroom time focusing on changing or molding students' behaviors to maximize time on-task in order to facilitate academic learning. As such, teachers' repertoire of effective classroom management strategies is an integral part of their daily practices as a means of limiting disruptions. Typically, most classroom management training for prospective teachers rely on behavioral outcomes based on generic characteristics believed to characterize traditional and non-traditional students, ignoring ethnic, cultural, or socioeconomic differences (Emmer & Stough, 2001; McCarthy & Banally, 2003; Wlodkowski, 1999). For example, many assume that instrumental conditioning, such as reinforcement, can provide rewards consistent with the needs of all students to gain compliance with classroom rules. Moreover, although reinforcement is described as a naturally occurring phenomenon of behavior change (Alberto & Troutman, 2003), in the classroom, the teacher arranges, controls, and monitors the environmental conditions of the change. In some cases, the behavioral-reduction management program (e.g., reinforcement) is paired with aversive stimuli (shouting, scolding, ridicule), as teachers unconsciously practice disciplines that they were exposed to as children (Alberto & Troutman, 2003). These approaches rarely provide student with the tools to self-evaluate, self-monitor, and self-regulate their actions. In addition, these methods may fail to

account for differences related to self-regulation, as they are culture bound. Such is the case with the traditional American Indian culture in which children's or students' positive behavior patterns are expected to be internally regulated rather than manipulated by parents or teachers. Therefore, it is important to identify some of the critical values and cultural characteristics of traditional American Indian families as they relate to classroom management strategies typically used in schools. These values and cultural characteristics play a major role in influencing a child's learning styles.

TRADITIONAL AMERICAN INDIAN VALUES VIEWED IN THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Riding and Rayner (1998) described "learning style" as the way an individual uses strategies to help learn tasks and the way the individual organizes the information. American Indian children tend to have a more global cognitive style of organizing information and an emphasis on using visual strategies and mental representations for processing information (Hilberg & Tharp, 2002; Vasquez, 1990). An example of this style of learning would be a preference to hear an entire story all the way through before discussing events of the story and answering content questions (Woolfolk, 1995). This process would allow the student to understand the story from beginning to end, mentally visualize key events gradually throughout the story, and develop conclusions about the events from a holistic perspective.

With the holistic perspective learning style of American Indians, McCarthy and Benally (2003) discussed the group process that is emphasized in their culture. Since collaboration and cooperation is highly valued, children are taught not to be opinionated or hasty in reaching conclusions. Children should strive to see other people's perspectives and come to a reasonable conclusion that is harmonious with others. Therefore during a problem solving activity, these children would tend to favor a solution that demonstrates generosity (Brendtro & Brokenleg, 1996) instead of egoism or self-serving actions.

Brendtro and Brokenleg (1996) discussed the importance of wisdom in the traditional American Indian culture. Family members expose their children to the value of observation of individuals with more experience. Through this observation, children are exposed to a model for learning a new skill. Children are encouraged to learn privately through a trial and error process (Vasquez, 1990) until mastery has been achieved. While an individual is learning, one's privacy must be respected and mistakes should not be publicized. The child will be reluctant to perform the task until he or she is certain they can perform it well. The importance of mastery is a cultural value and children are encouraged to achieve a

mastery level for a personal goal instead of an extrinsic reward (e.g., grade, candy, attention). An intrinsic reward, such as completing the bonus questions to achieve mastery is an excellent example of the traditional American Indian's value of self-regulation for motivation, monitoring, evaluation and reward. Brendtro and Brokenleg continued in their discussion to emphasize the value of exhibiting humility once mastery is achieved.

Related to this learning process and the achievement level, American Indian children are taught the importance of humility not only in regards to their own performance, but in regards to peer performance. McCarthy and Benally (2003) reported the value of collaboration and cooperation in the traditional American Indian family. Additionally, virtue awareness was stressed in Jacob's (2003) research where he noted the importance of an individual possessing "courage, humility, and generosity." A child who witnesses a fellow classmate err on a question would feel highly uncomfortable to answer the same question as this would appear to be competitive. Plank (1994) found that students from this ethnic group are likely not to respond to a question asked of him or her in the classroom. The silence may be interpreted as noncompliance or being disrespectful; however, a child who has been taught to display humility would feel it is inappropriate to be singled out in front of others. Students in Plank's study commented they were uncomfortable in responding, as they believed it would appear they were trying to be competitive with their peers. This silence and subsequent potential interpretation by the teacher may put a student at risk in the educational system and may result in an inappropriate referral to special education.

Cooperative learning activities as opposed to individual, competitive activities are compatible with the American Indian values (Butterfield & Pepper, 1991). Students from this ethnic group learn most effectively within small groups that focus on hands-on learning in activity-based contexts. When the activity is organized in such a format to allow students to direct their own learning and to see the meaningfulness of the lesson, learning becomes more natural and motivating. Once the children feel this motivation, self-regulation of the learning process is enhanced. For example, McCarthy and Benally found American Indian children learned social studies, math and science skills most effectively when they were able to work in groups using charts, maps, drawings, sculptures, and even their own artistic creations to show evidence of their knowledge.

The traditional American Indian culture values inclusion and belonging to a group (Brendtro & Brokenleg, 1996). Therefore, children are taught to work for a meaningful goal for the betterment of a group. An individual reward system would

be meaningless to an American Indian child who has been taught this value. McCarthy and Benally (2003) commented that an individual reward (if given) would undoubtedly become a reward for all in the group. Additionally, delayed rewards (living for the day) may not be effective as it is the tendency of American Indians to be motivated to accomplish for present utility and not for long term future goals.

American Indians value independence and individual freedoms in contrast to dominance and discipline for obedience (Brendtro & Brokenleg, 1996; Strand & Peacock, 2002). Children are taught to respect others and to develop self-respect. Through both types of respect, children once again are encouraged to self-regulate, to solve problems and show responsibility for challenges they encounter. Young American Indian children are given training in self-management skills without rewards for good behaviors, but are encouraged to view their good behaviors as a reward in itself (Strand & Peacock, 2002). Although independence is being nurtured in children, adults continue to greatly value the provision of models and feedback to young children as they mature. In terms of taking responsibility for their actions, discipline that is very abrasive is incompatible with the American Indian culture. Subtle messages that highlight the value of completing a task and why the task is of value are more culturally appropriate. Children are also taught to use self-evaluation to help monitor their behaviors and to be aware how their behaviors may not be beneficial to the group.

Another cultural value of traditional American Indians that is modeled by adults to children is the value of reflection. McCarthy and Benally (2003) reported that American Indian children tend to wait six to ten seconds to respond to an interaction, a sharp contrast to non-American Indian children whose wait time is approximately three to five seconds for a response. This type of reflective modality is consistent with American Indian children practice of their global perspective for processing information. This wait time would also allow them to carefully produce an answer that is compatible with the values of inclusion, generosity, mastery, and independence (Brendtro & Brokenleg, 1996). Moreover, the value of reflection can elicit a non-response or silence. Within the American Indian culture, individuals are taught to be comfortable with silence as it serves many important purposes. Thus, a teacher may assume the American Indian child, when using silence, does not know the correct response. This may prompt the teacher to ask another student the question or provide the answer. Either way, the child may be labeled in the teacher's thoughts as incompetent (Vaughn, Bos, Schumm, 2003).

The silence, the need for humility, and the need for self-monitoring of behaviors lead to the concept of self-regulation. The American Indian culture promotes self-regulatory behaviors through modeling and various teaching experiences to develop independence in children. The following two sections deal with the institutional response to self-regulation in terms of how the development of self-regulation is nurtured through the educational programs, the teacher behaviors that are culturally responsive to self-regulation, as well as the potential teacher behaviors that may impede the development of self-regulation and independence.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-REGULATION

McDevitt and Ormrod (2004) described self-regulation as being able to direct and control one's own behavior. According to these authors, the capabilities included in self-regulation are being able to control impulses, using socially acceptable forms of interactions to express emotions, being able to delay gratification, striving for self-chosen goals, and monitoring one's own attention and learning strategies to promote cognitive development. Individuals who are able to self-regulate their behaviors are able to monitor, evaluate, and reward their own actions. Self-regulators are driven by intrinsic motivation as opposed to external rewards (Wlodkowski, 1999; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

In general, self-regulation is seen in the early stages of children who are 12 to 18 months (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004). At this early age, children begin to show compliance for simple tasks and rules. They begin to internalize these rules and thus show evidence of self-monitoring. Children at this age and as they continue to develop exhibit self-talk behaviors that are used to monitor their actions (e.g., a young child would say to him/herself "don't touch the glass or it will break"). During the preschool age, children demonstrate increased abilities to control their impulses and emotions. At this age, children are showing emerging signs of self-monitoring of behaviors when interacting with peers. Additionally, at around 3 years of age, young children are able to self-evaluate their own behaviors and determine whether their endeavors were successful or in need of improvement. As children reach elementary school age, they are expanding their self-monitoring skills to include internalization of the rules of society. Therefore, it can be surmised that self-regulatory skills are attainable in the early childhood years. A child's exposure and reinforcement of these skills will determine the mastery level and their use.

THE SIGNIFICANT IMPACT OF CULTURE ON A CHILD'S LEARNING

Culture plays an important role in influencing a child's learning process and the skills that are learned. As noted in the literature, the development of self-

regulatory skills is an important feature of traditional American Indian values (McCarthy & Banally, 2003; McInerney & McInerney, 1998; Wlodkowski, 1999). Since self-regulatory behaviors are modeled and thus promoted at an early age in young American Indian children, the acquisition of this skill emerges at an early age. According to Brendtro and Brokenleg (1996), even the youngest of children in the American Indian communities are given daily tasks of responsibility. Each of these young children is nurtured to learn to manage their own behaviors and to achieve mastery.

Cognitive theorists stress that culture has a direct impact on a child's learning process. McDevitt and Ormrod (2004) discussed how a particular skill can be learned early in one ethnic group but later in other groups of children of similar age. The key factor that determines the acquisition is related to the influence of the group's cultural values. If the skill is deemed functional for an individual or a community of people, the skill is likely to be modeled, practiced, and learned. For example, Kearins (1981) provides an excellent example of the cultural influence on children's development. In this study, Kearins looked at children's skills from aborigine and urban communities in Australia. The researcher was comparing visual spatial skills of young unschooled children who lived in remote and desolate areas of Australia to the skills of a group of children of the same age who attended urban schools. Results showed children from the aborigine communities performed significantly higher on visual spatial tasks. Kearins discussed the findings stating the aborigine group was accustomed to traveling within the desert environment in search of food. They were required to develop skills of identifying subtle landmarks within the desert in order to return home to their community. These visual spatial skills were necessary for survival and consequently very meaningful in their lives.

The literature has strongly documented that traditional American Indians value self-regulation behavior (Alberto & Troutman, 2003; Emmer & Stough, 2001; Ledlow, 1992; McCarthy & Banally, 2003; McInerney & McInerney, 1998; Wlodkowski, 1999). Their culture nurtures and cultivates the development of these behaviors. Paradoxically, the literature also suggests that the main approach used in the typical educational settings is that of adult manipulation of reinforcements and punishments to change and/or control behavior (Ascher, 1980; Harding & Associates, 2002; Maag, 2001; Maag & Kemp, 2003). Therefore, it is important to explore American Indian families' preferences regarding the management of their children and whether the educational practices used in classroom management are compatible and culturally responsive to traditional American Indian families. This study focuses on these concerns and attempts to address these issues.

METHOD

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the views of rural Apache parents pertaining to their child's discipline, reinforcement, independence, cooperation, and respect for authority. The study was conducted in two remote rural southwestern reservations. A group of teachers enrolled in a graduate level Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) class conducted the interviews. The teachers were employed at two different Apache schools. The interview was a class assignment designed to determine how culturally sensitive the ABA class content was to the Apache culture. The survey questions were developed and standardized cooperatively by the teachers and the authors (see Table 1). Fifty Apache families agreed to participate in this study. Participant responses were tape recorded and later transcribed for accuracy. Interrater reliability of the transcribed tapes was greater than 95%. The responses were then later analyzed to determine all commonalities in the families' responses.

RESULTS

Overall, the families' responses were similar to all of the questions. The families guided their children with minimal reinforcement and punishment as a direct result of their belief in self-regulation and independence. Motivation that the families provided their children was an intrinsic "good feeling" for the desired behavior. The families modeled patterns of conduct designed to help their children evaluate and make changes to their behaviors to meet the standards of the rural community. The children felt comfortable with the ongoing modeling as it exemplified the functional characteristics required to belong to their Apache community. Belonging to the community was highly valued, thereby motivating children to emulate the behaviors prized by the group.

Devoid of the modeling preferred in their community, the families viewed the schools as being too involved in manipulating their children's behavior. The families interpreted the manipulation of punishments and rewards as school personnel trying to control their children instead of nurturing the process of self-regulation. For example, one parent said "My son was consistently rewarded; first for having his materials out, then for opening his textbook, and another for putting the date on his paper. He was being rewarded so much without really learning anything." Moreover, since the management of student behavior was not directed to the whole classroom, the families concluded that this approach was confusing to their children as it challenged the concept of group behavior reinforcement as taught and practiced in their homes. One mother complained that her daughter was "spot lighted" in front of the class for her math paper. She went on to say that ". . .

this embarrassed my daughter in front of her friends." In summary, the families felt that the children were bewildered about how the class should behave as a group. The Apache child had little expectations of meeting behavioral goals tailored for individual students based on the assumption that the typical classroom management style invites inconsistency by devising a different behavior plan for each student.

One recurring comment from the survey was familial concerns about respect for adults and school authority figures. The families worried that their children may not be as compliant to school protocols due to the mismatch between community culture and school culture. In order to foster respect for authority, the families desired their children to comply with school regulations even though these rules may not match those endorsed by the community. The families felt that the school authorities and adults needed to take the time to explain the meaningful purpose of the school rules. To Apache individuals, as the purpose of the rules are understood, respect for authority is more likely to be obtained.

The families also desired that the school implement changes in the management styles used to guide their children through social learning at school. Overall, survey results suggested that the families would like school personnel to emphasize group orientation and to promote self-evaluation and independence in students. The families supported holistic classroom rules because these rules promote class cohesion and equal treatment of students, rather than the typical behavior management program emphasizing extrinsic motivation and dependence on teachers' strategies involving instrumental conditioning.

One consistent and strong comment made by the families is related to their disapproval of the way the school disciplines their children. They pointed out that the punishments were not well matched to the inappropriate behaviors in that the punishments had no natural consequences for the child to learn the appropriate behavior. For example, one parent commented on how being sent to the cafeteria for an in-school suspension for not completing assigned homework may not be the appropriate discipline to help students focus on academic goals. Additionally, they considered the school punishment as a humiliating experience to their children, and perceived the school system as a place that casts public shame on the child.

DISCUSSION

American Indians share a culture and a set of values that are one of the most subtle and indefinable of all the various ethnic groups in our educational system (National Congress for American Indians, 2000). This issue is additionally

complicated by the fact that although all American Indians share some common cultural characteristics, they also differ along cultural practices that are unique in the way they conduct their daily lives. Thus, educators have the enormous responsibility to learn about these various cultures and values in order to more appropriately educate the American Indian child.

The literature review clearly summarized many important cultural characteristics and values of the American Indian population. One of the fundamental rules of conduct that captures the American Indian values and characteristics is that of exhibiting humility (Jacobs, 2003; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989; Youngman & Sadongei, 1974). American Indian children are raised to value that they should be humble in the presence of their peers, their family, and in a world they refer to as their "Mother Earth." This conscious practice of being a humble person at times produces tension in many classrooms for the American Indian child. The typical classroom environment expects children to show the knowledge they have acquired openly to their teacher. They are also expected to demonstrate learned skills and knowledge in front of their peers and be proud of their accomplishments. This is a contrast to the values of the family and the community in which they are raised. Thus, the typical classroom may create a situation whereby instead of developing pride in their accomplishments, the American Indian students in the classroom environment develop a sense of shame. Shame produces many uncomfortable feelings for the American Indian student. Frequently, this feeling of shame can and does manifest into behaviors that are viewed by the classroom teacher as an uncooperative and uncaring student. This potentially inaccurate teacher observation can result in an inappropriate referral to special education or place the American Indian student at educational risk. The mismatch between the two cultures (school and Apache community) may explain, in part, reports indicating that about 44,000 American Indians children in K-12 schools are classified with a disability, and that less than 50% graduate from high school (National Advisory Council on Indian Education, 1990; Wald, 1998). This survey conducted with Apache families provides insights to and a different set of practices for teachers of American Indian students, such as how the practice of humility can play a critical role in these students' interactions during daily operations within a classroom environment

The families, who responded to the survey, shared their desires to have the classroom environment organized as a cooperative group who both succeeded and failed together. The families wanted assurances that the school would establish a culture of group cooperation in which children would be able to reflect on their own behaviors regarding how they would fit into the group environment.

Consequently, the children would have an incentive to regulate their own behaviors to become a good group member. They would also be able to independently make choices to establish and maintain the suitability of their group membership. By allowing this form of self-regulation to occur in the classroom, the highly regarded value of humility is preserved and strengthened in its use. For American Indian children, this self-imposed behavioral management style is culturally bound and serves the sole purpose to regulate one's own behaviors as a viable member of the larger society. American Indian children can take pride in their academic and social accomplishments as long as their achievements have purpose for the group.

To meet these expectations, educators teaching American Indian populations need to develop the skills required for building group oriented classrooms, provide opportunities for students to engage in cooperative learning activities, nurture self-regulatory behaviors, and allow ample time for students to reflect on their learning. The most effective behavior program for this population of students would be one that focuses on using gentle probes that lead to cooperative behaviors. Additionally, an educator, when appropriate, would try to avoid using externally controlling reinforcements as rewards for shaping a desired behavior. Punishments should be self imposed by the child whereby they are allowed to evaluate their failures and to self-impose new behaviors that would be more acceptable. Punishments that cause undue shame should be avoided and all punishments should directly relate to the improvement of the desired behavior.

The need for teachers to embrace new management skills pertinent to American Indian students has a significant impact on the pre-service and post-service training programs. Professionals in higher education should consider a more research-based approach to teaching classroom management to prospective teachers, in order to expose future teachers to management strategies for specific cultural groups. These strategies are usually omitted in the typical college textbook on classroom management as these manuals are developed with the assumption that a student's culture should not be a consideration in applying discipline (Kauffman, Mostert, Trent, Hallahan, 2002). In addition, school districts serving the American Indian population need to carefully select curriculums when providing in-service to teachers. Without these supports, the American Indian student will continue to be at risk for failure in the school environment (overrepresented in special classes or programs with concomitant low graduation rates). Finally, the students can be encouraged to assist in designing classroom expectations that will facilitate group success and involvement. Many of the social

behaviors that these students bring to the classroom can be incorporated to produce an environment that will enrich their learning and educational production.

Researchers, university and college instructors, school administrators and other policy makers should identify institutions that have developed educational programs that address educational issues for American Indians. Once these institutions and programs are identified, steps should be initiated to replicate these programs at universities and colleges. Trainers should be identified and scheduled by school administrators to in-service their teachers in the schools. School district that serves American Indian students should require that all teachers must participate in training that teaches strategies culturally sensitive to that population. These policies should encourage teachers to incorporate these strategies in their daily lessons.

CONCLUSION

This research supports the existing literature in focusing attention on the cultural components necessary for a successful school experience for American Indian students.

American Indian students are unique in their learning and social behaviors (Jacobs, 2003; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989; Vaughn, Bos, Schumm, 2003; Youngman & Sadongei, 1974). However, these unique qualities, when reinforced, can become a valuable aspect of their teaching. As a result of these suggestions, educational success for the American Indian student may become a reality.

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