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ABSTRACT

This study examined the process of parent-school communication from the perspective of Native American parents in a consolidated, rural school district. The multi-model qualitative study used participant observation, open-ended interviews, and document collection to focus on the relatively wealthy, rural consolidated district, encompassing three communities. The results show that Native American parents perceived communication with school personnel to be almost nonexistent. School personnel most often made contacts with parents for disciplinary or health-related reasons. Many Native American parents therefore viewed the nature of school contacts as hostile and discriminatory. They believed the communication process flowed one way: from school administrators to parents. Differences in communication styles also hindered communication. The data produced five perceived types of communication barrier: (1) distrust of schools among Native Americans; (2) racial tension; (3) maintenance of tribal identity; (4) Native American dependency on government; and (5) Native community's isolation from the community at large. Beliefs, attitudes, and educators' actions are more influential on education and the communication process than school financing. An ethnocentric cultural view, as it is imposed upon educational institutions, prevents inclusion of culturally different people. Native Americans should be actively engaged in the identification of educational problems and the search for solutions. (TES)

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Voices of Native America

A Native American Community's Perception of Home/School Communication

Karen Sunday Cockrell

Regardless of the contextual scheme from which one proceeds, an examination of the relationship between Native American cultures and the Anglo-American culture reveals a continuous pattern of domination and exploitation. The 1969 Kennedy Report referred to the subjugation of Native American people within American society as "a national tragedy and a national disgrace" (United States Subcommittee on Labor and Welfare, 1969, p.3).

The failure of American public education to adequately prepare Native American people for full and equitable participation in American society is evidenced by rates of poverty and unemployment higher than that found in the general population (Bureau of the Census, 1985). Concomitant to conditions of poverty, alcohol abuse is widespread among Native American people (Asetoyer, 1990) and extends to Native American adolescents (Austin, 1988). According to Lamarine, Native American health issues are related to conditions of poverty and the devaluing of the Native American culture within American society (Lamarine, 1989).

The Kennedy Report of 1969 provided a dismal picture of confusion, rejection, and failure. This report indicated that forty percent of the students dropped out of BIA boarding schools and that the dropout rate was higher for a small selected number of public schools (RedHorse, 1986, p. 42). RedHorse found that the dropout rates in the 1980's were similar to those reported by the Kennedy Report. Despite the revelations of this report and subsequent legislative measures, the status of Native American students within the American public school system remains relatively unchanged. Giles points out that the majority of Native American students are enrolled in public schools and,

... there is overwhelming evidence that public schools have consistently instituted programs and sanctioned a prevailing attitude that has contributed to the demise and consequent state of affairs for the Native American - truly, a national tragedy (Giles, 1985, p.10).

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Purpose of the Study

According to Solomon, research has consistently demonstrated that parental support and involvement in the educational process is conducive to student success (Solomon, 1990). Several researchers note, however, that Native American parents are often not visible participants in the educational lives of their children (Benally, Cole, and Quezada-Aragon, 1987). Parents of Native American students, particularly those who are considered to be low income, are often "... silent bystanders in the educational experiences administered to their children" (Dobson and Dobson, 1973, p.90.). Because communication between home and school is an important element and because Native American parents do not appear to be visible participants in their children's education, then communication linkage between the home and school may be inadequate for fostering mutual trust and understanding.

The purpose of this study is to examine and describe the process of parent-school communication from the perspective of the Native American parents in a consolidated, rural school district. Examination of the process includes identification of the conditions which mediate the communication process and the effects of those mediating conditions.

Methodology

Multi-modal qualitative research methods were used to collect the data. These methods included participant observation, open-ended interviews, and document collection. While participant observation was a primary tool used in the data collection process, the stories of Native American people were collected in their own words through the open-ended interview. The collection of documents provided an additional dimension to the data base. The collected documents include demographic and economic data, written communication in the form of letters and newsletters, memoranda, and minutes of meetings. The data analysis occurred through grounded theory analytic procedures.

Description of the Research Field

This study focused on a rural, consolidated school district which encompasses three communities and several hundred square miles. A significant portion of the land within the school district is tribally owned. The populations of two of the communities are predominantly Native American. One tribal agency is located within the boundaries of the school district and the reserve area of another tribe is located nearby.

The total student population of the school district fluctuates around four hundred. An approximate student distribution indicates that one hundred and seventy students are elementary, one hundred and forty are middle schools, and ninety are high school. Many of the Native American students are full blood or, if mixed blood, are one-quarter or more Native American by blood quantum. Thus, the students are easily identified as Native American by their physical appearance.

According to state education agency data, this school district is in the top one percent of the wealthiest districts in the state. The data indicates that the district receives almost four times the revenue received by the poorest district in the state. The school facilities are spacious and attractive. Noticeable features of the school complex include extensive sports facilities, advanced agricultural and technological education equipment, and a professional quality auditorium. The quality of the total educational plant, inclusive of material resources for professional and student use, exceeds that found in most school facilities in this country.

The tribal agency is the primary employer of the Native American people who live within the district. The communities are rural, agricultural communities offering limited employment, shopping, or entertainment opportunity for the Native American people in the area. Most of the Native American families have lived in the area for three generations, descendents of those who survived removal.

Communication Process

Native American parents perceive the communication linkages with school personnel to be almost nonexistent. Communication between home and school is usually initiated by school personnel and is most frequently related to disciplinary actions or health related issues. The nature of the causes underlying communication contacts is viewed by many Native American parents as hostile and discriminatory. They perceive school personnel as being more concerned with "rules" and "being in control" than in the welfare of students.

As perceived by some Native American parents, communication with school personnel flows one way. Because most interactions occur as a result of disciplinary actions or health related issues, communication is frequently between parents and school administrators.

School administrators are described as being more concerned with "telling" and "referring to rules" than in listening or attempting to create shared meanings. One parent stated, "they would not reason and would not listen...they were just concerned with rules and that's all." Native American parents believe that messages flow one way in the communication process: from school administrative personnel to parents. Messages from parents are perceived as being unheard, ignored, or discounted.

The channels typically used by school personnel to communicate with parents may not facilitate communication with Native American parents. Economic conditions preclude telephone service in some Native American homes and literacy considerations impact the feasibility of written communication.

Each month a school newsletter containing information about extracurricular events, the school calendar, menus, and student news is sent to every patron in the district. Native American parents do not appear to consider it as a valued source of information. The issue of literacy accounts for some parents not referring to the newsletter; however, those parents who are literate do not use it as an information resource.

The communication styles of school personnel, specifically school administrators, and Native American parents differ in several respects. School administrators are perceived as "taking a superior attitude" and "talking down" to Native American parents. They are further perceived, in face to face verbal communication to speak "in a loud voice, interrupt another's speech, transmit information in an abrupt manner, and to control the process through bureaucratic means".

Typically, Native American people speak in a moderated voice, continue speech turns until the thought is completed, pause between speech turns, and allow time for the communication process to reach a conclusion. Native American parents may react to the administrative communication style with silence, avoidance body movement such as turning the body away from the speaker, or anger. One parent stated that she ended a confrontive situation because she did not want to "give them the satisfaction of seeing me cry." Many Native American parents simply absent themselves from the process.

From the perspective of Native American parents, communication with school personnel is limited and ineffective. Few parents expressed satisfaction in their interactions with school personnel and described the communication process as "very limited in nature" and "basically nonexistent".

Communication Barriers

Five categories emerged from the data which I labeled as constraints to the communication process. They include: distrust of schools, racial tension, maintenance of tribal identity, dependence upon governmental institutions and services, and Native American isolation.

Distrust of Schools

A shared distrust of schools among Native American community members is based upon historical and personal experience and the educational experience of contemporary Native American students. Distrust results in the belief that Native American children will not be fairly treated or offered equitable educational opportunities. The climate in which communication interactions occur is partially shaped by the dissonance produced by distrust.

The parents of elementary age students, particularly those in the primary grades, appear to be more satisfied with the school experience and academic progress of their children. Parents reported that academic growth begins to slow in the upper elementary grades and, in some cases, begins a reversal process in the secondary years. The reasons cited for this phenomenon included lower teacher expectations of Native American students, the unwillingness of the school district to conform to the needs of the students, the perceived irrelevance of the academic curriculum, and the lack of parental involvement in the secondary levels. Parents indicated that their children become frustrated and quit trying to achieve academically.

Racial Tension

Racial tension, engendered by prejudicial attitudes and behavior, is perceived to be pervasive throughout the school district. The lack of cultural understanding and nonacceptance of cultural differences create a divisive and suppressive environment. Native American people believe that they are consigned to a subordinate position within an ethnocentric environment. Communication interactions are mediated by distrust, which is fueled by racial tension.

According to Native American community members, the school district reflects the attitudes of the Anglo community. The low esteem in which Native American people are held is reflected by tracking Native students into a less challenging academic curriculum, low teacher expectations of Native students, and harsher punitive measures applied to Native students. While the educational system appears to reflect the culture of the Anglo community, Native American people believe the school system attempts to make the Native American culture invisible. In the educational sense, the Native American is treated as an historical artifact.

Maintenance of Tribal Identity

Native American people have struggled to maintain the beliefs and values which define the tribal culture and identity. The maintenance of tribal identity is perceived to be essential to the survival of Native American people and the Native American community. While the requisite changes and adaptations of a "living culture" have occurred, those values common to all tribes have remained the same "throughout all these generations." The ways in which Native American people interact with others are selected from the repertoire of behaviors created by the culture.

Dependence

The conditions for governmental dependency were created by the federal government during the nineteenth century. During the era of forced removals and restrictive reservation policies, Native American people were totally dependent upon the federal government for survival. The creation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs served to institutionalize the paternalistic relationship between the federal government and Native American people. Dependency behavior persists today and is exacerbated by conditions of poverty and chemical dependence. The communication process is impacted by the presence of outside agency personnel, serving as representatives for Native American parents. Thus, governmental dependency serves as an intervening condition in the communication process.

Native American Isolation

The Native American community perceives itself to be isolated from the community at large by conditions of cultural difference, prejudice, and unequal distribution of economic and political power. This sense of isolation extends to the institutions within the community, particularly the educational institution. In this environment of isolation, the

roles of communication participants assume dimensions of domination and subordination. These conditions preclude an exchange among equals.

Conclusions

It is a commonly held belief that solutions to educational problems can be derived through the application of greater financial resources. This study occurred in a school district which is favored by abundant financing for the educational program. The physical facilities are attractive, spacious, and appointed with amenities seldom found in public school buildings. Computers are located in each classroom for individual student use and instruction. In addition to the existing resources and materials, each classroom teacher is provided with an individual budget for the purchase of classroom materials. In an educational setting which is well financed, a significant percentage of Native American students regress academically during their educational experience, experience discipline problems which result in in-house suspension or expulsion, become chemically addicted to alcohol or other substances, engage in sexual activity resulting in pregnancy, and leave school before graduation. In this environment of educational abundance, Native American students are failing. One conclusion that can be drawn from these conditions is that economic resources do not solve all educational problems. Money is not a cure-all.

One might conclude, then, that it is the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of individual educators that are fundamentally important to the educational process. Students are more likely to learn and to thrive in an environment in which they feel accepted and valued. And parents are more likely to participate in the educational process if they feel welcome and respected.

Another conclusion drawn from this study is that the imposition of an ethnocentric cultural view upon an educational institution effectively prevents the inclusion of culturally different people. The attempt was made to forcefully acculturate Native American people through the boarding school experience. It failed. Subjecting Native American Children to an educational environment which is eurocentric in nature is similar to the boarding school phenomenon.

A final conclusion is that Native American people must be actively engaged in the identification of educational problems and the search for solutions. Their voices and their stories must be heard, recorded, and analyzed.

The historical passage of Native American people through the American educational system has impacted, but not destroyed, tribal cultures. Few communication bridges have been erected to traverse the distance between a culture which thrives on competitiveness and rapid change and a culture which values cooperation and the maintenance of a harmonious balance within the total environment. The cultural wellsprings which define Native American communities have provided the resiliency required for survival.

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