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ABSTRACT

Native American students are often placed in special education programs because their English is poor, they are unprepared for an unfamiliar environment, and traditional classrooms do not accommodate their strengths and needs. The lack of Native American special education teachers at reservation schools compounds these difficulties. Three elementary and middle school special education teachers in a remote Arizona Navajo community were interviewed concerning the ways they worked with their students. All three teachers identified language as a barrier in working with the students, both because the Navajo students had limited English proficiency and because the two Anglo teachers only spoke English. None of the teachers had preservice or inservice education related to working with bilingual children. Difficulties with the English language were mistaken for learning disabilities. The strategies that the teachers used in working with their students were direct communication with students and parents about school expectations, using extrinsic and intrinsic rewards to build self-esteem, creating a structured and comfortable learning environment, breaking tasks down into small steps, and using hands-on manipulative approaches. Recommendations for teacher education programs are concerned with needs in bilingual, special, and multicultural education; culturally relevant education; and the use of community members or bilingual teaching assistants. (TD)

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Teaching Navajo Bilingual Special Education Students: Challenges and Strategies

Students from culturally diverse backgrounds often experience difficulty when they enter classrooms across America due to

> cultural differences that are reflected in their learning styles, learning preferences, and classroom behaviors. These differences predispose students from culturally diverse backgrounds to failure in traditional classrooms that have not been designed to accommodate their strengths and needs. Consequently, these students are at greater risk of being referred and placed in special education programs (Voltz, 1995, p. 1).

This risk is often compounded when the student is from a Native American background. As the following statistics indicate, the remoteness and isolation of Native American populations across the United States have created a situation in which this group is often a forgotten minority.

***1.4 million Native Americans live on reservations.**

***A significant percentage of Native Americans live in rural areas.**

***300,000 to 400,000 of Native Americans are school age.**

***85 to 95% of Native American children are educated in Public Schools.**

***Only 1% of the teachers in the United States are Native American.**

***Special Education services on reservations are rarely provided by Native American people.**

***In 1989, the high school dropout rate for Native Americans was 36%.**

Although attention has been placed upon multicultural education in recent years,

> one of the perspectives that [still] requires representation in today's curriculum is that of the Native American. Native Americans are unique among ethnic and multicultural groups as our only native peoples. Critical research on Native American children is limited or unavailable (Holiday, Bitseedy and Russell, 1995, p. 50)

The curriculum in the public schools across America is saturated with the structure and practices of dominant culture, therefore, when a Navajo child begins attending school they are

> suddenly plunged into a totally unfamiliar environment. The child is unprepared for the classroom. The child may have the desire to learn, but as an unfamiliar environment, the school soon begins to eat away at his or her sense of freedom, independence and pride. The life that once had balance is now perceived as a standard of living that is not acceptable to the dominant culture. The child is no longer empowered (Ibid., p. 51).

Often this lack of familiarity with the way we "do school" (Bennett deMarrais and LeCompte, 1995) results in the children being identified as special education students. Robin (a current education major at Northern Arizona University) describes her experience in the following account:

> While I was at the boarding school, I started from the first grade. I did not know how to read nor speak the English language. My teacher labeled me as LD (learning disabled), so I attended classes with Special Education students. I had no friends because they thought that I was crazy. Therefore, I struggled through school, and I did not have much support from anyone (not even my teacher).

The plight of the Navajo student in a special education class is also impacted by the fact "that a very small number of special education teachers working in Navajo schools (are) Navajo" (Delaney-Barmann, Prater and Miner, in press, p. 3). Lancaster (1994) found that since Navajo special education teachers were in high demand, there was a high turnover rate because they were often able to move to better paying positions at other schools on the reservation.

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of three special education teachers who currently work on the Navajo reservation in northeastern Arizona. In this study we explored the challenges faced by these teachers as well as the strategies they use when working with Navajo bilingual special education students. Finally, we suggest alternatives to schooling as a means of affirming the Navajo culture and as a means of providing an education which is culturally relevant to Native American students.

Context of Study

This study was conducted at Cedar Elementary school in Cedar, Arizona. Cedar, a very remote community located on the Navajo reservation, is nestled between First Mesa, Second Mesa and Black Mesa and offers spectacular views of the sun rising and setting on the surrounding mesas. It is approximately 30 miles northeast of Second Mesa, which is on the Hopi reservation and 45 miles southwest of Chinle and Canyon de Chelly, a sacred place for the Navajos. It is a community which has strong ties to the Navajo culture and traditions. Navajo is the primary language among the elders of this community and approximately 80 to 85% of the students attending Cedar Elementary school speak Navajo as their first language. With the exception of one two lane paved road, Cedar is accessible only by dirt road. During inclement weather, this leaves only one means of access into and out of Cedar. By paved road, Cedar is about a four hour drive from the main campus of NAU in Flagstaff, Arizona. If the weather is pleasant, alternate routes over several miles of dirt road reduces the travel time to two and a half hours. The Cedar Unified School District, the Navajo Nation, Bashas (a chain of grocery stores throughout Arizona) and traditional artistic endeavors such as sandpainting, silversmithing and weaving are the main sources of employment.

Methodology

The qualitative research team for this study were both faculty and undergraduate preservice teachers who are currently participating in an elementary/special education program located on the Navajo reservation. This program is a joint venture between Northern Arizona University (NAU) and the Cedar Unified School District (CUSD). This study used interviews to explore the ways three special education teachers work with their students. The challenges which these teachers encounter when working with Navajo bilingual special education students were examined, especially as these factors relate to the language barriers and lack of university coursework which specifically prepares teachers to work with Native American special education students. This paper examines the strategies which these teachers have found to be successful when working with Navajo special education students. The undergraduate students were part of the research team for this study and were responsible for collecting the data. Since this is the first time these students conducted interviews, they were not as in-depth as interviews conducted by more experienced qualitative researchers. The undergraduate students, with the assistance of their university professors, analyzed the data thematically providing rich, detailed descriptions of the teaching of these special education teachers. Several themes emerged from the interview data which provide insight regarding the challenges and strategies used by these teachers in their special education classrooms. These themes are:

1. Understanding language differences:
   - Variation in familiarity among teachers [and students] with Navajo language
   - Limited teacher preparation for working with bilingual special education Navajo students
   - Confusion with the influence of language and its impact on special education placement

2. Strategies for working with bilingual special education Navajo students:
   Attempting a variety of forms of communication to try to reach the students
   Using extrinsic and intrinsic awards to motivate students
   Direct communication with students and parents about school expectations
   Creating a structured and comfortable learning environment
   Using task analysis to break down tasks into specific steps
   Using a variety of "hands-on" approaches

Participants

The participants in this study elementary and middle schools teachers who work in a small rural community located on the Navajo Nation with Navajo bilingual, special education students. Pseudonyms are used for the teachers as a means of preserving their anonymity.

Brad

Brad is an Anglo teacher who has been employed by the district for three years. He works in the middle school. His area of expertise lies in gifted education, but he is currently working with special education students in the middle school. Brad believes that one of his roles as a teacher is to motivate students to learn. He uses rewards, games and other extrinsic strategies to get students interested in learning activities. The student interviewer describes this teacher as "concerned about his students and about finding ways to meet their educational needs."

Martha

Martha is a Navajo teacher who was originally hired as a guidance counselor for the elementary school, but now serves as a special education teacher there. She has taken master's level coursework that includes some special education coursework. She has an emergency special education certificate from the State of Arizona. This is Martha's first year as an employee of the school district. Martha believes that many of the children come from homes that are unstructured and believes her role is to provide a structured environment so that students learn. The student interviewer describes this teacher as "soft spoken and concerned about her students and their education."

Rose

Rose is an Anglo teacher currently in her first year as an elementary teacher in the district. Her educational background is in special education. Although she thinks that behavior modification is important for many of her students, she also responds to her student's needs based upon what she learns from them. She believes that students should be motivated intrinsically rather than extrinsically. The student interviewer describes this teacher as an individual who "learns from her students and finds ways to adapt to their educational needs."

At first glance these teachers may seem drastically different in terms of the ways they approach teaching and their students. However, the interviews with these teachers revealed several similarities in their experiences. None of these teachers have had much education regarding Navajo culture and/or its use in classroom. Like many educators, their schooling did not address the special nature of working with bilingual students, the research around second language learners, multicultural education, or problematizing the culture of schooling for minority students. All of the participants are struggling to do the best they can in a school setting that is very different from their own educational experiences and they are all trying a variety of approaches and hoping for the best for their children

Understanding language differences

Variation in familiarity Navajo language

All three teachers identified language as a barrier to their work with the students. Since approximately 90-95% of the students they work with enter school speaking only Navajo, the language barrier presents itself in two ways: (1)Navajo students have limited English proficiency and (2)Anglo teachers speak English only--they are not familiar with Navajo. Rose finds this to be her biggest challenge.

> I think that biggest challenge is not being familiar enough with their language to understand them when they tell me something. Especially when language is an issue anyway. A lot of the kids come to school and don't speak English or Navajo very well. And if you can speak both languages, you can understand them better than I can. In some ways though...it's probably better for the kids because they've been forced to speak English then. Sometimes when you have to use it you acquire it faster. But it's been hard because I learned how to speak some German and the sounds are so different. I keep getting that confused with Navajo, so I have to stop. But that's

been the hardest...is being able to understand them and them being able to understand me.

This is a challenge not only for the teachers, but also for the students. Martha, who is a Native speaker of Navajo agrees that "the challenges that I face working in with Navajo bilingual students (is the students') ... lack of experience with ... or lack of proficient English."

Limited preparation for working with bilingual special education Navajo students

Traditional university programs often fail to focus upon the infusion of bilingual education with special education primarily because they "are not designed to meet the needs of the reservation" (Baca and Miramontes, 1985, p. 43). As a result many of the teachers who work with bilingual populations are unfamiliar with the strategies and techniques used with bilingual students. It was clear from the interviews with the three teachers that they had a limited knowledge base to support their work with the children in their classrooms. None of the teachers we interviewed had pre-service or in-service education related to working with bilingual children. Rose discovered that only through trying different methods of communication with her students was she beginning to realize some successful communication:

> Well, I think the biggest reward is realizing that I can communicate in a lot of other ways than with language because I had to learn how to explain things to kids whether it was using sign language or body language or lots of other things. Thinking about where I could picture things to show the kids or working with the puppets, you know any of those things and so, while it's been a language issue for them it's really been...I've learned that communication takes place in a lot more ways than just verbal.

Rose was left to her own devices to develop communication strategies with her Navajo speakers. She had little in the way of support systems for this work.

Confusion with the influence of language and its impact on special education placement

Since a majority of the teachers who work at this school are Anglo and therefore unfamiliar with the Navajo language, difficulties with the English language are often mistaken for learning disabilities. As a result, students must pay the consequences because like Robin (in the above quote) they are misidentified as needing special education services until they are proficient in English. When discussing her students, Martha states that "two of them are English proficient and back in the classroom." The teachers we interviewed seemed to confuse the limited English proficiency with the special education needs of the students in their classrooms. In fact, several times teachers mentioned that when the children had become more proficient in English, they were moved from the special education classroom. The teachers seemed to be unclear as to when a child was having language difficulties and when a child was experiencing any of a variety of learning disabilities.

Strategies for working with bilingual special education Navajo students

Direct Communication with Students and Parents about School Expectations

One of the strategies that each of these teachers used was to communicate directly with students and/or their parents regarding their expectations for the students. Rose states, "We talked a lot about bringing in homework and the importance of it." She also talks about how at one point students in her reading group "asked to be able to make (flashcards) for the next week. And at that point I decided that sometimes kids do know more of what they need." Martha describes the following process she uses with a student:

> Everyday we sit and we talk with him. We ask him questions. Trying to help him to talk so that we can start working some of the words out of picture cards. It's really knowing where the kids are and then trying to build them up with [experiences in both languages].

Brad discusses how he tries to build self esteem and also how he tries to emphasis the importance of an education to the students' lives.

> That's a real problem, especially among special ed kids - - is a very low self esteem ... a low image of themselves, especially at middle school. Actually that's one thing that we try to work on. Give lots of praise and pats on the back, things like that to try and get them to work.

> I've had a kid that came into my reading class from another class. He would just sit there and not do anything and it took me a while to get him. And, it was involving his parents to work with him. It was showing him that it was important - - it was going to be important for the rest of his life. And he started making improvements and working a little bit harder and his writing became a little bit better, but it took a lot of work. And now he's ... we've mainstreamed him in all of his classes. He's done real well.

Using Extrinsic and Intrinsic Rewards

These teachers also found that they were able to motivate their students through both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. Brad primarily uses extrinsic ways of reinforcing children.

> I try all kinds of stuff. I offer them food and candy, cookies, things like that. I try to make it interesting...the material interesting. I modify it to what they can achieve. I try to do fun things. Okay, we work hard all week and Friday we'll have word games or math games or things like that. It's a combination of making it interesting and bribery, a little bit...and then giving them something to strive for...a challenge.

Martha and Rose both try more intrinsic methods to build skills, confidence and self esteem. Rose believes that

> the best strategy that (she's) found is constantly telling them that they are doing a good job and trying to get them comfortable with what their skills are, and try to teach them how to tell themselves that they've done a good job. I try some rewards and in extreme cases they do work because sometimes that is the only thing that will motivate.

Martha agrees,

> I try to build their self esteem, too. That's why I have the mirror there. 'Look in there. Who is that? That is a special person.' And I try to build that in...that you are special because it's not apparent what or who says anything to them.

Creating a Structured and Comfortable Learning Environment

These educators recognized the importance of creating learning environments for their students which were structured. In order to learn, students must feel comfortable and secure. Students must also be provided with an environment in which

> children are encouraged to be creative thinkers, ... make good decisions, and develop values. Emphasis should be placed on providing a structured and facilitative environment through which the students can become self-directed. Learning must come from within the individual through social and individual contexts, with the student encouraged to find the discipline to take learning seriously (Holiday et al, 1995).

Martha believes that structure is important "because I get the impression that they are unsupervised at home. That there's no structure at home...Routines make them feel secure. If they aren't secure, they are going to feel lost and be someplace besides school." The day-to-day structure and routine provides the students with the security and comfort them need in order to learn.

Use of Task Analysis

Often the teachers find that it is helpful to break down the tasks into a step-by-step process. In the following example, Rose discusses how she has found that it is important to break skills up into steps.

> I think that I always started with something they could do first, and then add one step at a time. Like, ...especially in math. For example, the fourth graders are working on doing two and three digit multiplication, and they were trying to remember what the second step is...like in two digit multiplication where you carry it and have to add it. So, what I've done is, I've gone through and had them do the first step on all the problems. So, they go through and multiply the one that's right above it. And after they're done with that for all

> of them, then they go back and they do the next one that they have to do at a diagonal. And when they do the same step repeatedly over and over, by the end of the paper they know how to do that second step.

Brad adds, "I have to lay it out for them pretty much. Step one. Step two. But here, I've found that to be true with regular ed kids, too."

Using a Variety of "Hands-on" Approaches

Within the Navajo tradition, children learned through observation and manipulation. For example, a young girl learned how to weave a rug through watching her grandmother and/or grandmother weave and then by actually weaving. As the young girl weaved. she would be under the watchful eyes of the grandmother. When she encountered difficulties, her grandmother would instruct her at the loom by showing her what she had done wrong and by then going through the steps with her once again. "In the curriculum, teachers should use manipulative approaches whenever possible, remembering that not all students' answers will agree with the teacher's answer" (Holiday et al, 1995, p. 53).

We found that one of the strategies that these teachers identified as important was the use of manipulatives and starting where the student was. Martha described the importance of manipulatives in the following statement. "There again, the Navajo kids, they need a lot of hands-on. Manipulatives that they can use and also try to go at their level. Start where they are and build upon that ... instead of saying this is an apple, I have them taste the apple." Through experience, these teachers have learned about the importance of observation and manipulatives. Martha has found it helpful to use

> Pictures...something attractive...sometimes I use things that they can put their hands-on. They want lots of pictures. A lot of times they aren't motivated to write and I try to give them different things they can write on. Sometimes I give them a paintbrush and I have them draw something.

Rose has found it helpful to encourage the students to use pictures in their writing.

> Another thing is to teach them that it is okay to draw pictures instead of writing, and as they get more comfortable with even the drawing...like some kids shut down when it came to journal time because they thought that they had to write...they had to write words. So sometimes, just backing it up a little and allowing them space to do what they can do first makes a big difference.

Even so, one component that was missing in all of these teachers use of hands-on manipulatives was use of culturally relevant examples. For example, "teachers (could) use a known object such as a Navajo basket as the focus to connect the known with the unknown" (Ibid. at 52). If the teacher education programs which these students attended had included an emphasis upon multicultural education, these teachers would have the knowledge they need in order to provide their students with culturally relevant instruction.

Conclusions and Recommendations

All three of these teachers are using the strategies they have developed for working with bilingual, special education Navajo students. Unfortunately, due to their limited knowledge, they are left with little in the way of support systems for the challenges of their classrooms. In the remainder of this paper, we offer recommendations and alternatives ways of doing school and teacher education that would affirming the Navajo culture and provide teachers with the knowledge necessary to offer Native American students with a culturally relevant education. We offer the following recommendations:

1. We believe that there is a need for teacher education programs that addresses these concerns.

There is a need for changes in university programs in terms of the training which they provide to prospective teachers in terms of bilingual, special education and multicultural education. Teacher education programs such as the Piñon Preparation Program (Lewis, 1998) is a good start because it is preparing Navajo teachers elementary and special education teachers. In addition, the elementary methods portion of this program is based upon a social foundations approach and is infused with multicultural education. Future university teacher education programs could build upon the structure of this program by adding a component specifically dealing with bilingual education.

This combination of disciplines will provide teachers with the knowledge they need to discern whether a student's difficulties are the result of cultural or language differences or learning disabilities.

In addition, teacher education programs should develop the following areas of knowledge and abilities of teachers:

(1) develop knowledge and understandings of their own cultural backgrounds;
(2) develop knowledge and understandings of minority students;
(3) develop knowledge and understandings of children from impoverished families;
(4) better understand the problems and concerns of children and teachers in rural school settings;
(5) understand the social service programs and agencies involved with the families in the communities in which they will teach;
(6) develop understandings of the structures and policies of rural/Native American schools; and
(7) develop teaching practices appropriate to the education of children in rural/Native American schools.

2. We believe that there is a need for culturally relevant curriculum.

It is important for classrooms to reflect the culture of the students who attend the school. The San Juan public school district has developed the Beauty Way curriculum. The following seven principles not only guide this model, they serve as a way of empowering students and of providing students with a sense of ownership in their education.

1. Being Navajo in itself is not a problem.
2. Growing up and going to school in a non-Indian environment and society is frequently a problem.
3. Navajo children grow up experiencing at least two very different views of the world they live in.
4. Teachers and other school personnel are oblivious to the fact that Native American students undergo traumatic cultural conflicts while going to school.
5. The school must address the traditional issues of the Navajo family.
6. There is a lack of culturally relevant curriculum in schools; the current curriculum does not emphasize what the child already knows.
7. Educators must carefully view Native American students and their educational process from a bilingual and multicultural perspective.

Teachers and school districts which serve Native American populations must continue to find ways to present the curriculum in a way that is culturally relevant. The curriculum should conform to the needs of the children rather than the children conforming to the needs of the curriculum.

3. We believe that teacher's work should be supported through the use of community members and/or bilingual teaching assistants.

One way in which the language barrier could be addressed is to provide the teachers with support either through instruction in the children's first language or through the use of community and/or classroom assistants who are bilingual and who could help to bridge the language gap. These assistants and/or community members may provide knowledge where necessary and appropriate for Anglo teachers.

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