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Cornelius, Mary, "AN EXPLORATION OF POSSIBLE CAUSES OF HIGH DROPOUT RATES IN NATIVE AMERICAN RESERVATION SCHOOLS" (2002). *Nebraska Anthropologist*. 71.

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AN EXPLORATION OF POSSIBLE CAUSES OF HIGH DROPOUT RATES IN NATIVE AMERICAN RESERVATION SCHOOLS

Mary Cornelius

Native American reservation schools have significantly higher dropout rates and lower graduation rates than the national average. Significant problems behind high dropout rates on Native American reservations in the United States include poverty, lack of support from elders and differing expectations and ways of communicating between teachers and students in the classroom. The history of Native American education includes many efforts at assimilation and the destruction of native cultural practices and languages. This still impedes today's youth in that many elders still see schooling as a tool of assimilation and do not encourage or support success in what they see as the non-Indian world. Poverty and the lack of economic opportunities on many reservations discourage the effort needed to do well in school and complete an education, as jobs are often unavailable regardless of education.

Native American reservation schools have higher dropout rates and lower graduation rates compared to the national average. The explanation behind these rates seems to be a combination of factors. One of the factors has to do with teachers and students coming from different backgrounds and cultures, a second factor has to do with different values held by the community as opposed to the school. A third factor is the economic state of the communities that the schools serve.

In 1993-94, BIA/tribal schools had a dropout rate of 9.5% and a graduation rate of 85.9% (U.S. Department of Education 1997). However, according to a conflicting report by the Bureau of Indian Affairs the dropout rate in 1992-93 was 17%, only decreasing to 11% in 1998-1999 (Bureau of Indian Affairs [BIA] 2000). For comparison, schools with less than 25% Native American enrollment had a dropout rate of 2.7% and a graduation rate of 91.4% in 1993-94 (U.S. Department of Education 1997). However, not only are there differences between BIA/tribal schools and schools of low Native American enrollment, but there are differences between different BIA/tribal schools. BIA/tribal schools in South Dakota, for example, are reported as having an average dropout rate of 13.3% and a graduation rate of 54.6%. Specific schools in South Dakota vary from reporting dropout rates as low as 4% at Cheyenne Eagle Butte School in Eagle Butte to as high as 31% at Little Wound

School in Kyle. Graduation rates go from as high as 94%, also at Cheyenne Eagle Butte School, to as low as 2% at Takini School in Howes (incidentally Takini School also reported only a 5% dropout rate) (BIA 2000).

There have been different arguments for why minority students have greater dropout rates and lower graduation rates. One of the leading theories is the problem of conflicting cultures, both within the school between non-Indian teachers and students and outside of the school between community values and mainstream educational values.

Differences in Indian schools and mainstream American schools seem to have always been extreme. In mainstream American schools, the teachers and students generally share the same language, culture, expectations, neighborhoods, and often histories. In Indian schools not only does that seem to be the exception rather than the rule, but also often the language and culture of the students has historically been suppressed. Although tribes presently hold much control over their tribal schools, funding and the lack of qualified Indian teachers from their tribes still contribute to many problems similar to those before tribal control. In BIA/tribal schools 37.8% of teachers were American Indian or Alaska Natives in 1993, and at public schools with at least 25% Indian enrollment, only 15.4% of teachers were American Indian or Alaska Natives (U.S. Department of Education 1997).

So even with more tribal control, there is often still a question of Indian education versus mainstream education for Indians.

Frederick Erikson, in an article in *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, clarifies a major problem encountered when teachers are not of the same background as their students. He reports that in the late 1960's, sociolinguistically oriented anthropologists identified a factor inside the school as playing an important role in the low school achievement and morale of minority students. This was the factor of cultural difference in communication style between teachers and their students. He says that when teachers and students differ in implicit expectations of appropriateness in behavior, they act in ways that each misinterprets. Their expectations derive from their experiences outside school in what sociolinguists have called speech networks. Members of different speech networks know the sound system, grammar and vocabulary of English in this case, but have different assumptions about ways of communicating that show functional intentions such as irony, sincerity, approval and positive concern, rapt attention, disinterest and disapproval. Culturally distinctive ways of speaking differ from one speech network to another but belong to the same language community. This provided a way of seeing classroom problems as misunderstandings, as teachers and students played into each other's cultural blind spots (Erickson 1987).

A specific example of how cultural differences within the school can hurt education is found in Oregon. In an extensive study done on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in Oregon, Warm Springs Indian children failed to participate verbally in learning exercises that required group recitations in their classrooms because the norm for social performance in their community does not support public linguistic performance. However, they were more talkative than non-Indian students in learning exercises where students initiated the interaction with the teacher or worked on student-led group projects (Reyher 1992).

To illustrate when school/mainstream values and teachings contrast with community values and how that inhibits learning, I first will emphasize that learning takes place, but not

necessarily the kind that can be measured and compared by standardized tests. Students in school, like all humans, learn constantly. When it is said they are not learning, it is meant that they are not learning what school authorities, teachers, and administrators intend for them to learn. Learning what is deliberately taught can be seen as a form of political assent, while not learning can be seen as a form of political resistance (Erikson 1987). One of the reasons for this is school may detract from participating in the community and can compromise their identity as Indian instead of the school being part of the community and helping them to identify as Indian.

In writing about the Pueblo, Alan Peshkin says that Pueblo students are ambivalent about school success, knowing that it may earn them disapproval from less successful peers and scorn from some elders who see success as "acting white." Another way the difference of Indian culture and school has been stated is that students are trying to walk in two worlds, that of their Indian community and heritage and that of the non-Indian world represented by schools and their teachings. For example, in the Pueblo community, equity, the community good and cooperation is emphasized, while in school, independence, aggressiveness and competition is valued (Peshkin 1997).

To make the hard work of understanding cultural differences even harder for both sides is a history of mistrust and mistaken assumptions. A history of assimilationist boarding schools, where Indian children were punished for showing native culture and speaking their language, as well as day schools that only taught mainstream ways, were seen as destroying Native American cultures and languages.

Native Americans have a unique history in the United States. As opposed to other groups who traveled to America to become part of American society, American society traveled to the Indians to try to force mainstream culture and American ways of life on them. There have been various ways in which non-Native people have tried to educate Native Americans for different reasons. Some of these reasons include to civilize Indians, convert Indians to Christianity and to assimilate Indians into mainstream society.

Attempts to educate Indians in the ways of the dominant culture started early. In 1744, the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, as reported by Benjamin Franklin, rejected an offer to send their sons to the College of William and Mary. They graciously declined the offer replying:

Several of our young people were formerly brought up at the colleges of the Northern Provinces; they were instructed in all your Sciences; but, when they came back to us, they were bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either cold or hunger, knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, or kill an enemy, spoke our language imperfectly, were therefore neither fit for hunters, warriors, nor counsellors; they were totally good for nothing [Franklin 1784:21-22 quoted in Reyhner 1992].

The Iroquois problem of Indian education teaching dominant culture and values while ignoring Native American culture and values turned out to be a problem for other tribes to this day.

During the period between 1778-1871, the United States entered into 400 treaties, of which 120 had provisions for the federal government to provide Indians with a Western education (Reyhner 1992). Generally, Christian missionaries who were interested in converting and "civilizing" the Indians carried out these provisions (Ogbu 1987).

The government also had an agenda in educating Native Americans. In 1819, President Monroe's Secretary of War, John C. Calhoun, declared that it was the duty of employees in government-funded missions, even if these missions were funded with tribal annuities or trust money, "to impress on the minds of the Indians the friendly and benevolent views of the government towards them and the advantages to them in yielding to the policy of the government and cooperating with it in such measures it may deem necessary for their civilization and happiness" (Layman 1942 quoted in Reyhner 1992).

In 1851 the reservation settlement period began. Schools set up on the reservation were designed to devalue the traditional culture and religion of Indian people and coercively assimilate Indian youth into the dominant society (Reyhner 1992). An example of the justification to assimilate is this explanation of why schools should be established according to a report of Indian peace commissioners in 1868,

Through sameness of language is produced sameness of sentiment, and thought; customs and habits are molded and assimilated in the same way, and thus in process of time the differences producing trouble would have been gradually obliterated. . . . Schools should be established, which children should be required to attend; their barbarous dialect should be blotted out and the English language substituted [Report of Indian Peace Commissioners 1868:16-17 quoted in Reyhner 1992].

During the Allotment Period (1889-1924), federal boarding schools were built away from tribal communities to teach Indian children the white middle-class language and way of life at the specific exclusion of all Native culture and Native languages (Ogbu 1978). In 1879 the first off-reservation boarding school was opened at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. By 1902, the BIA was operating twenty-five boarding schools in fifteen states for almost 10,000 students (Reyhner 1992).

However, in 1890, Congress authorized tuition payments to some public schools that enrolled Indian children. By 1912 there were more Indian children in public schools than in government schools, and the number of government schools began to decline. In 1924, the Secretary of the Interior called together a committee that recommended creating reservation day schools offering a sixth grade education and reservation boarding schools that offered an eighth grade education.

During the time of Termination (1945-1968), Indian education was handed over to the states for Indian children who lived on reservations that were being terminated. Another effort to get Indian children into public schools was the

amending of Public Laws 874 and 815, first passed in 1950, which authorized funds for public schools with students who lived on tax-exempt federal land, such as military bases. They were amended in 1953 to include Indians living or working on reservations or other trust land (Reyhner 1992).

After the activism and movements in the 1960's, some improvements were made in tribal authority. In 1970, President Nixon sent a message to Congress stating, "The time has come to break decisively with the past and to create the conditions for a new era in which the Indian future is determined by Indian acts and Indian decisions" (Fuchs and Havighurst 1972 quoted in Reyhner 1992). At the end of the 1960's, the Special Senate Subcommittee on Indian Education produced a summary report of their study on Indian education titled Indian Education: A National Tragedy, a National Challenge. This report, also known as the Kennedy Report, led to the passage of the Indian Education Act. This act authorized funding for special programs for Indian children in reservation schools and for the first time, urban Indian students. As amended in 1975, it required committees of Indian parents to be involved in planning these special programs, encouraged the establishment of community-run schools, and stressed culturally relevant and bilingual curriculum materials (Szasz 1977 cited in Reyhner 1992).

There is no doubt that this tumultuous history has had a large impact on the education of today. Many adults can still remember boarding school experiences and relate to their children and grandchildren's education from that perspective. Sometimes this experience affects descendants by passing on a disdain for education as a tool of assimilation or by withholding knowledge of native languages and culture hoping to make mainstream education easier for the child.

Another strong argument for why minority students do not complete school to the degree of students belonging to the dominant culture is one of poverty and the perception that education will not help in obtaining a job, or break the circle of poverty, because of the inherent inequity or racism in society. The belief that education will not help break the cycle of poverty or increase chances of finding

employment is often strengthened by politics and life on the reservation.

In an example from Utah, on the Uintah and Ouray Reservation, the attitude that schooling is unimportant is reinforced through frequent reminders that some tribal council leaders have only a few years of elementary education. Tribal members with college degrees do little better in tribal employment than those who have not completed a secondary education. Success within the Ute Indian Tribe has a political component based on family standing within the community, band positions on certain issues, and long-standing relationships of trust or enmity (Kramer 1991).

South Dakota BIA/tribal schools are an example of how poverty and the lack of economic development can combine with other factors to decrease graduation rates. Using the argument that poverty and the economic condition of the community affects individual attitudes and decisions regarding education, it makes sense that Indians living on reservations in South Dakota would be less likely to see the benefits of obtaining an education than Indians living in places of lower unemployment and more opportunities.

The reservations in the Northern Plains, grouped as the Aberdeen area, have the highest unemployment rate of all areas, at 71% of the labor force unemployed. Labor force is defined as people ages 16-64, not including those deemed unavailable for work (Bureau of Indian Affairs [BIA] 1997). The Aberdeen area includes South Dakota tribes, some North Dakota tribes, one Montana area, and four Nebraska tribes. For example, the Cheyenne River Sioux have 8,099 Indian residents with 5,371 people available for employment and a rate of 80% unemployed. The average graduation rate from its three high schools is 53.3%. This seems to reinforce the argument that there is little reason to complete an education when there are not jobs available with or without an education. The Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux have 10,227 enrolled members but a resident population of only 3,946. They have an unemployment rate of 58%, however the rate of employed persons living below the poverty level is 98%. Their one high school has a graduation rate of 27%. Although almost half of the labor

force is employed on this reservation, most of the members who are employed still live below the poverty level. Whether education is not completed because it seems unlikely it will help students find a job or whether the benefits of having a job do not seem worth the time and effort spent in education, both are plausible arguments for the low graduation rate in this case.

Another factor that may affect graduation rates in the largely rural state of South Dakota is the lack of local high schools and the extra commitment required to attend a boarding school or obtaining the resources, such as a dependable car, to travel long distances to school. For example, the Standing Rock Sioux tribe only has schools up to the eighth grade in South Dakota. The one Standing Rock high school located in North Dakota has a 59% graduation rate (BIA 2000). The 74% unemployment rate on the reservation is also discouraging (BIA 1997). Although not mentioned in the Bureau of Indian Affairs reports, I will mention that some Indian students may not enroll in high school at all or may attend public schools or private parochial Indian boarding schools and therefore these graduation rates may not be an exact representation of reservation youth.

Another example of communities with few economic opportunities is the communities of the Pine Ridge Reservation. The Pine Ridge reservation is the nation's poorest county with the average annual income at \$3,400 (Dobbs 2000). They also have one of the lowest graduation rates at 57% of the students graduating from their three high schools (BIA 2000). The Oglala Sioux of the Pine Ridge Reservation have a population of 39,321 people and an unemployment rate of 73%.

Emphasizing the lack of business and economic development on the reservation is the meager number of 186 people employed in the private sector compared to the 6,012 that are employed in the public sector (BIA 1997). In fact, all the tribes in South Dakota have more people employed in the public sector than in the private, with the exception of the Flandreau Santee and the Yankton Sioux, both run casinos in places close to the relatively large populations of Sioux Falls and Sioux City respectively. Of

those that are employed on South Dakota reservations, an average of 42% are still below the poverty line (BIA 1997).

Schools are part of the community in which they exist and manifest the characteristics of those communities (Peshkin 1997). These communities exist in poverty and many children grow up without employed or educated role models. This may contribute to the lack of importance put on obtaining a good education by students and parents alike. John Ogbu argues that the main reason for the low school achievement in many non-immigrant minority groups (such as African-Americans and Native Americans) is that those students, along with their parents and peers, are convinced that school success will not help them break out of a cycle of poverty that they attribute to racism in American society. This is opposed to voluntary immigrant groups that believe there is more opportunity in America than their country of origin, often seen as dependent upon a good education (Erikson 1987).

Many factors contribute to Native American students' low graduation rates in the United States. Cultural differences between non-Indian teachers and Indian students impede learning in the classroom. Differences in community values and school values can make students feel they need to choose between the community and the school, often meaning they feel they are really choosing between their Indian identity and the non-Indian world. The history of Native American education also can emphasize this difference as elders may see schooling as a tool of assimilation and not encourage success in what they see as the non-Indian world. The condition of poverty and the lack of opportunities on many reservations can also discourage the effort needed to do well in school and complete an education.

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