

Trauma in Transition

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This ethnographic study, conducted among Sioux Indian students in a Canadian prairie high school and reserve, describes the effect of macrostructural factors—factors created by a history of social relationships between Indians and whites—on the academic performance of indigenous students. It is that very relationship that allows educators in the non-Native high school to attribute the cause of low student performance levels to the characteristics of the students, rather than seeing student behavior as a response to an environment that the students experience as hostile. The study provides a description of the students' experiences during the transition from reserve elementary school to public high school. It describes how Indian students respond to a school environment that operates without consideration of Indian culture. Factors leading to the performance of Indian students before and after the transition between schools are addressed.

Background

Indian students who perform well at elementary schools on reservations often perform very poorly when they later transfer to mainstream high schools. This article offers an explanation as to why that change occurs. One summary explanation of the data is that the difference in performance is related to unresolved cultural discontinuity, experienced as conflict, which is faced by the students. This conflict leads to lower academic achievement and ultimately to absenteeism, to dysfunctional behavior, and frequently to dropping out of school.

Many educational anthropologists have observed cultural conflict at work in the classroom, reflecting the fact that educators are key agents of socialization of culturally different children (Hornberger, 1988; Borish, 1988; Trueba, 1989). The observation of cultural conflict is not a new phenomenon. As long ago as 1948 Herskovitz (1946) suggested that serious conflicts may result when students are educated by people from cultural backgrounds different from their own. Yet it seems that little has been done to alleviate the problem. These conflicts have become a focus of educational anthropology. Hall (1983) outlines some of the specifics of this interfacing between culture, learning, and communication. He believes that since education is communication, understanding the nature of the information flow within the cultural context of learning is invaluable, and that the implicit nonverbal behaviors that accompany the transmission of education must be a part of the learning of all educators.

Children who experience the cultural discontinuities at the interface of two cultures, and who possess inadequate coping skills, have limited options available (DeVos, 1973, p. 207). These options include rejection of their language and culture. Some children may even pretend to have another ethnic identity (Trueba, 1988).

Another option is resistance. Many researchers believe that the knowledge taught in schools is no more difficult to acquire than the linguistic and cultural knowledge obtained through daily experiences. They reason that resistance to learning should be viewed as students' rejection of cultural values and academic

demands placed on them by school personnel (Erickson, 1984). If this is the case, then one wonders why students subject themselves to the traumas of the conflicts involved.

Although educational anthropologists have confirmed many findings of cultural conflict in the school setting, they have not often gone beyond a description of the conflict to articulate the effects of the conflict. This study shows the nature of the conflict and discusses the results of the conflict on the academic performance of the students involved.

The Setting

Indian reserves are often bordered by white mainstream towns. The Sioux reserve in this study is no exception. The reserve is located on the eastern portion of the Canadian prairies, within the 200-mile-wide population corridor that abuts the United States border. Residents from the reserve go into town to shop for groceries, to use the medical facilities of the town, and sometimes to take part in social activities. For the most part they stay on the reserve and conduct as much of their business as possible from there. The reserve has a population of approximately 1,200 people. Residents either have their own small farms, or work at businesses owned and operated by the band. A few go outside the reserve to work. The majority stay close to home and travel to the city, which is 20 miles away, only when it is necessary to do so.

A brief historical perspective on the schooling of Indian youngsters in the portion of Canada where this study took place will add to the understanding of the present schooling situation. As part of the post-Confederation Western treaties between the Indian nations of Canada and the Crown during the 19th century, the federal government obligated itself to provide schooling for Indian children when requested to do so by a band. In order to meet this responsibility, the government often removed Indian youngsters from their homes at an early age and transported them to federally funded, church-operated Indian residential schools. Students returned to their home reserves only for Christmas and summer vacations; in some instances children were removed from their reserve homes at the age of five and could not return until they had completed elementary school or had reached the age of 16, when it was no longer compulsory for them to attend school.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Indian bands throughout Canada became increasingly vocal in objecting to residential schools and to the treatment of their children. As Indian bands gained in political power in the Canadian context they began to insist on their children attending school in their home communities. For many years the federal government agreed to fund only elementary schooling on the reserves. Indian children still had to leave the reserve to obtain their high school education, and the government negotiated tuition agreements with provincial public high schools.

Indian reserves throughout Canada are now in the process of reclaiming control over the education of their youngsters. Many reserves are now building their own kindergarten to grade 12 schools with funding from the federal government. Indian bands are electing their own educational boards and hiring their own professional staffs who set the curriculum, in most instances following provincial guidelines. Even today, however, on those reserves that do not yet offer a high school education, Indian students must still leave the reserve in order to further their education past the elementary grades.

The band in which this study took place, like other Sioux bands in Canada, is not a signatory to any Indian treaty. Residents are, however, considered by the Canadian federal government as though they had been a part of the treaty making process, and as such are treated as Status or Treaty Indians.

The Reserve School

Reserve residents had built their own elementary school five years before this research began. It was designed by an Indian architect who solicited suggestions from community residents on a regular basis throughout the design process. The school was built in the shape of a circle with the four main entrances opening to the four directions—a powerful and significant symbol in Indian culture. Local residents, following the direction of a professional Indian artist, had created intricate basket weavings and colorful quilts which, along with pictures of students in their traditional powwow clothing, decorated the hallways. Parents of students, relatives of teachers, and outside visitors came and went throughout the school on a fairly regular basis. Noise level in the school was very low, yet activity was high.

The majority of the teachers at the reserve school were female, as was the principal. Approximately half were Indian people who spoke the language of the reserve. The remainder were white, and most, including the Indian teachers, had taught in a variety of places before teaching on the reserve.

The High School in Town

Once Indian students finished their elementary schooling, they were bussed to the city high school to complete grades 10 through 12. The city had a population of approximately 50,000, and all the businesses, professions, and facilities of a modern industrialized community. Like most such cities, it has a large middle class. The majority were of Anglo-European background.

The high school to which the students from the reserve were transferred was one of several in the city. It had a population of 1,500 students and an all-white teaching staff of 75, the majority of whom were male. The principal, his two assistants, and his administrative assistant were all male. The school was designed in a linear fashion, with rectangular classrooms, tiled floors, and locker-lined hallways. A full complement of university entrance courses was offered. In addition to university preparatory courses, the high school offered industrial, vocational, and special education streams. Records of student progress and attendance were kept in computerized files. Noise and traffic levels in the school were high and students could be seen in clusters in hallways and resource rooms any time during the day.

Methodology

Ethnographic methods were considered particularly appropriate for this study because of their holistic nature. Wolcott (1988) believes that ethnographic research “invites us to look at things not ordinarily looked at, from perspectives not ordinarily taken.” In this study I employed an ethnographic method that would, in the words of Trueba and Wright (1981), “painstakingly investigate specific events embedded in a situation (a culture or a group) and then systematically ground the inferences on the observed behavior” (p. 38).

My background contributed to the validity of the information I was able to collect. Prior to conducting this research, I had taught in both public and reserve schools for nearly 20 years and had been a high school administrator for several years. This background in the school system made for credibility when interviewing and observing teachers. They knew that I was familiar with the school and its procedures. They knew that I had experienced the pressures and the trials of teaching in the classroom, and this helped them to open up and express their deeper thoughts and feelings. They saw me as a white teacher interested in their problems. No duplicity was involved, but the teachers did not know that I had resided for the major part of my adult life on an Indian reserve and that my cultural affiliation was with the Indian students in the study.

I had knowledge of the home and school background of each of the students involved. That personal knowledge made data collection more substantive and meaningful when combined with observations and interviews with students in both reserve elementary school and public high school. I had either visited the homes of the students in the study or had met and visited with the parents in other settings. Observations in classrooms and interviews with teachers and principals in both the reserve school and the public high school added to the information collected from students, and in fact served to validate student perceptions.

As a researcher, I attempted to follow the suggestion made by Lutz (1981) that "educational research should engage in macroethnography" and that research should seek explanations "within a broad cultural context, regardless of where the focus begins, and couch that explanation in an even broader cross-cultural approach" (p. 56). As Erickson (1986) argues, "if interpretive research on classroom teaching is to play a significant role in educational research, it will be because of what interpretive research has to say about its central substantive concerns" (p. 120). Many of these concerns rest with the nature of classrooms as socially and culturally organized environments for learning.

Field research on this project began in September 1988. Of the 23 students from the reserve who were enrolled in classes in the public high school when the study began, 18 had dropped out by the end of April. Over 78% of the students had been unsuccessful in completing the school year. Only five students were successful in completing the year and of those, none was enrolled in university preparatory level courses.

Twenty-seven teachers in the high school were interviewed. Those interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. After interviews with high school personnel were complete, the perceptions of the Indian students were sought. All students from the reserve who attended the high school were interviewed, first in small groups and then individually. Interviews took place in the reserve school, in the homes of the students, or in private places in the high school. Data recording techniques were the same as those for teacher interviews.

Following the completion of interviews with the Indian students, teachers in the reserve school were interviewed. Classes were observed in session and on a number of occasions video-recordings were taken of the class proceedings. Finally, field observations were completed at the high school and included observation of classes and videotape recording.

Trauma in Transition

The Indian high school students from the reserve were really the only persons from either of the communities who had to live in both settings: the Indian reserve and the predominantly white city. To receive a high school education, students were expected to move between the two cultures of these areas even though the communities were vastly different. Cultural interests of the communities varied dramatically. Different languages were spoken in each. Residents did not visit back and forth between the two communities, although the residents of the reserve did drive to the city to do some of their shopping. Very rarely had anyone from the city ever visited the reserve.

It was in this context that Indian students traveled to the city to obtain their high school education. It was in this context that Indian students spoke of their experiences. It was also from this context that responses and attitudes from the white teachers and students at the high school emerged.

The apparent lack of success of Indian students in the public high school was a stated concern of the principals of both the reserve elementary school and the mainstream high school. The principal in the high school encouraged research that would shed light on the dropout problem, a problem noticeable in many high schools where a minority population or cross-cultural student body exists.

Of the 27 teachers interviewed at the high school, all but one said that Indian students were not prepared for high school when they came from the reserve. Teachers said that Indian students could not speak proper English, could not read, would not mix with other students, and just did not fit into the system.

Teachers in the high school said that a few Indian students had tried to take university entrance courses but that they simply could not handle the work, and they usually had to be placed in either vocational or special education classes. They said that Indian students never attended social functions in the high school, and many said that the only time that Indian students spoke up was when they were drunk.

By contrast, during observations in classrooms on the reserve, it was noted that teachers treated students with respect. They laughed with students, and they often placed a hand on the shoulder of a student as they walked by in the classroom. Teachers moved about in the classroom and in most cases made either verbal or physical contact with each student. Teachers spoke to students often about professions that they might enter. Their expectations were high. Students thrived in this atmosphere. Test scores were high. Students appeared happy and involved. Psychological test scores showed that students were intellectually and academically prepared for high school.

The well-being and academic excellence displayed by students in elementary school on the reserve could not withstand the onslaught of negativism as they attempted to move into the mainstream system. Students had clear perceptions about the cause of their lack of success in high school. They perceived that they were isolated in the school—isolated from the system, from the white students, and from the teachers. They said that they knew that they caused much of this isolation themselves because they felt like outsiders. They were drawn to other Indian students who could understand how they felt and they spent most of their time with these students.

Because of their feelings of isolation, Indian students often absented themselves from classes and ultimately from the school. They said that if a friend was experiencing a problem they would skip classes to be with that friend. They spoke of areas in the school and the community where they would hide to talk to their friends.

Students said that they were unprepared for learning in an unfamiliar culture. They were not prepared for the racial prejudice that they encountered regularly. They were not prepared to work in a setting where they had no support. One student summed up this lack of preparation well by saying, "We get disqualified before we even know what the rules of the game are." Most frustrating to the students was the awareness that they had been very good students while in the reserve elementary school. Their marks had been high, they had felt secure and worthwhile, but now they felt unprepared and inadequate. One student said, "The work I am taking now is so simple that it is ridiculous. I took this stuff in about grade four. I look at it now and my mind goes blank. If I wasn't dumb before I got here, I sure will be before I get out of this place."

Because students felt themselves to be insufficiently prepared for life in the mainstream high school, they did not invest heavily in academics. They needed all their time and energy just to survive in the school.

Racial Prejudice

Students were aware of and very sensitive to racial prejudice in the school. They gave clear examples of having been treated by teachers both inside and outside of classrooms in a fashion that displayed that teachers would have preferred for them not to be there. They told of how the attendance policies in the school were used to get rid of kids who did not fit in. Often teachers had discretionary power to enforce the policies. Classes in the high school were large, and as soon as Indian students reached their allowed 10 absences, they were withdrawn from the class list. Indian students said that they knew of white students who had as many as 20 absences who were allowed to remain in class.

One student told of an incident when the school bus had broken down and he had been unable to get to school. He had explained the absence to his teachers but was not excused and he was withdrawn from classes for lack of attendance. Another spoke of having an appointment with the guidance counsellor during class time. The counsellor had arranged the time for the meeting. When the student returned to class he found that the teacher would not believe his reason for not being there. The student's absence was unexcused without the teacher ever seeking verification from the guidance counsellor.

Many students recounted experiences of having asked for help from teachers. They said that they noticed that when other students asked for help that teachers would go into detail to explain, but that when Indian students were in need of help, the teachers would either simply write the answer on the chalkboard, or give the answer very briskly and then move on without any explanation.

During classroom observations at the high school, it was noted that teachers seldom if ever made contact with Indian students in their classrooms. Indian students sat apart from the white students in the same classrooms. They seldom asked questions or responded to questions that teachers asked. Teachers faced and conversed with the white students who asked questions or responded to their

remarks. As a result, many times teachers faced away from Indian students throughout entire class periods.

Indian students endured racial slurs from fellow students who were white. They spoke of areas in the school where Indian students were not supposed to be and of remarks such as "I smell a strange smell in the hallway" that were made by the white students if they should enter these areas. If Indian students should happen to wear new clothes to school, white students frequently remarked to their white friends that welfare checks must have just been issued.

Counselling

Counselling in the high school was another area that the Indian students felt was inadequate. Two guidance counsellors served the entire school, and although several of the students had good words for the one female counsellor, they said that there was no way that one woman could look after everyone in that school who had problems. Because the students were not being adequately counselled, they were being forced to make decisions that they had no background knowledge or preparation for. Often they were forced into low-level courses because everyone around them assumed that they were incapable of handling university preparatory work. A classic example came from a student who wanted to enroll in a computer class. His teacher advisor suggested that he take a mechanics course instead because "there will always be old broken down cars to repair on the reserve but I doubt that there will ever be computers to work with."

Inadequate Preparation

Students' perceptions of not having been properly prepared for life in the mainstream high school encompassed both the social-emotional and the academic content of schooling. Because they felt unprepared and undervalued emotionally, they undervalued their academic ability and took undemanding courses and/or easy course loads, either by choice or by allowing others to make the choice for them. One student interviewed was taking only two courses, thereby attending school in the mornings only. The classes he took demanded little time or effort and neither was university entrance requirements. He said, by way of explanation, "I'm taking only two classes, so I'm here in the mornings only and I only have to deal with two teachers now." Other students echoed the attempt to minimize school contact: "I just want to get finished and out of here," and "They put me in these courses and right now I don't care, so long as I can get out of here soon."

Students said that because they did not feel prepared to handle the transitional problems that faced them as they entered high school, they allowed others to make decisions for them. They stated that they were usually placed in vocational or special education courses, but that they "did not have the guts to do anything about it." One student said that it took him a whole semester to get up the courage to say that he did not want to be in the welding class, "even though I hated every day of it and knew I was smart enough to be taking academic courses." The lack of confidence and preparation that the students felt appeared to result in acceptance of whatever was chosen for them solely "to get it over with."

Once I had interviewed Indian students about their transitional experiences in progressing from elementary to high school, the nature of the transition became

apparent. Students were not happy with the transition and their perceived negative experiences resulted in responses that formed links with these experiences.

Students' lack of response in the classroom contrasted with their responsiveness when interviewed privately or when observed with their friends. We know that students behave as they are expected to behave. Conversely, students are treated according to how they perform. The level at which these students appeared to perform had nothing to do with their native skills or inherent capabilities. Instead, their performance seemed directly related to different structural settings both institutionally and culturally for which all of them were totally unprepared. In the space of one day they faced racism, behavior patterns different from their own, alien cultural norms, and economic stress. The structure appeared to them to have been designed for their failure, and they failed, practically overnight.

Critical Findings

From the data gathered in this study, four critical findings emerge:

1. Students' limitations in academic performance are consequences of macro-structural factors, rather than observed characteristics of individuals or characteristics common to the group of students.
2. The overwhelming frustration and isolation of students affects their academic performance.
3. The lack of understanding of cultural conflict on the part of school personnel contributes to student failure.
4. The school personnel's preconceived idea that the situation is hopeless is played out. Low expectations become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

While the problems pertaining to the education of Indian students are often characterized by the school administration and by mainstream educators as being imbedded in the individual, it is more likely they are derived from structural and social conditions in the environment. Those structural and social conditions contextualize the social settings in which face-to-face interactions discrediting to the Indian students are played out. The options of Indian students are thus limited by barriers imposed by society. The consequences of the problems created by historical and social factors, and mediated in the individual experiences between Indian students and others in the high school, are low performance/high dropout rates, demoralization, and the maintenance of aspirations that are increasingly unrealistic. Residents of the reserve expect that those students who graduate from high school will be able to continue on into postsecondary education. They do not know that their children are enrolled in terminal programs. After attempting to deal by themselves with issues that they cannot handle, Indian students lapse into total frustration, isolation, and despair. The data show that many times, even before the teachers knew the students, they had prejudged them. They could not imagine that these students could ever have been successful. Students were classified as unable to cope with a heavy academic load.

This misperception is created not by the students, but by the nature of the sociopolitical system. These critical findings help to explain the underperformance of the students.

Spindler (1987) discusses structural reasons for schools performing as they do. Cummins (1986, 1989) speaks of the need to advocate for students and Delgado-Gaitan (1989) talks about issues concerning the home cultural environment and the empowerment process. Yet it is not enough to know that Indian students are

disempowered, and that they are disempowered primarily by the macrostructure of the system and by gross cultural misunderstandings on the part of school personnel. One reason that the school personnel were totally insensitive was that they had no access to understanding the culture or the cultural context in which the Indian students grew up and in which they were successful. If they had been exposed to this and if they were familiar with Indian culture, they might have seen the students as potentially successful and capable.

Ogbu (1989) believes that minority students do not succeed because of their "oppositional or ambivalent identity and cultural frame of reference" (p. 195). He states further that "the equation of standard English, the curriculum, and the standard practices of the school with white culture and identity often results in conscious or unconscious opposition or ambivalence toward learning these things" (p. 195). The students in this study did not appear to accept this argument. Many of them pointed out in their testimonies that they felt competent but misunderstood. They did not buy into the school personnel's notion that they were not competent. Contrary to Ogbu's theory of cultural ambivalence, the students felt out of place because they were not treated well.

Because Indian reserves are isolated from the white town, there is an imposed transition if an Indian student wants to get a high school education off the reserve. Reserves are looked upon by mainstream society as being of low status; therefore, students coming from reserves are viewed as being low-status students. In addition to this, high school personnel are culturally insensitive and do not believe that Indian students are capable. McDermott's (1989) findings show how failure is constructed in very specific ways. His statements come closest to the findings of this study when he says that

Our schools divide people into halves: those who can and those who cannot. Dropouts are doing what the culture tells those in the losing half to do: they are getting out of the way. There are thousands of students every day who are insured success simply because the dropouts have disappeared from the competitive roles. Where would the successful be without dropouts? (p. 20)

Do Indian students have to be sacrificed in order to ensure the success of white students?

Conclusion

Previous researchers have provided some explanations as to how and why minorities fail. This article delves more specifically into the details of the structural transition from Indian school to mainstream school and into the specific kinds of institutional and individual responses that create situations of inequity where Indian students are likely to fail. Furthermore this study shows that students respond by refusing to accept inferiority just because the mainstream says they are inferior. They know that they were successful in the past. Lack of culturally appropriate interfacing mechanisms to ease the transition from a rural to an urban environment creates cultural discontinuities and cognitive ambiguities resulting in underachievement.

Often success or failure to learn are related to the acquisition of communication skills whose development is anchored in culturally congruent and meaningful social exchanges. Academic success or failure is more a reflection of the sociocultural system that offers or denies a child the opportunity for meaningful social

intercourse, and thus for cognitive development, than it is an individual attribute. Academic achievement is fully understandable only in its macrohistorical, macro-social, macroeconomic, and macropolitical context. According to Florio-Ruane (1988), both academic success and academic failure are socially constructed phenomena:

Working within preexisting social norms and role relationships, teachers and students collaborate to create the linguistic and social conditions under which students fail to learn.... Misunderstandings of one another at that time can lead to assessment of students as less than able or interested learners. (p. 1)

Our society has a long way to go before justice can be served in its institutions. Creative and bold initiatives must be taken. Members of minority groups must have a say in the process and the product of their education. School personnel must be trained in ways to understand and be sensitive to culture. As educators, we must all accept responsibility and take action if we expect changes to occur.

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