

Special Education for Indigenous Students

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American Indian, Alaska and Hawaiian native populations with exceptional learning needs remain a significant challenge for educators in regard to special education and language transition needs. There are 3 primary concerns: 1) continuing disproportionality in identification and placement in special education services, 2) limited access to culturally and linguistically responsive instruction within special education services, and 3) limited numbers of indigenous bilingual special education professionals. We will examine these in order, beginning with disproportionality.

Census data from 2006 indicates a great deal of disproportionality remaining in placement of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education (Alliance for Excellent Education 2008). Using federal identification terms, both African American and Native American students were disproportionately over-represented in all special education categories. American Indian and Alaska Native students are more likely than students of other racial and ethnic groups to receive services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Specifically, about 14% of American Indian and Alaska Native students received IDEA services in 2006, compared to 8% of white, 11% of black, 8% of Hispanic, and 5% of Asian/Pacific Islander students (Alliance for Excellent Education 2008). Table 1 shows the percent of minority students enrolled in three specific special education categories in 2006.

Nationally, American Indian and Alaska Native students are 1.53 times more likely to receive special education services for specific learning disabilities and are 2.89 times more likely to receive such services for developmental delays than the combined average of all other racial groups. Fifteen percent of American Indian and Alaska Native eighth graders were categorized as students with disabilities in 2005, meaning they had or were in the process of receiving Individualized Education Plans (IEP), compared to 9% of all non-American Indian and Alaska Native eighth graders (Collier, 2011). A disturbing additional aspect of this disproportionality is that while over-represented in special education in general, AI/AN students are woefully under-served in specific categories of special need, e.g.,

autism spectrum disorder and intellectually gifted. In 1998, American Indian and Alaska Native students made up 1.1% of the student population but just 0.87% of the student population in gifted education (Faircloth and Tippeconnic, 2000).

This dismal national picture is repeated within many individual districts. In a study of ethnicity and gender in placement in special education in Portland Public schools in Oregon (King & Pemberton, 2001), researchers found a consistent pattern of disproportionality for AI/AN students. They were over-represented in special education services almost 2 to 1 but under-represented in autism spectrum disorder. While AI/AN students represented 2.4% of total enrollment in PPS, they represented 4.7% of special education students but only 1.5% of those identified as having autism spectrum disorder. In contrast, European American students represent 62.4% of the total enrollment in PPS, but 78.7% of those with autism spectrum disorder.

This disproportionality in access to special education services for specific disorders is also found among limited English proficient students from other diverse culture

Table 1. Comparison K12 Enrollment to Three Special Education Categories (U.S. Census)

	Hispanic	African American	Asian/Pacific Islander	Native American
% Total enrollment	18.51	14.91	4.2	0.97
% Emotional Disturbance	11.90	28.79	1.12	1.56
% Learning Disabilities	21.22	20.52	1.7	1.74
% Mental Retardation	17.270	20.6	2.19	1.53

and language backgrounds. Data gathered by the Office of the Superintendent of Instruction in Washington State for the Transitional Bilingual Program indicates 12.9% of English Language Learners (ELL) were identified as learning disabled compared with only 5.8% nonELL students. A similar pattern was seen for emotional and behavior disorders with 4.4% ELL placed in this category but only 2.5% nonELL. In comparison, while 0.6% nonELL were receiving services for Autism spectrum disorder, only 0.1% of ELL students were. (McCold, 2011)

This continuing issue of disproportional services for indigenous students with special needs may be due to inappropriate assessment and screening procedures as well as a paucity of effective training within our current teacher and specialist preparation programs. It is certainly an area needing critical attention...and sooner rather than later.

Limited Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Instruction

In regard to providing culturally and linguistically responsive instruction, AI/AN students are in a similar situation as many other culturally and linguistically diverse populations in the United States, i.e. fewer than 5% of teachers are from diverse culture and language backgrounds and very few teachers receive preparation to work with culturally and linguistically diverse learners. For example, though 23% of Alaska public school students are Alaska Natives, just 5% of the teachers are and in a study involving thirty special education teachers on the Navajo reservation, no more than 10% of the teachers surveyed said they had been provided with sufficient information regarding their students' cultures. (Johnson and Wilson, 2005)

This issue of adequate teacher preparation to deliver culturally and linguistically responsive instruction to AI/AN students could be addressed by recruiting and preparing more indigenous bilingual teachers, expanding access to dual language programs for AI/AN students, and assuring that all special education services are provided in a culturally and linguistically responsive way, including offering bilingual special education.

Research by de Valenzuela (2008) showed that students with intellectual disabilities from Spanish speaking homes retained a great deal of receptive capacity in Spanish. The study further showed that it was counterproductive for these students to be placed in English-only special education classrooms as it led to loss of their expressive ability in Spanish, limited their access to content instruction, and diminished their adjustment to sheltered work and living situations staffed largely by Spanish speaking aides. Additionally, Meyers (2012) has demonstrated that students with disabilities are not held back academically when placed in two-way immersion programs.

It is not that there are no culturally and linguistically responsive instructional programs available or that we don't know that these are needed for student success, it is that there are so few good examples available. For example, the Tsehootsooi Diné B'i'olta' (Diné Language Immersion School) and Ayaprun Elitnaurvik (Yup'ik Immersion School). Ayaprun Elitnaurvik has met AYP goals under NCLB for three years in a row. We need more of these programs and more culturally and linguistically responsive instructional preparation for ALL teachers working with AI/AN students.

Limited Bilingual AI/AN Special Educators

Finally, the preparation of personnel to work with diverse linguistic and cultural populations has not kept up with the need in school districts, particularly the preparation of special educators working with indigenous students with disabling conditions. No more than 20 universities in the United States offer training or certification programs in bilingual special education (Mazur & Givens, 2004). Of these, only a handful focus on indigenous bilingual special education.

Northern Arizona University has had ongoing teacher and administrator training programs, notably RAISE (Reaching American Indian Special/Elementary Educators) and Pennsylvania State University has had two American Indian special education teacher training programs. More common are the teacher and paraprofessional training programs at tribal colleges and universities such as those at Dull Knife Memorial College, MT (target is 24 graduates), Ft. Peck Community College, MT (target is 16 graduates), Little Big Horn

College, MT (24 graduates), and Sinte Gleska College, SD (30 graduates).

These programs rely predominantly on federal grants to provide student aid and assistance and none are self-sustaining at this time. Additionally, the numbers of bilingual special educators graduating is not enough to fill the need nationally.

Conclusion

Despite considerable improvements and expansions in providing bilingual instruction to indigenous, American Indian, Alaska and Hawaiian native populations, there remain serious concerns regarding effective education for AI/AN students with exceptional learning needs as well as language transition needs. Three principal concerns have been discussed in this article: 1) continuing disproportionality in identification and placement in special education services, 2) limited access to culturally and linguistically responsive instruction within special education services, and 3) limited numbers of indigenous bilingual special education professionals. Education professionals must join together to see that these issues are addressed at both the system and service point in our education organizations.

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