American Indian – Alaska Natives Today

Introduction

Among American Indians and Alaska Native students (AIAN) there are many cultures, beliefs, and religious practices. American Indians and Alaska Natives are identified through their tribal affiliation, which is a group of families who share ancestors and culture, and their nation, which is an organization of tribes.

American Indians should not be viewed as a homogeneous group because their cultures are so varied. The 2010 U.S. census reported 2,932,248 American Indians and Alaska natives throughout the United States representing .9% of the US population¹. In Minnesota the number of American Indians – Alaska Natives is estimated at 60,916. Considering families that identify as American Indian Alaska Native and another race, the number is estimated at 101,900. There are 550 federally recognized Native American Nations in the United States. The number of American Indian Alaska natives who are school age is estimated at 23,759 (representing 1.9% of the school age population in Minnesota²).

American Indians have some of the lowest incomes of all residents in Minnesota; many live well below the poverty level. Poverty is one factor that requires attention when assessing the American Indian student. Most students are capable of meeting academic performance standards. Economic stress due to poverty is factor that may interfere with the ability of some students to focus on academic requirements (i.e. computer and internet access). A common misperception is that all American Indians receive direct financial benefit from tribal gaming enterprises. This varies from tribe to tribe.

Many American Indian adults did not have positive educational experiences themselves and consequently many do not trust the educational system to address their children’s needs. These negative educational experiences were related to forced use of boarding schools and, for some families, current school practices and standards that fail to recognize or respect the culture of American Indian families. Problem areas include racism, lack of culturally relevant curriculum, historical trauma, lack of understanding, and underrepresentation of American Indian teachers and support staff.

The predominant groups in Minnesota are the Anishinabe (Ojibwe or Chippewa) and the Dakota peoples. In addition there are Ho-Chunk, Menominee, and Oneida Indians from Wisconsin who live in Minnesota, as well as American Indians from tribes throughout the United States and Canada. American Indians from Canada are referred to as First Nations people.

American Indian students are identified in various ways. *The methods families identify themselves and how districts identify American Indian students may be inconsistent.* State and federal programs may require different criteria, and districts may have different processes and practices with regard to student count. It is important for school personnel to understand how American Indian families identify themselves in ways different from school requirements.

**Anishinabe reservations:** Grand Portage, Bois Forte, Red Lake, White Earth, Leech Lake, Fond du Lac, and Mille Lacs.

**Dakota Communities:** Shakopee-Mdewakanton, Prairie Island, Lower Sioux, and Upper Sioux

The exact percentage of Minnesota Indians who live on these reservations is not known. A portion of the American Indian population moves back and forth between reservations and towns or cities outside of the reservation. This creates situations where American Indian students are moving frequently between different environments, causing some to experience loss of identity and other problems related to acculturation. Non-Indian special educators often have difficulties in perceiving and understanding the cultural identity of American Indians, whether they live in urban or rural settings.

Understanding American Indian Cultural Identity & Culture of Today

Understanding students' cultural identity is essential to building relationships and communicating with caregivers. If the student is not successful in school, educators may be uncertain about whether the lack of success is due to a cultural difference between school and home or if it is indicative of a disability. An awareness of the influence of race, culture, and language is important for educators and administrators.

In a discussion of cultural identity, a Minnesota Indian Home-School Liaison who participated in a focus group about special education services (Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning, 1996) stated that American Indian families are “on a continuum, ranging from those who follow a traditional lifestyle to those who are very acculturated.” As a result, values and beliefs may not match lifestyle, and individuals who may outwardly appear to be acculturated in terms of dress and employment may still maintain traditional spiritual beliefs and cultural values.

American Indian students have a wide variety of experiences. Some may participate in cultural activities while others do not. Some families may experience and live the values of the culture without attending cultural events. A student’s physical appearance does not indicate their level of participation or non-participation in cultural practices and beliefs.

Another important aspect of American Indian culture is the differing concepts of *disability* or *impairment*. These terms are not easily translated into American Indian languages or conceptual frameworks. Although persons with severe disabilities are recognized as different in Indian communities, a wide range of differences are still accepted, in general, as *normal*. Persons with disabilities were not historically excluded or shunned in American Indian communities as they were in many European cultures, or such as when institutions were used for placement of students before Public Law 94-142 in 1975 (the first special education law). Some parents of
students receiving special education services may not agree with the services because of their concern about the use of labels and potential for students to be separated from their peers.

The following list of indicators, *Understanding American Indian Identity* was generated by a group of Indian Home-School Liaisons in Minnesota:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding American Indian Cultural Identity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indian communities rely on elders to build their knowledge and sense of identity because many families may be displaced or separated from one another. Elders maintain a connection to the past.</td>
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<td>Families may have expectations for their children that are different from the expectations of schools. For example, cooperation rather than competition.</td>
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<td>Some families choose not to follow any activities and/or beliefs related to American Indian culture.</td>
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<td>Personal items and/or artifacts in the home may or may not indicate cultural identity, beliefs or practices (presence of cedar, sage, dream catchers, feathers, Indian artwork).</td>
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<td>Students who are English speakers are influenced by their community's native language in such areas as response time, conversational rules, vocabulary, and syntax. For example, taking time to reflect before responding could be mistaken for refusal.</td>
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<td>A student’s activities may be indicative of their cultural knowledge. Some students may have value of their cultural heritage but may not demonstrate it in overt ways.</td>
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<td>A student’s knowledge may be indicative of cultural identity. Students may know and be able to articulate their family’s cultural participation and tribal affiliation.</td>
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<td>Some Indian Children who are in non-Indian foster or adoptive homes may lose their cultural identity if the foster home does little to value the culture of the student.</td>
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Understanding Tribal Identity

All American Indian students have an affiliation with a specific tribe. The students may be actually tribally enrolled or the parent or grandparent may be tribally enrolled. Sometimes it is as remote as *someone told me my great grandmother was Indian*. Requirements for tribal enrollment vary from tribe to tribe. It is each tribe’s sovereign responsibility to establish these membership requirements. **Educators should be aware that tribal identity is a political identification and is different from racial or cultural identities. Many American Indians do not consider themselves people of color or a racial minority, but identify only with their status as members of sovereign tribal nations.**
American Indians and Alaska Natives have experienced a series of traumatic events over successive generations. These traumatic events included “community massacres, genocidal policies, pandemics from the introduction of new diseases, forced relocation, forced removal of children through Indian boarding school policies, and prohibition of spiritual and cultural practices” (Stannard, 1992; Thorton, 1987). This historical trauma has enduring, compounding consequences for AIAN families and communities and impacts identity, as well as individual and familial health, including mental health (Evans-Campbell, 2008).

Brave Heart and her collaborators have studied the impact of historical trauma on the Lakota tribe. They found that their historical trauma responses included survivor guilt, anger, depression, unresolved mourning, feeling numb in response to traumatic events, intrusive thoughts and dreams, rumination over the past and lost ancestors, and fantasies about saving lost ancestors (Brave Heart, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). Research has shown that AIAN people may tend to minimize or trivialize their own problems given the historical trauma of their ancestors (Walters, Evans-Campbell, Simoni, Ronquillo, & Bhuyan, 2006).

Historical trauma may also play a part in AIAN family violence. It has been suggested that all the AIAN parents who grew up in boarding schools were not only deprived of traditional parent role models and learning healthy child-rearing practices from the previous generation, but they instead learned new negative behaviors (Horejsi, Craig Heavy Runner, & Pablo, 1992).

The policy on the use of boarding schools conveyed the message that AIAN families could not raise children and this message has been internalized by parents and children “who may begin to doubt themselves, their own culture, and their traditional ways of parenting” (Evans-Campbell, 2008, p. 327). AIAN parents who attended boarding schools where they were mistreated and subjected to racism and prejudice may pass these negative perceptions of education on to their children. While they want their children to have an excellent education, their own schooling experiences cause them to be leery of even setting foot on school grounds (Chavers, 2010).

Sometimes educators do not understand the continuing impact of historical trauma due to lack of training and professional development. Attitudes may range from a general lack of understanding and awareness to an attitude of well, get over it. This dismissal of the significance of the impact on American Indian Alaska Native families creates more cultural conflict, has a detrimental impact on racial identity development, and perpetuates a misperception that American Indian families do not value education.

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Language

American Indian culture relies on the oral traditions of the elders for the preservation of storytelling, events, ceremonies, songs, dances, legends, creation, and history of the people. Maintaining the language means cultural survival for the younger generation.

One common misperception is that American Indian languages had no written form prior to European contact. This is not true. Maya, Olmec, and Zapotec languages spoken in Mexico and Central America were written languages based on hieroglyphic recording. Other written forms included picture writing in which each picture stood for an idea in the language.

The Anishinabe (Ojibwe) people of Minnesota used a combination of picture writing with other devices to make maps, send messages, and record information about songs, ceremonies, and historical events. The Dakota used a similar picture writing system to communicate information.

Language variation is one of the most significant differences among American Indian tribes. From over 300 distinct languages spoken by tribes north of Mexico, 150 to 200 of these languages survive today. Each tribe speaks a different native language. Groups of languages, however, are historically related and have been grouped in 18 language families.

In Minnesota, Dakota is a dialect of a single language that includes three dialects: Dakota, Nakota, and Lakota. The Dakota communities of Minnesota use the Dakota dialect. The Nakota dialect is used by the Yankton and Yanktonai and can also be heard on the Sisseton Reservation of South Dakota, while the Lakota dialect is spoken by tribal members who live at Pine Ridge in the same state.

Ojibwe (Ojibwemowin) is a single language with many dialects. As stated within the Ojibwe People’s Dictionary, “speakers of Ojibwe consider their language to be precise, descriptive, and visual, and feel that it is among the greatest treasures of their cultural heritage." Ojibwe is part of the Algonkian language family. The Eastern branch of the Algonkian language family includes languages such as Abnaki Narragansett, Delaware and several others. The Western branch includes Arapaho, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Gros Ventre, and Sutaio. The Central branch, of which Ojibwe is a part, also includes languages such as Cree, Potawatomi, Menominee, and many others. Ojibwe is a highly complex and very descriptive language. According to the Guinness Book of World Records, Ojibwe is one of the hardest languages in the world for non-native speakers to learn. The language includes over distinct pronunciation and verb forms.

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4 http://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/
5 http://www.native-languages.org/ojibwe.htm
Both Ojibwe and Dakota:

- are extremely complex in terms of grammar, morphology, and phonology;
- have a strong oral tradition for transmitting information from one generation to the next;
- had systems of written communication prior to contact with Europeans; and
- are currently being restored as living languages using phonetic writing systems;

Language Loss

AIANs have experienced catastrophic language loss. Linguists estimate that there were approximately 300 to 500 Native languages spoken by the peoples native to what is now the United States and Canada before European contact (Krauss 1998; McCarty & Watahomigie 2003; Zepeda & Hill, 1992). Fortunately, more than 200 of those languages remain, but only 34 are still being naturally acquired as a first language by children (Krauss 1998). “It is language that carries the nature and character of who we are and how we relate with one another . . . and to all things we experience in life,” a Pueblo leader relates; “[o]nce we’ve lost that, we have lost everything” (Suina, 2004, p. 300).

Language Loss is one example of historical trauma that AIAN people have experienced. Language loss occurs when proficiency in a native language is lost over time (voluntarily or involuntarily), but speakers of that language do not become fully proficient in another language. Historical trauma, sometimes referred to as multi-generational trauma, is a shared experience for AIAN where the negative impact of displacement from their land and homes, forced assimilation to a different culture and beliefs, boarding school placement, and language suppression and language loss, extends across generations (Native American Center for Excellence 6).

Language Loss is one outcome of historical trauma for AIAN, where an important part of their cultural history and identity was de-valued and suppressed. Language loss was hastened by U.S. government policies for the repression of Indian cultures and languages and forced assimilation to the dominant society.

The loss of language was partly a result of federal government policies that forced American Indian children to attend government and mission run boarding schools. The major goal of the boarding schools became the total assimilation of American Indians into American culture and the eradication of distinct American Indian cultures. One method of eradicating American Indian cultures took the form of eliminating use of Indian languages.

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6 http://nace.samhsa.gov/HistoricalTrauma.aspx
7 http://etc.umn.edu/resources/briefhistory.htm Brief History of American Indian Education
Quotations from the 19th century illustrate the U.S. government’s systematic efforts to repress the use of Indian languages and to substitute the use of English (St. Clair & Leap, 1982):

“... you will please inform the authorities of this school that the English language only must be taught the Indian youth placed there for educational and industrial training...”

“The only way the Indian children can be taught successfully...is to take them entirely away from their parents so that they will not hear their native tongue spoken.”

In many, if not most of the boarding schools, American Indian children were forbidden to speak their own language, and when caught speaking their language, they were severely punished by boarding school authorities. As a result of the English only policies of boarding schools and other influences, almost 150 American Indian languages were lost. This assault on American Indian languages is bitterly remembered in American Indian communities today. American Indian students still feel the effects of the boarding schools. These effects have shaped the family’s and community’s attitude towards education, language development, and cultural identity. Families themselves may not be fully aware of this influence.

Due to the English only policies, some Indians did not speak either their native language or English well. This affected the way American Indian parents spoke with their children and resulted in a pattern of language loss across several generations. Most American Indian students in Minnesota now speak English as their only language or primary language but may still be impacted by cross-generational language loss as well as by residual native language influence.

**Language Revitalization**

Analysis has shown that many English varieties characteristically found in American Indian and Alaska Native speech communities contain phonological and grammatical rules that in no way replicate the conventions of standard or vernacular English. In some surprising ways, however, the rules appear to parallel the grammatical details of the ancestral Indian language of the speaker’s home community. This language-specific grammatical uniqueness means that there are as many different forms of Indian English as there are different Indian languages and language traditions. Indian English speakers acknowledge this fact frequently, for example, when they identify a person’s tribal affiliation merely by calling attention to some specific features in the person’s spoken English.

The variations of English used by different communities are thought to be associated to the different approaches used by boarding schools, where often the setting was over-crowded. This was combined with lack of access to models that accurately spoke English. American Indians in the various boarding school settings began to supplement the English they were taught with local dialect, hence the variations among the different tribes. Remnants of the ancestral language remain for each group, even though recent generations may not have used the ancestral
Language revitalization seeks to isolate the remnants of the ancestral language and rebuild the language.

**Language Influence and Non-standard English**

American Indians and Alaska Native students and their families can use a variety of non-standard English dialects; sometimes referred to as *Rez English*. The dialects and grammatical forms developed have a local origin, are influenced by the original tribal language across different reservations, and are modified across time through generational changes. This language influence is thought to affect deep structure (thinking patterns) of language as well as surface features (morphology, syntax, phonology).

An impact of the integration of the ancestral languages over time with American English led to loss of home language and development of non-standard English as two languages were combined. Non-standard English involves grammar and verb forms, and other aspects of verbal communication, that is inconsistent with traditional English. American Indian students in boarding schools, because of language confusion, were judged as less educated or less intelligent than their White peers at a time they were struggling with language confusion. Other students raised in traditional American Indian settings displayed communication traits that were often viewed as disrespectful or noncompliant by educators not familiar with American Indian culture.

Negative judgments are still made today when educators fail to consider than AIAN students are similar to bi-lingual students, where adjustments to understanding the impact of a student using two languages are made. A point of focus on this issue is the need to review the performance of AIAN students on state assessments where foundational English language skills are assessed, such as reading assessments.

**Current Status of Ojibwe and Dakota Languages**

Today, immersion schools, and elementary and high schools are offering courses in tribal languages. Communities and tribes are offering immersion and culture camps. Computer applications, technology, books, quiz bowls, community circles (language tables), websites, newspapers, and radio stations are being supported by tribes, institutions and grass roots efforts to strengthen understanding of the rich cultural heritage of American Indian Alaska Native students. There is state and federal funding that supports language revitalization efforts through activities that include teacher training.

Many more American Indian languages are being transcribed into written forms. These languages are being taught at tribal schools, American Indian alternative schools, a number of public schools in Minnesota, tribal community colleges and some major universities in the

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United States and Canada. In Minnesota, American Indian languages are accepted as second languages in universities.
Converting spoken languages into written form is not an easy process. Some languages, such as Ojibwe, include several dialects. Deciding which dialect to record and teach is often a difficult choice. In addition, sounds exist in Indian languages that have no comparable sound value in English and vice versa. The community of native language speakers cannot always agree on what kind of written recording method best captures these sound differences. Some American-Indian linguists prefer use of characters to represent parts of words (syllabary). Others linguist attempt to follow a phonetic system. Still others prefer a system where each letter or letter combination has only one possible pronunciation (unlike words in the English system where read can be pronounced two different ways depending upon the context). In what is referred to as a double vowel system, a single letter would designate a short vowel sound, while a double letter would designate a long vowel sound.

**Code Switching**

Code switching is a common language strategy observed in second-language learners. “Code switching occurs when an LEP (Limited English Proficiency) child switches from one language to another language when conversing, usually between sentences” (Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005, p. 74\(^\text{10}\)). Code switching is not considered an indicator of poor language skills but viewed as a communicative strategy often used by bilingual students.

Language switching is a cognitive process that occurs naturally and spontaneously among persons who use multiple languages. Some American Indian students have a home language (L1), and are expected to operate in settings where they are expected to think, process and perform in Standard American English (L2). It is not easy for some students to turn off their home language when they transition from one setting to another (Cumming, 2013). In fact, this “phenomenon indicates that the L1 plays an integral role in L2 performance” (Cumming, 2013, p. 133). Allowing students to process information in their home language adds to their understanding of concepts.

Code switching is viewed as a skill to be utilized and capitalized on to maximize academic language and literacy learning. There are varying degrees of code-switching both linguistically and culturally. Some students are very adept at situational behavior while others are not. This may lead educators and other school staff to believe that students who are code switching are confused and are less capable than students from dominant culture. Or, educators may miss the influence code switching may have on student performance. Even if a student’s first language is English and a tribal language is not spoken in the home these influences still exist.

**Communication Styles**

American Indians may have communication styles that are different from the communication styles of teachers and the implicit or explicit communicative expectations in public schools. These communication style differences may cause misunderstandings if the cultural values behind them are not understood. Heit (1987) shared some general styles of appropriate communication in American Indian cultures. Examples included children not verbally expressing

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themselves in the presence of adults, allowing actions to speak instead of verbalizing knowledge, and not verbally disciplining or praising a child in public.
Within some American Indian cultures it is considered inappropriate to look at someone directly the whole time they are speaking or to compete for correct answers (Hait, 1987). These types of behaviors would be met with peer group disapproval. These general styles of communication can clearly contradict the typical communication practices and expectations in a school classroom, highlighting the importance of cultural awareness and competence.

**Some Characteristics of American Indian Culture and Communication Style**

American Indian and Alaska Native students have been subjected to forced changes in their culture and communication styles. Despite the pressures they have endured to assimilate and lose traditions, they have remained resilient. This resiliency has allowed for the maintenance of important and valued aspects of the culture.

The culture and values of American Indian are on a continuum. Some values will be seen in one family but not in another. The interpretation of a value can differ from family to family, community to community, and tribe to tribe. Because of forced assimilation, values and corresponding behaviors may have changed from the original intent in some areas.

Students raised in American Indian communities or families display communication traits that are sometimes viewed as disrespectful or non-compliant by teachers who are not familiar with American Indian culture. Some of the major areas of difference in communication style are in the areas of language development, eye contact, class participation, and latency of response. Each communication style is described below:

**Communication Style Factors:**

**Eye contact:** Some American Indian students will not make eye contact with the teacher when spoken to; this is a traditional way to show respect for teachers and others who offer to speak. These students are brought up to interact within a group rather than stand out in a crowd.

**Communication Style Preference Circular Communication:** AIAN students often have a preference for a circular communication style. Traditional public school settings operate on a linear communication style. A linear communication style is direct, brief, and focused on a specific point of discussion. A circular communication style relies more on inference, use of non-verbal as well as verbal cues, and allows for discussion on issues indirectly related to the point.

**Class participation:** Some American Indian students do not volunteer or raise their hands to participate for fear of standing out or appearing to know more than their peers. If one student gives an incorrect response when called on by a teacher, other students may be reluctant to give the correct answer because they do not want their classmate to feel badly. Many American Indian students are not comfortable with individual praise.

**Group interactions:** Some American Indian students work well in cooperative groups and may prefer private recognition. Learning is enhanced when lessons presented in fable/story form and are consistent with traditional teaching methods.
Latency of response: Some American Indian students demonstrate latency or longer response time. An initial judgment by educators is that the student does not know the answer or that he/she has an information processing problem, however, it is possible for some American Indian students that they are using a reflective response style not dependent upon responding quickly. This may affect the results of timed assessments.

Other characteristics of tribal culture and communication style include the following (some similarities with other cultures can be found):

- Addressing elders with great respect.
- Valuing humor. Humor and teasing are used in many ways. Humor can demonstrate acceptance, or serve as a coping mechanism, or a way to be inclusive, or used as a teaching tool. Verbal teasing may not be inappropriate, nor is it mean-spirited. It may be used as a form of engagement.
- Taking time to think before speaking. Understanding that words have power to heal and power to do harm.
- Speaking softly when responding.
- Feeling that it is improper and intrusive to ask personal questions of someone.
- Feeling comfortable with silence. Waiting until someone is finished speaking before responding. Pausing often to reflect while speaking. Expecting listeners to wait during pauses until the speaker is ready to continue.
- Waiting and listening when joining a group that is engaged in conversation, rather than starting to talk immediately.
- Valuing cooperation and avoiding competition, confrontation, and conflict.
- Not volunteering advice unless asked.
- Avoiding certain topics of conversation such as ceremonies, medicine, spirits, and dreams. Students may elect to share and staff are encouraged to be respectful.
- Communicating criticism and/or praise indirectly through another family or community member.
- Preferring to observe an activity or task repeatedly before attempting performance. American Indian students may be reluctant to display their performance skills on demand in either the classroom or in testing situations until mastered.
American Indian students and families experience many of the health issues and risks that affect students and families in poverty. These health issues manifest themselves in physical, mental and emotional ways. Among AIANs, the risk factors for coronary heart disease are more prevalent than other groups. American Indians experience high rates of hypertension, high cholesterol, and diabetes (Liao, Bang, & Cosgrove, 2011\(^\text{11}\)). Behavioral risk factors are high with this population as well, with high rates of smoking, obesity, and sedentary lifestyles (Barnes, Adams, & Powell-Griner, 2010\(^\text{12}\)). Many AIANs have limited health literacy and cardiovascular health knowledge (Brega, et al., 2013\(^\text{13}\)).

Of particular importance for schools, American Indian children are disproportionately affected by obesity (Polhamus, Dalenius, Mackintosh, Smith, & Grummer-Strawn, 2011\(^\text{14}\)). Fortunately, physical activity level and diet are risk factors for obesity that can be modified. Since children spend much of their time in school, schools have the opportunity to positively impact physical activity and dietary habits (Brega, et al., 2013\(^\text{15}\)). Schools also have the opportunity to educate AIAN students about other health concerns like smoking and cardiovascular health and help them develop healthy lifestyle habits.

American Indian students with health issues may lose school time because of doctor or dental appointments. Many American Indian students are served through Indian health services and health providers may not be available in the immediate area. Their caregivers may have difficulty getting appointments and travel time to appointments can be extensive.

Chemical Use Concerns:

Alcohol and drug abuse has been an identified concern for AIAN youth for decades. Hawkins, E.H., Cummins, L.H. & Marlatt, G.A (2004\(^\text{16}\)) reviewed literature on the status of chemical use with American Indian and Alaskan Native Youth, and found that the prevalence of inhalant abuse, tobacco use, alcohol and marijuana, was a significant concern for AIAN youth\(^\text{17}\). Regional and national data from the 1980s indicate that nearly all drug rates were higher for American

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Indian youth when compared to non-Indian youth (Okwumabua & Duryea, 1987). In 2001, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that American Indian youth were more likely to use alcohol and marijuana than other youth. American Indian youth are also significantly more likely to use methamphetamine and cocaine than the general population (Ramisetty-Mikler & Ebama, 2011) and start abusing substances at earlier ages (Nalls, Mullis, & Mullis, 2009).

Factors that contribute to substance abuse include cultural conflicts, peer pressure, substance use as a form of recreation, and reaction to negative experiences in the larger society (Bagley, Angel, Dilworth-Anderson, Liu, & Schinke, 1995). From negative experiences associated with racism, perceptions of rejection, or failure in school, some American Indian students may use chemicals as a form of escape or stress management. Substance abuse can be viewed as a maladaptive coping mechanism.

The performance of school age American Indians performance may suffer, and students may be misdiagnosed and mislabeled and placed in programs for students with an emotional or behavioral concern if substance abuse is not adequately considered and ruled out. As in the broader community, caregivers and or other family members may be involved with drugs or alcohol. If chemical use by caregivers is extensive, it can become an environmental factor that affects the performance of the student. The caregiver may have difficulty attending to the needs of the student, or, the student may be in the role of supporting their caregiver with little focus left to respond to the demands of school.

**Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) and Fetal Alcohol Effects (FAE)**

In the U.S., there are racial and socioeconomic disparities in Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) rates. American Indians and lower income groups have higher rates than White Americans and members of higher income groups (Abel, 1995; Centers for Disease Control, Prevention, 2002). FAS, which is entirely preventable, causes serious, incurable developmental and neurological problems (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005).

The characteristic patterns of behavioral and cognitive abnormalities exhibited by children with FAS include poor executive functioning, lack of inhibition, increased activity levels, and motor and memory challenges (O’Connor, Kogan, & Findlay, 2002; Kodituwakku, Kalberg, & May, 2001). Lewis, Shipman, and May (2011) found that prenatal alcohol consumption, low

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24 Lewesi, P.T., Shipman, V.C., & May, P.A.
socioeconomic status, and higher levels of psychological distress in mothers were associated with FAS diagnoses in children and believe that educating youth about pregnancy, depression, and drinking may increase early awareness and lead to the prevention of FAS. Students may be misdiagnosed and mislabeled as having an emotional or behavioral disability/disorder (EBD), attention deficit concern (ADHD), or cognitive concern (Developmental Disability) if FAS or FAE is not explored.

**Mobility Rates/Homelessness**

Homelessness or lack of a regular and adequate nighttime residence, negatively impacts learning and assessment of children. From 900,000 to 1.4 children and youth experience homelessness each year in the United States (Burt, 2001\(^25\)). Approximately 62% of these children and youth are of racial minority groups: 43% are African American, 15% are Hispanic American, and 4% are Native American or are member of other racial groups (Burt et al., 1999). Many school-aged children who are homeless attend school sporadically

For those homeless children who attend school several factors could impact their academic performance.

**Factors that could impact the performance of a student who has experienced homelessness include:**

1. Fatigue (not sleeping well or lacking a comfortable bed to sleep)
2. Poor nutrition
3. Concentration difficulties due to worry (e.g. “Will I eat supper tonight?” or “Where will my family sleep?”)
4. Gaps in their school knowledge from missed days
5. Lack of daily preparedness, such as completing homework, resulting from not having necessary materials or a place to study (Noll & Watkins, 2003, p. 362\(^26\)).

Homeless individuals and families have high mobility rates. It is important to use Tier 1 informal assessments to gather information about what a student knows and in what areas she/he needs additional support. Frequent moves can impact students emotionally, socially, mentally, and academically as they often have unrecognized educational needs, unmet educational needs, and lack of stable social relationships (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003\(^27\)).

American Indian families may move back and forth from reservations to urban areas and to smaller communities. The transition of moving from one American Indian community to another American Indian community can be stressful to the student. Some research suggests that “at least half of the differences in achievement do appear to be related to the effect of mobility itself”

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(Rumberger & Larson, 1998, p. 328), where student mobility can be both a symptom of disengagement in school and an important risk factor for high school dropout.

When teaching students who are homeless it is important to start where the child is in her/his development and move ahead, rather than starting where she/he would be expected to be given her/his age (Noll & Watkins, 2003). In assessing American Indian students who have experienced periods of homelessness, timely observation is important in determining the student’s background knowledge, strengths, and needs.

Some American Indian families may meet the definition of homelessness. However, members of the family may not view themselves as homeless when they are living with relatives. Historically, multigenerational families lived together in one household, and this practice has been maintained in some American Indian Alaska native communities.

**Racism and Racial Identity Development**

A major developmental task for all adolescents is the establishment of identity (Erikson, 1968). Forming an identity is a psychosocial task that creates a sense of unity and cohesiveness for an individual (Allen & Majidi-Ahi, 1989). Identity formation provides meaning, direction, and purpose while also contributing to the development of competence and adaptive functioning (Allen & Majidi-Ahi, 1989). “While identity development is a complex task for all youth, it is particularly complicated for children and adolescents belonging to ethnic and racial minority groups in the United States” (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990, p. 290).

American Indian students may be negatively impacted by lack of understanding as they progress through stages of identity development. All people pass through different stages of development as one realizes racism is a part of their life. Those who do not have support may have behaviors that are not conducive to a successful educational experience.

**Many American Indian tribes do not think in terms of color or race, finding racial identification an artificial concept.**

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Tatum developed a model that suggests people of color pass through the five stages of racial identity development.

Racial identity Development According to Tatum:

1. Pre-encounter: goal is assimilation to dominant culture and distance from own race
2. Encounter: person questions beliefs and considers identity, often in response to racism
3. Immersion/Emersion: focus on racial identity, explores their culture and its history
4. Internalization: comfort with race and identity and able to relate to members outside of race who are respectful
5. Internalization-Commitment: concerned about maintaining the identity of their race and committed to act to support their race.

Students develop coping strategies, some unhealthy, to help them as they navigate through this developmental process.

Unfortunately many American Indians in the U.S. continue to experience racism. They experience both personal and institutional racism. Institutional racism can occur in districts without being intentional. If there are disparate negative impacts on specific groups of students, policies, practices and procedures should be examined for institutional racism. Gathering data and conducting self-studies through reviewing program participation of diverse groups and examining program participation of diverse students and discipline rates and referrals may help identify warning signs of institutional racism.

Schools and educators can support students by considering the student’s progress through racial identity development. For example, students who are in the oppositional stage of racial identity development may be misdiagnosed as having an emotional or behavioral disability/disorder (EBD), and appropriate support based on their true needs for support in racial identity may not be provided.

American Indian youth are exposed to contradictory messages from the broader society about the value and meaning of being American Indian. The few images of American Indians in mainstream media tend to be distorted and illustrate popular culture’s tendency to both romanticize and devalue American Indians, while lacking accurate knowledge about them (Newman, 2005). Racial stereotypes persist, like sports teams using images of American Indians as mascots. Chavers (2010) reported that AIANs still experience racism in both schools and communities and its effects can be seen in the high drop out rates and low academic performance of AIAN youth.

For American Indian students the development of cultural identity is complicated by tribal identity. Students may be officially enrolled in a specific tribe or may have a parent or grandparent that is enrolled in a specific tribe. The students’ knowledge may be limited to family teachings that indicate an ancestor belonged to a specific tribe or that tribal background may not be known. Gathering specific information from the student or their caregiver about tribal enrollment or affiliation helps with developing a comprehensive understanding of the student’s status. Students are on a wide continuum of tribal affiliation and ancestral knowledge.
American Indian students do not always have physical characteristics that readily identify them as American Indians. Appearance does not reflect cultural or tribal identity. Cultural, racial, and tribal identity can affect students’ performance and if available school personnel can involve appropriate cultural liaisons for assistance in supporting a student or in communicating with caregivers.

**Curriculum Concerns**

In Minnesota, there is a statutory requirement that requires that all content standards address the contributions of Minnesota tribes and communities as they are revised. While these revisions are occurring appropriate assessments are lacking. Therefore, there is little to no accountability to assure that appropriate instruction occurs. Unfortunately, some school curriculums and U.S. History content standards fail to promote critical thinking about American Indian-European American interactions in U.S. history (Anderson, 2012).

Textbooks that focus on historical events have increasingly recognized the diversity among American Indians, yet genocidal practices that decimated American Indian populations are often minimized, and inaccuracies that native people were present before Europeans are not corrected. History pertaining to American Indians is typically a sidebar and is not portrayed as a central part of American history (Anderson, 2012). “There is a long-standing and fundamental disjuncture both in school curricula and in U.S. society generally between the documented historical record on American Indian affairs and how most European American would like to remember this history” (Anderson, 2012, p. 498).

Some believe that “schooling has functioned, in general, to transmit the dominant social order, preserving the status quo” (Stanley, 2010, p. 17). Multicultural education should not perpetuate social inequalities, but instead value the contributions that various populations and races have made throughout history.

When students do not see themselves in the curriculum, schools may become less relevant to the student. Students may disengage and as a result school performance, attendance, and behavior may be affected.

**Cultural Values**

It is crucial for educators to be aware of the cultural values of American Indian and Alaska Native students in their schools. Cultural practices and expectations vary among the diverse populations of American Indians and Alaska Natives. How AIANs define success in life may differ from the definition of success that guides public education. “Economic interests and income may be one measure of success, but there may be other equally important measures of success, such as cultural connectedness, that drive individuals’ educational and professional goals” (Akee, Yazzie-Mintz, 2011, p. 122).

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Respect is an overarching value in the American Indian community. The belief system of the Anishinabe and Dakota place respect at the center of the value system. Respect is directed at the Creator, Mother Earth, elders, family and community.

Some examples of Cultural Values of AIAN are as follows:

- **Noninterference**: Parents may choose not to interfere with choices made by students even when there are unintended outcomes. The purpose is to teach responsibility and to learn from the results of your actions.
- **Generosity**: It is an expectation to help family and community before self. Students are also expected to share in ways that may not support the dominant value of ownership.
- **Humility**: Students may not raise their hands or put themselves forward even if they know the answers.
- **Humor**: Teasing may be used to as a form of acceptance, coping mechanism, teasing oneself or others.
- **Cooperation**: Working together or in groups is valued.
- **Acceptance/Non-judgmental**: American Indian families have a strength-based view their children therefore families may be reluctant to accept the labeling of their children.

These are generalized behaviors that may not apply to all students in all situations. This may be due to cultural identity and/or code switching. When schools are conducting assessments it is required by state and federal law that a determination is made as to whether culture contributes to assessment results and understanding of the American Indian cultural values system will help to inform this response. Schools and assessment teams must be careful as values and their related behaviors may be misinterpreted.

Another example of where differences between cultural expectations of the American Indian/Alaska native student may differ from the culture of the school is in terms of how absences are viewed and treated. A student may feel pressure from the school due to absences for legitimate family and cultural events that contribute to their identity development and maturation. Absences from school may be due to attending funerals, cultural events, or significant family events that may not fit expectations of non-Indian educators, as far as how much time is needed away from school.

An American Indian or Alaska native definition of caregivers, family, and extended family may extend well beyond the immediate family definition used by schools. Grandparents and other relatives may provide caretaking for American Indian and Alaska Native students. A broad family support system of relatives, including family members and clan members, is a value that contributes to the strong connections sought within the American Indian and Alaska Native community. These bonds form the basis of family and community support, important to the success of students.

These specific examples illustrate the varied cultural values of tribes. The academic success of AIAN students is dependent on applying knowledge of these differences towards developing interventions in public schools.
Family Stress

As in all communities, environmental stressors involving family disruption can momentarily destabilize the American Indian student. The presence of nurturing caregivers in a youth’s life supports the development of resilience and well being in youth. Caregivers often face challenges and stressors of their own which can hamper their ability to adequately support and guide their children. “American Indian parents may also be affected by intergenerational transmission of trauma and loss of traditional parenting practices, as a result of forced boarding school and/or relocation” (Goodkind, LaNoue, Lee, Freeland, & Freund, 2012, p. 389\(^3\)).

A concern about the function of some families exists in the Indian community in the same way as other communities. Problems with family stability are sometimes demonstrated by drug and alcohol abuse, domestic abuse, and family violence. This can lead to out-of-home placement in foster homes for American Indian students at higher rates than students from other backgrounds. Often their placement is in non-native homes in spite of the requirements of the Indian Child Welfare Act. This exacerbates the cultural conflict the student may be experiencing.

Schools can design interventions to involve caregivers, the tribal community, Indian Education staff, and other community resources to support American Indian students working through family concerns. In this way both their development and academic performance can be supported.

Learning Modalities of American Indian Alaska Native Students

One factor that may affect school performance of American Indians and Alaska Natives is that their learning styles may not be accommodated in schools. Researcher Sue Read reported that American Indians differed significantly from their peers on several learning style preferences\(^3\). These preferences may reflect different cultural values and traditions and should be accommodated by educators.

Summary of Learning Style Preferences for American Indian Alaska Native Students

- Preference for lower lighting
- Preference for the presence of an authority figure
- Preference for visual learning
- Preference for late morning learning

The preference for the presence of an authority figure may reflect the tradition of respect for elders (Light & Martin, 1985). American Indian students also showed less persistence and less responsibility/conformity when their interactions were observed (Read). What appeared to be a


\(^{32}\) http://arapaho.nsuok.edu/~oil/Articles/LearningStylesofNativeAmericanStudents.pdf
lack of persistence could have been a period of reflection and a preference for needing time to think and consider prior to completing an assignment (Swisher & Deyhle, 1987). Some American Indian students may also not persist in their schoolwork because they do not consider the content to be relevant or consistent with their values (U.S. Department of Education, 1991; Dunn & Griggs, 1995; Sanders, 1987) or because they perceive limited post-school opportunities (Ogbu, 1978). The lower level of responsibility/conformity observed in American Indian students from Read’s (a) study may reflect subculture norms that emphasize equitable group standards over individual success (Dumont & Wax, 1969). Read’s work also illustrated that there are as many within group differences as between group differences, so it is important for educators to identify the learning styles of their students rather than adopt a uniform approach to all AIAN students.

American Indians and Alaska Natives (AIANs) also differ from the general population in perceptual style preference (auditory, visual, and tactile/kinesthetic) (Read, b). While the majority of the general population has a dominant perceptual style preference, the majority of AIANs had no strong preference (Read, b). For learning to occur and AIAN achievement to improve, teaching must incorporate a variety of perceptual methods (Read, b). “Of primary importance is that teachers learn to integrate a variety of modalities so that the learner who has no strong preference is afforded an equal opportunity to concentrate on, process, and retain new and difficult information” (Read, b, p. 7).

Furthermore, based on a review of research, theories, and models of the learning styles of AIAN students, Pewewardy (2002) concluded that AIAN learning styles were generally “characterized by factors of social/affective emphasis, harmony, holistic perspectives, expressive creativity, and nonverbal communication” (p. 22).

Assessment teams can support AIAN students by working to identify the learning and perceptual styles of their students, within the overall school climate of embracing student diversity. Educators must use a wide variety of instructional strategies to address the many learning styles in their classroom. New concept or difficult concepts must be taught using auditory, visual, kinesthetic and tactile modalities. Other strategies include differentiation, as well as flexible and/or cooperative grouping.

School Readiness and Poverty

Hibel, Faircloth, and Farkas (2008) found that “the strongest predictor of special education placement is a student’s academic readiness on entering kindergarten as measured by the student’s pre-reading and pre-mathematics scores” (p. 498). This is a concerning topic given that American Indian and Alaska Native students are overrepresented in special education programs and classes. These students are more likely than any other racial or ethnic minority group to

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34 http://www.intime.uni.edu/model/teacher/teac1summary.html
receive special education services (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2007).

While the Minnesota legislature and the federal government have added resources to early childhood and all-day kindergarten programs, schools must continue to pay particular attention to student performance in early childhood programs and towards identifying children through preschool screening efforts. Hibel et al. (2008) advocate for the development of early intervention services that are culturally and linguistically relevant for American Indian and Alaska Native children.

**Health Factors Impacting Language Development**

The rate of otitis media (ear infections) is higher in American Indian reservation communities than in the population as a whole. Otitis media during early childhood can affect language development, whether or not it results in permanent hearing loss. AIAN students with recurrent ear infections may experience delays in acquiring language, or miss opportunities to learn due to absences from school due to fever or pain associated with ear infections. One study found 63% of children of American Indian mothers had experienced an ear infection by the time they were 6 months old. The mothers also had histories of ear infections and other upper respiratory concerns. The authors of the study stated “Racial and ethnic differences in OM incidence may arise from disparities in socioeconomic status, access to and use of health care, and variations in the prevalence of environmental and genetic risk factors”.

**Working With American Indian Families**

Many school districts have Indian Education programs that are staffed in a variety of ways. There may be tutors, advocates, cultural specialist or Indian Home School Liaisons. Many Indian Home-School Liaisons in Minnesota conduct home or family visits. Home and family visits are important as a means to build a relationship between home and school. There are many purposes for these visits; liaisons report that they conduct home visits to check in with the student or address family needs. Indian Home-School Liaisons also help families with a variety of other needs by connecting them with community resources that help to build good relations with families. If preferred by the family IEP meetings can be held in the home. American Indian Culture and/or Environmental Differences That May Affect Evaluation/Assessment Results

At the point of assessment and evaluation of American Indian students it is important for educators and evaluation teams to remember that multiple issues may affect American Indian students. Examples include code switching, language loss, language influence, communication style differences, relational style preferences, and differences in traditions, mobility, poverty, racism, and health factors. Not all of these factors apply to each student, however, it is important to screen for the presence of any of these factors that could provide context to the student’s social, emotional, behavioral reactions, or response to their curriculum in public school settings.

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As well, the overall culture of American Indian students, particularly when they are in settings where they make up a small portion of the student population, can be significantly different from their peers. The recognition and education on cultural differences is a benefit educators can offer families and students.

Intervention and assessment practices that integrate understanding of language, culture, and environment of an American Indian student are recommended. A critical issue for many American Indian – Alaska Native students is language loss. The language of a student’s parents or grandparents is being restored. However, many cognitive abilities tests have a verbal language element that may not be sensitive to a student who is in the process of learning two languages at the same time. It is important to recognize how reliance on verbal language impacts the performance of an American Indian student, and how vital the issue of restoration of language is for American Indian families.

School personnel are advised to review *Tips for Successful Visits and Meetings with American Indian Families* which contains recommendations generated by a group of Minnesota's Indian Home School Liaisons.
Tips for Successful Visits/Meetings with American Indian Families

- At the beginning of the year, establish a relationship with the family with positive phone calls and notes.
- As relationship are being developed, visit the home as needed. As a relationship is established, the family will feel more comfortable visiting the school.
- Set visits ahead of time by phone or in writing. State purpose of home visit. If the family does not have a phone, send a note home with the student and also mail a letter to the home (clarify to the student they are not in trouble).
- Give parents a choice of meeting places: the school, their home, or a neutral place such as a coffee shop, community center, or tribal center.
- Be aware of transportation issues if attempting to visit with a family at school or at a community center.
- On the first family visit, if possible, include someone who already has a relationship with the family (i.e. Indian Home-School Liaison).
- You may not be invited inside when you go to a home. Be prepared with paperwork and pen and ready to conduct work outside the home.
- Begin every visit or meeting with social conversation before formal matters.
- Be willing to accept refreshments if offered when visiting the home. If possible offer refreshments to the parents when meeting in school or other locations.
- When needed assist caregivers with completion of paperwork.
- If appropriate interact with the children while in the home; this will help to establish rapport and build a relationship with the parents.
- If taking notes, ask for permission or explain the purpose of taking notes.
- Accept the family and their home as they are, refraining from making judgments based on perceptions of neatness, or style of dress.
- Listen and observe carefully for cues from family that indicate understanding of meeting when visiting homes. Be careful of cultural mores in which family politely agrees with all discussion.
- Refrain from using acronyms or explain meanings of terms.
- Provide follow-up phone call or visit to answer questions.
- Consider issues such as access to telephones, transportation, or computer/internet.
- Be aware that in some homes grandparents, aunts, uncles or other family members are the responsible caregivers.

To support the relationship between family and schools, special education teams are advised to be particularly sensitive with caregivers when discussing educational needs of the student. A strengths based approach may decrease tension. Identifying positive aspects about the student as well as concerns communicates a broad based view of the child, rather than a view that is deficit based. Start with a positive statement about the child and provide an example of services offered by the school or resources within the school that can be used to improve learning outcomes. Be respectful of the family, particularly in a large group, and confrontations within a large group.
should be avoided. If American Indian families perceive disrespect by those working with them they may be reluctant to attend and follow-up meetings.

Team members should also take time to build a relationship with families without being overly assertive. Ask parents what the team can do to help them. Making personal contacts with parents in the community also helps to build a relationship, create trust, and break down the barriers between the system and American Indian families. For students who are in foster care, school personnel can try to establish a relationship with extended family members when possible as well as with the foster parents. To build relationships, schools should invite families to non-academic activities.

Families may be very cautious about revealing sensitive information because of privacy concerns. Share information about sensitive topics with other team members on a need to know basis. Sometimes, information needs to be discussed at team meetings but only necessary information should be recorded in detail on the Assessment/Evaluation Summary Report or a similar document. If needed, brief notes can be included in the record such as the fact that a student is seeing a private counselor or that the family is involved with county social services without giving details.

In working with American Indian or Alaska native families, teamwork and consensus are important. The emphasis is on process rather than product. Establishing harmonious, trusting relationships may take priority over completing paperwork or following an agenda. American Indian families report that IEP meetings are rushed and feel they are not heard. Whenever possible team members should stay for the entire meeting to listen and discuss concerns and/or questions from the parents. Often parents are more comfortable asking questions and providing information on a one to one basis.

*Once an assessment has begun it is critical to carefully consider exclusionary cultural and environmental factors that have the potential to lead to mistakenly identifying the student as EBD or LD.*
Tier 1 Interventions involving American Indian Students and their Families

Caregivers, students, and teachers need to feel a sense of connectedness to their school. For American Indian students a sense of connectedness is supported when staff works to better understand the unique values, customs and traditions of each tribe represented in their district. Each tribe has its own customs, values and traditions that may be very different from other tribes. School staff need to understand the concept of Tribal Sovereignty and increase their knowledge of the history, language, stories, songs and music of each tribal unit. American Indian youth are first taught that their identity comes from their tribal affiliation. Staff development on these issues is recommended.

Policies and procedures should be addressed to increase fairness in services for American Indian student. Each policy should have an evaluation component, completed by teachers, parents and students, if appropriate. Aspects of policy and procedures include:

- Assuring that the academic content is free from bias and stereotyping
- Adapting the curriculum to the cultural needs of the students (e.g. infusing American Indian – Alaska Native history and culture in course content)
- Using research-based instructional strategies
- Teaching about the various cultures represented in each classroom
- Teaching the culture, history, stories and language of local tribes to the entire class, when appropriate
- Implementing data-based assessment systems
- Including culturally relevant material into the curriculum to show a need for learning specific academic material
- Obtaining sufficient bias-free materials and supplies to meet the needs of each student in the class
- Using hands-on, visual and kinesthetic instructional activities to teach concepts and skills

Caregivers of American Indian – Alaska Native students are more likely to be receptive to teachers and school staff when a warm, caring relationship is established and it is clear that the environment is inclusive. Most American Indians value harmony and balance, and utilize nonverbal communication and listening skills, rather than rapid and aggressive speech patterns. Sharing, cooperation, kindness and generosity are usually more appreciated than the accumulation of possessions and attainment of status through competition.

Within their culture American Indian youth are taught the value of noninterference in their daily lives. These students often do not interfere in the struggles with other students unless a Tribal member is involved. The use of a Tribal member provides a guide who promotes a caring aspect. Therefore, to be more consistent with the needs of American Indian students, the development and implementation of a school-wide disciplinary system should include a caring social aspect. One of the more difficult concepts that white teachers must learn when working with American Indian Alaska Native students is the concept of present time. Most tribes value the concept of here and now rather than the future or consequences that may occur later. This can be a
challenge when discipline systems use positive or negative consequences for a student that is deferred to a later time. The American Indian Alaskan Native student may have difficulty understanding the connection of their behavior and the consequence if they are separated in time. Use of restitution programs that provide an opportunity for correcting mistakes in the here and now are more consistent with the beliefs of American Indian Alaska Native students.

Caregivers from American Indian families can be strong assets to their children’s school to support educators. Establishing a social relationship with caregivers enables educators to better understand factors that contribute to the student’s growth and development. A caregiver orientation meeting at the beginning of the school year is one method to establish a trusting relationship.

Caregivers can provide cultural, language, academic, social and recreational information about the student that may help the teacher better plan an academic program. By inviting caregivers, Tribal elders and other Tribal members to the classroom to speak to classes, assist with academics, art lessons, field trips and after school activities, teachers and students can greatly benefit from their involvement. Caregivers and community members should be involved in choosing new textbooks, curriculum planning and new teacher orientation workshops. When a caring relationship is established, it is easier for the teacher to help caregivers learn how to help their children at home with academic tasks and to help their children learn appropriate school behavior.

The school can also function as a community facility by opening the building for cultural events and celebrations. Implementing after school activities for members of the American Indian community where elders and other community leaders can be involved can be a useful strategy. When school staff members attend community events involving their American Indian students, further develops between school staff and American Indian Alaska Native students.

**Tier 2 Interventions for American Indian Students and their Families**

The use of American Indian cultural liaisons can be extremely helpful to staff as well as families who need assistance in understanding the various processes and procedures used by individual districts and schools. Trained cultural liaisons have the knowledge of Tribal customs, traditions and language and also understand and know district and school procedures.

Parents can be included on district and school committees that have a direct impact on their child’s education. As volunteers in the classroom, parents can help the teacher by working with small groups of students, reading stories to small groups as well as presenting their knowledge about Tribal customs, language, art and music to entire classrooms or to small groups of students.
Tier 3 Interventions for American Indian Students and their Families

It is important that students and their families understand the reasons for needed additional individualized academic, social and/or behavioral support in the classroom. Cultural liaisons can be extremely helpful explaining the reasons for the need for individual student support and engaging the parents in the planning, implementation and evaluation of these services. The process of assessment for special education service and programming also can be included in this section. Again, it is important that parents and students (if appropriate) be included in this process.

Conclusion

Many school districts have strong Indian education programs. Tribes have made education a priority and a variety of language revitalization efforts are in place. Resources to help educators and parents are available. It is critical that teachers and educators understand issues of language, language loss, and language development on school performance of American Indian students. Many American Indian students are exposed to two languages. For some it is a false assumption that English is their first language. Many American Indian educators believe language issues combined with lack of understanding of native culture are primary factors in the disproportionality of placements of American Indian students in special education programs.

In conclusion, American Indians today face a number of cultural and environmental issues that contribute to their disproportionate representation in special education. However, we must also consider the strengths inherent in the culture and the resiliency of American Indian students and families that allow the American Indian student to be successful.

Resources

For those wishing to review more in resources on American Indian Education and Development, an extensive list of information on culture and languages of different groups can be found at:

http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~cmmr/Native_American.html

A review of American Indian Education Issues can be found at:
http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/AIE/Ind_Ed.html

US Census Bureau Information on American Indian and Alaska Native Populations:
http://www.census.gov/aian/

Resources for American Indian Heritage Month (November)
http://www.colorincolorado.org/calendar/celebrations/aihm/