

# A Survey and Assessment of Culturally Based Education Programs for Native American Students in the United States

---

David Beaulieu

A few years ago when I was conducting field hearings to discuss intergovernmental relations (state, federal, and tribal) in the education of American Indians/Alaska Natives connected to President Clinton's Executive Order on American Indian and Alaska Native Education, a hearing was held in Arizona at Window Rock, capitol of the Navajo Nation. During a morning break from our discussions, I felt a tug upon my sleeve that beckoned me to turn around. At the other end of the tug was an older Navajo man who asked me if I wanted to know what the problem with Indian education was. I said, "Yes, absolutely."

He said quite seriously, "Hollywood!" As soon as I echoed the word "Hollywood," he went on to explain that as a child his family didn't live as Navajos had lived a generation before, nonetheless they had all lived together, their entire family being in constant contact with one another. They spoke Navajo to each other and they all took care of one another. He said that nowadays, parents, whether employed or not, poor or rich, are not with their children but leave them to be raised by the TV set. He said, "Hollywood is raising our children." I said, "Hollywood," nodded my head and thought to myself after listening to a morning of chatter among school people, "yes I think he is on to something there."

What struck me about what he said was. "We all lived together; we took care of each other; we spoke Navajo to each other." In his view Hollywood, as represented through the TV, had become a surrogate Navajo parent.

An Ojibwe tribal school leader once explained his main vision behind the nature of the tribal school he was developing. He said that in bringing elders, parents, and family members into the school, combined with the way in which the school enabled and directed adult child interactions of all types, they were trying to give children positive examples of what family life is all about. The school itself was becoming an Ojibwe extended family, creating its own iteration of it within the school setting. And by consequence, the Ojibwe extended family was becoming the vehicle through which learning was occurring. He had earlier

said that so many grandparents and parents had experienced life as children in boarding schools and in other institutional settings that they had no real role modeling on how to be a parent.

In visiting a school for a study to determine the feasibility of doing research on culturally based education (CBE), a colleague of mine indicated that those who were doing well in school were those students who knew their Native language. To her and those in the school she had interviewed, it wasn't the language per se that was the factor but the use of the Native language in that community to support social interaction within the extended family. The school had for years developed a program with strong parental and community involvement and used the Native language within the educational program. Many of the staff were members of or aligned to the extended families of the students. In another school, a Navajo teacher calls upon her students by their proper relationship term owing to their clan designations and realizes that the students all began to pay her greater respect as a teacher and begin to more seriously participate in classroom activities she has arranged.

In all of the above examples—Hollywood as represented in TV; Native language fluency as an indicator of the presence of a supportive Native extended family in the life of a student who did well academically; a tribal school purveying a way to iterate a Native extended family as a vehicle for learning academic content; and the teacher who has improved her teaching by interacting with students according to their relationship to the teacher in the kinship system of the tribe—I was reminded that learning is a *social* activity. Culture does not exist separate from its specifically-associated and congruent sociolinguistic container, which weds relationships, stories, conversation, and experience as shared by a group of people. Culture cannot be transmitted or passed on to the next generation without learning within that social web of stories and relationships. Indeed they are separable only when we are “alone.”

These ideas, which are considered “common sense” among my selection of local people familiar with Indian communities, is sustained by the theoretical literature that identifies factors that contribute to the successful accomplishment of the purposes and goals of schools with students from unique social-cultural backgrounds. It is parental, familial, and community involvement that matters. However, this is not typically the way in which schools think of “involvement.”

As summarized by Roland Tharp in the technical proposal for the study that included the survey of culturally based education interventions reported in this paper, Cultural Historic Activity Theory (CHAT) holds that:

Primary socialization of infants and young children (and indeed, all later socialization into new communities of practice) is accomplished through joint, meaningful activity with guidance by more accomplished participants, principally through language exchanges or other semiotic processes. Language vocabularies and routines acquired by the learners through these processes are the elements that account for community, linguistic, and cultural continuity. They are also the primary cognitive tools for individual and group problem-solving and adaptation. Attitudes and values are similarly

and simultaneously formed through those linguistic and paralinguistic exchanges. Thus, it follows, culturally based secondary socialization processes (e.g., schooling) can be facilitated by activating the learners' cognitive and linguistic tools laid down by community socialization. Many of these are encoded in the community language (NWREL. 2002, p. 8).

With so much discussion in Native education focused on culture we seem to have deemphasized or forgotten that the real distinctions are essentially social and linguistic in character. Culture is uniquely contained within the social-linguistic web of a human group; within family and community. If we believe that culturally based education will make a difference in the effectiveness of schools, it is how we teach and arrange social activity in schools that we would predict as being the most influential factor. The extent to which the social-linguistic approach of the school mirrors that of the students and community will determine the extent to which the purposes and goals of the school can be accomplished.

It isn't simply a matter of congruence of what exists at an observable moment but also congruence with the underlying community's aspirations as a whole, or those of the families of the children enrolled in the school, with respect to the expectations of the school in the socialization of their children. The school must not simply develop congruent social linguistic approaches to effectively accomplish academic content in the learning of students but must incorporate into its purposes and goals those values of the community for the continued socialization and education of children to adulthood. The school must make deliberate choices that are informed by the adult members of the community which translate these expectations into adult child teaching interactions and other social relationships which occur within the school directly planned and modeled as well as formally encouraged. The development of congruent social linguistic approaches used must also reflect the appropriate milestones from childhood to maturity appropriate to the community.

The school must also make deliberate choices in the same manner that prescribes the learning of new information and knowledge representative of the collective experience of the community and which contextualizes the meaning and relationship of new academic information. Simply put, the goal of culturally based education is two fold; the school must provide both effective and meaningful educational programs. Citing A. D. Baddeley (1990) and F. I. Craik and R. S. Lockhart (1972), Roland Tharp in the feasibility study technical proposal indicates that culturally based education also relies upon ideas taken from cognitive theory.

For learning to occur, relevant prior knowledge in long-term memory must be activated, or made accessible, and the new information must undergo some form of processing. Processing that focuses on conceptual characteristics of the new information, such as its meaning, personal and social relevance, or relationship to prior knowledge and experience, improves learning and recall. Also, the greater the number of associations made between the new and the known, the more likely the new material will be

retained and recalled. Hypotheses derived from such studies and the supporting theory will probably suggest that culturally based education would be superior to the extent that it activates existing (culturally based) schema, to which new abstract instructional goals can be related; to the extent to which cultural context facilitates encoding of new material in a meaningful manner; and to the extent to which cultural context encourages more elaborative strategies (NWREL, 2002, p. 7).

What is offered as theory for individual learning is also, I suspect, collectively applicable to small societies and communities as well. It has been postulated by historians of Indian-European relations and cultural anthropologists that in situations of cultural contact between two societies such as Indian tribal and Western European societies that so long as the power relationships between the two groups are fairly balanced, each will influence the other and a significant, creative, yet selective interchange of ideas and customs can occur. The process of social-cultural change in such situations appears to occur in such a way that new thought and practices are incorporated, allowing social and cultural continuity. The process is deliberate and occurs socially over time and is essentially a process of defining the meaning or value of something new to the group. Sufficient time and deliberate ability of the group to consider new information allows for healthy, creative social and cultural change. History is replete with examples of what happens to small societies when social-cultural change occurs too fast or where community values have a diminishing connection or reference to the social realities of daily life with little or no ability to affect desirable change.

A large part of our thinking in Indian education carries with it the belief that it is possible to transform the educational programs of schools serving Native students so that they will serve the interests of specific tribal communities. That interest is first defined in terms of maintaining social and cultural continuity with the past while adapting to change. Historically Tribal leaders have acquiesced to American schooling of children as a way of enabling and preparing the next generation to meet the needs of the community given new circumstances.

Deliberately considering the nature and meaning of what children should learn for specific Native communities is also a collective responsibility of the community and not simply a burden of the individual learner to consider and accomplish unto him or her self. Yet, despite the fact that schools under tribal control can develop their own standards, all have adapted the educational standards of the state educational authorities. On top of this, the increasing demands of the No Child Left Behind legislation and the demands of school accreditation requirements have been driving an increasing required sameness across the curricular landscape of American education.

In the past three years I have been involved with a project to study the feasibility of doing experimental or quasi-experimental research to determine the impact of culturally based education upon the academic achievement of Native American students. In our work, we have relied upon the notion illustrated in the theoretical literature that the purposes of the school-particularly in the area of

academic achievement-are accomplished through culturally based educational approaches appropriate to students. The operating definition of culturally based education that we have used based upon the theoretical literature is:

Culturally based education incorporates Native language and/or important elements of Native culture. Culturally based interventions introduce these elements as planned activities and materials designed to improve education in terms of community goals and student achievement. They range from broad programs that engage participants for long periods with a high degree of involvement (e.g., all-day immersion programs) to more specific interventions that entail less time and involvement (e.g., a specific language text) (NWREL, 2002, p. 14).

This idea that culturally based education approaches will have a positive effect in the academic achievement of Native children has been a centerpiece of Federal Indian education policy since the passage of the Indian Education Act of 1972, now Title VII of the No Child Left Behind Act. The prior reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1994, the Improving America Schools Act in 1994 included within The Indian Education Act, then Title IX, a new statement of this purpose retained in Title VII of NCLB, which is stated as “To meet the unique educational and culturally related academic needs of American Indian and Alaska Native students, so that such students can meet the same challenging State student academic achievement standards as all other students are expected to meet.”

Title VII also states that:

It is the policy of the United States to fulfill the Federal Government’s unique and continuing trust relationship with and responsibility to the Indian people for the education of Indian children. The Federal Government will continue to work with local educational agencies, Indian tribes and organizations, postsecondary institutions, and other entities toward the goal of ensuring that programs that serve Indian children are of the highest quality and provide for not only the basic elementary and secondary educational needs, but also the unique educational and culturally related academic needs of these children.

I found it interesting to learn that this same phrase, “meeting the culturally related academic needs of American Indian students” actually has a longer history than the passage of the Indian Education Act in 1972. I noticed that it was included in the first Johnson O’Malley (JOM) contract negotiated between the Federal government and the State of Minnesota to facilitate federal withdrawal and the assumption of State authority in the education of American Indians in the state of Minnesota in 1936. I imagine it was included in other such JOM contracts with other states in the 1930s as the Federal government began a policy of withdrawal in the education of American Indians and Alaska Natives and State public schools assumed significant responsibility.

Another aspect of current federal policy that bears upon cultural policy and education is the Native American Languages Act of 1990. The statute, outside of recognizing the relationship between culturally based education and academic

achievement, also recognizes the fundamental rights of Native Americans to preserve, protect, and promote their languages. The Statute, at a closer reading, also appears cognizant of the nature and character of the educational experience of Native children and its relationship to Native languages and cultures. This appears to underlay the strong declaration of policy on the part of the federal government to preserve, protect, and promote the rights of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages.

The Native American Languages Act 1990 declared that:

It is the policy of the United States to—(1) preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages; (2) encourage and support the use of Native American languages as a medium of instruction in order to encourage and support—(a) Native American language survival, (b) equal educational opportunity, (c) increased student success and performance, (d) increased student awareness and knowledge of their culture and history, and (e) increased student and community pride.

Another aspect of official Federal policy affecting American Indians is the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978, which relates to the protection and preservation of traditional religions of Native Americans. This act states that it is

The policy of the United States to protect and preserve for American Indians their inherent right of freedom to believe, express, and exercise the traditional religions of the American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut, and Native Hawaiians, including but not limited to access to sites, use and possession of sacred objects, and the freedom to worship through ceremonials and traditional rites.

The federal statutes formally recognize the relationship between culturally based education approaches including the use of Native languages and academic achievement as well as a fundamental right of Native societies to preserve their languages and cultures as direct goals and purposes related to the education of their children. This latter goal, the transmission of language and cultural heritage of a society, simply cannot be accomplished without the recognition and support of the manner in which young children are socialized and educated in any society. With significant time being spent by young children in schools and in activities connected increasingly to the transmission of American commercial and popular cultural values, the role of education has become increasingly a major concern to the social-linguistic future of Native societies.

In consideration of the phrase “the unique educational and culturally related academic needs of American Indian and Alaska Native students” and our official reliance upon meeting these unique needs for enabling the success of American Indian students academically through Title VII of the No Child Left behind Act statute—not to mention its reference in the Native Languages Act—what precisely are the unique educational and culturally related academic needs of American Indian and Alaska Native students? How are schools meeting these needs and is there evidence that meeting such needs has the effect intended by policy?

### Description of culturally based education programs

In the past two years I conducted a survey of all the culturally based programs in the United States supported by the federal government in reliance of the federal statutes (Beaulieu, 2003). The survey of culturally based education programs in the United States was conducted as a component of a study determining the feasibility of doing experimental and quasi experimental research associated with the impact of culturally based education upon the academic achievement of American Indian/Alaska Native Students (NWREL, 2002, 2004). The survey of culturally based education programs included a review of all 145 Administration for Native Americans (ANA) language preservation grants which were reviewed to identify 77 instruction-related programs as opposed to those that had a developmental and/or planning emphasis. All of these programs had 90-100% Native participation. The survey also included a stratified random and purposeful sample of over 1200 Indian Education Act formula grant programs and those funded by other sectors of the Indian Education Act to identify all the possible programs that could be considered culturally related.

A review of all the programs in the survey indicated that there were five types of culturally based education programs and four types of programs that are not defined as culturally based. The review indicated that 66% of all program were not culturally related and that these non-culturally related programs were almost exclusively instructional time-added approaches such as summer school, after school homework assistance, tutoring, home-school coordination/student incentives, and academic enrichment that was not culturally related; Attendance improvement and dropout prevention efforts were also among the types of programs being offered.

The survey indicated that there were five distinct types of culturally based education programs: Culturally Based Instruction (CBI), Native Language Instruction (NLI), Native Studies (NS), Native Cultural Enrichment (NCE), and Culturally Relevant Materials (CRM). These types of culturally based education are identified as follows:

Culturally based instruction (CBI) Culturally based instruction within the framework of CBE is represented in programs where the Native language is the language of instruction and/or the language of social interaction, including classroom discourse. These include Native language immersion efforts that encompass the entire school, Head Start immersion, immersion classrooms, and summer camp immersion programs. They include bilingual and two way immersion efforts, as well. These programs represent types with two different purposes; programs that seek to create native language fluency in a population of learners that do not know their Native language or whose Native language competence is underdeveloped as compared to fluent peers and programs that seek to provide academic content to learners through their Native language while also developing their Native first language competence.

Native language instruction (NLI) Native language instruction CBE represents programs where the Native language is the subject of instruction. There

are situations where a tribe has required and incorporated standards for Native language instruction within the schools of a reservation and there are language classes offered to those Native students who have an interest in the language and wish to take it as an elective. This includes incorporating culturally relevant materials for use in such courses.

Native studies programs (NS) Native studies CBE is represented in programs offering instruction in Native history and culture including contemporary events and Native civics-related subject matter such as treaties and tribal government.

Native cultural enrichment (NCE) Native cultural enrichment CBE is represented in programs that offer Pow-wows, presentations by knowledgeable and respected local tribal people, arts and crafts and culturally-related special honoring. These programs bring aspects of Native culture into the school or have students experience them outside of the school.

Culturally relevant materials (CRM) Culturally relevant materials CBE are represented in programs that include instructional materials that reflect students' identities and or culture in existing courses or curriculum. Most of these typically include reading materials with a Native theme that are brought into a reading program.

Native student population density The survey noted that there was a strong relationship between the density of the Native student population at a school site and the presence of culturally based education.

- 78% of all programs at schools with Native student populations of 10-50% were not cultural based, 22% were CBE.
- 65% of all programs at schools with Native student populations of 50-90% were not culturally based, 35% were CBE.
- 24% of all programs at 90-100% Native student populations were not culturally based, 86% were CBE.

### **CBE by Native Population Percentage at School Sites**

	Not-Culturally Based	Culturally-Based
10-50% Native Student	78%	22%
50-90% Native Student	65%	35%
90-100% Native Student	24%	86%

The general pattern of these CBE program types indicates a strong relationship between high Native student population density and the power and diversity of CBE types offered at a single program site. There are more Native language efforts with CBI and NLI program frameworks and a greater diversity of CBE program types offered at school sites with high Native student population density than at sites with low Native student density.



## Total CBE sample program sites by Native student population

1. Out of these 164 CBE program sites, 116 or 70.73% are in school sites where the Native Student population is 90-100%, 24 or 14.63% are at school sites where the Native student population is 50-90%, 23 or 14.02% are at school sites where the Native student population is 10-50%.
2. 140 of 164 or 85.37 % of all CBE programs are being offered at schools with 50-100% Native student populations.
3. There are 109 of 164 or 67% of the total CBE sample program sites that feature Native language either CBI or NLI. Sites with 50-100% Native Student population represent 104 of the 109 language based programs or 95.41% of all such programs.

### Major Type of CBE Program By Native Student Population Density

	90-100%	50-90%	10-50%	0-10%	Total
CBI	38 (100%)	-0-	-0-	-0-	38
NLI	56 (77.87%)	10 (14.08%)	4 (5.71%)	1 (1.41%)	71
NS	14 (60.87%)	4 (17.39%)	5 (21.74%)	-0-	23
NCE	5 (15.63%)	7 (21.86%)	11(34.38%)	-0-	23
CRM	3 (33.33%)	3 (33.33%)	3 (33.33%)	-0-	9
Total	116 (70.73%)	24 (14.63%)	23 (14.02%)	1 (0.6%)	164

The evidence resulting from the survey indicates that we have very few programs that are described as culturally based education and that these are for the most part concentrated in schools with high density Native student populations. We have even fewer school wide social-linguistic approaches or programs that meet the definition of culturally based education that incorporate all the elements of the theoretical literature on culturally based education.

### Concluding Remarks

The small number of culturally based education programs is discouraging particularly in view of the efforts we have made over the past 33 years since the passage of the Indian Education Act of 1972 to improve both the quality and effectiveness of the education programs of schools educating Native students. Certainly no one can blame the failures of schools to be successful with Native students upon culturally based education approaches as there are too few programs that serve as models.

Part of the issue may be related to the desire to focus on the reform of existing schools rather than re-designing them in the first place for the purposes of more effectively educating Native American students. What would such a school look like and how would we construct an educational arena within the social-cultural fabric of the families and community of the students that would effectively accomplish academic content while maintaining and enhancing continuity with the social linguistic and cultural heritage of the tribal society and community of the students?

That latter effort I believe would require that we focus on:

- Significant, long term, and sustained effort on the training of teachers from the local community.
- Professional development strategies that are based on what we know about creating social and linguistic environments that are familiar to students and represent what the community of the school wants for the continued education and socialization of its children as well as creating instruction strategies we know work with the Native students of the school.
- Locally based research that can be developed concurrent with larger efforts in educational research that will inform the community of educators and community members involved.
- Actually developing local standards for the education of Native students to be represented in what we teach them.
- Developing the curricular approaches consistent with these local defined education objectives for what student should be taught.
- Creating accreditation standards so that we can evaluate the accomplishment and quality of our efforts and that the principal 'public' to which the educational program is responsible and accountable in this regard is the public represented by the Tribe.
- Create the new knowledge necessary to guide this development among tribal education leaders.

We must create the structures supportive of this effort, which will allow us to develop and sustain what must be accomplished. This must be accomplished and developed locally through formative, community-based processes. These include not only teacher training, professional development and curriculum development structures but also the social and political process integral to the development of the interrelationships of the community as they pertain to school operation and function within the overall social cultural and educational development of the community. I suppose most of all; continuity of effort is the essential ingredient.

Our current Federal Indian education policy is not enabling either effective or meaningful educational programs for Native students despite the pronouncements of the statutes. It is also having little impact upon the retention

and preservation of Native languages. We must, I believe, rethink the policy structure in which we have been invested since the 1930s when the State school systems took over most of the direct control of schools for the education of American Indian and Alaska Native students. We have, I believe, gained considerable experience and a growing understanding of what works given the nature of intergovernmental relationships involved in the education of Native students since the 1930s. In my view, our experience has led us to the point of needing urgent action. Despite advances made in Indian education since the 1930s the essential relationships have remained intact. We need to reconsider ways in which tribal governments can represent the interests of their students in state public schools particularly within tribal jurisdictions that receive impact aid.

We must make the intentions of Federal Indian education statutes a greater reality. There are currently significant incongruities between the Federal protective statutes regarding language and culture and our education statutes; similarly there is incongruence within No Child Left Behind Act, between its Title VII and the purposes of the Indian Education Act, Title VII, and the implementation of the general provisions of the statute.

We must develop the concept of Federal trust responsibility for Indian education just recently written into Federal law as we also develop and grow the possibilities and potentials of Tribal sovereignty and jurisdiction in Native education beyond simply the running of schools under grants or contracts with the federal government. And of course we must begin to redefine the concept of "equal educational opportunity" as it pertains to the education of Native students in that area of the law which speaks to providing an adequate education. An adequate education in this case is defined as that which is required to finance what is necessary to produce effective and meaningful educational programs for American Indian/Alaska Native students. Certainly that is not represented by the \$233.00 per American Indian and Alaska Native student provided for that purpose in the Indian Education Act Formula grants in state and BIA funded schools nor is it represented in the current array of programs in the federal portfolio of programs funded in Local Education Agencies serving the approximately 500,000 American Indian and Alaska Native students in the United States.

**David Beaulieu, Ph.D.** (Minnesota Chippewa) is former Director of the Office of Indian Education, U. S. Department of Education and immediate past president of the National Indian Education Association. He is currently Director of the Center for Indian Education at Arizona State University

### References

- Baddeley, A. D. (1990). *Human memory: Theory and practice*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Beaulieu, David L. (2003). Descriptive report of culturally based education programs, Task 2, Preliminary study for experimental research on culturally based education for American Indian/Alaska Native students, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), Portland Oregon. July 29, 2003. Unpublished Report.

- Craik, F. I., & Lockhart, R. S. (1972). Levels of processing: A framework for memory research. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior, 11*, 671-684.
- Northwest Regional Education Laboratory (NWREL) (2002). Feasibility study technical proposal to the Institute of Educational Sciences, U. S. Department of Education for Preliminary study for experimental research on culturally based education for American Indian/Alaska Native students. Unpublished document.
- Northwest Regional Education Laboratory (NWREL) (2004). Preliminary study for experimental research on culturally based education for American Indian/Alaska Native students Task 2: Assess feasibility. Final paper Submitted to: Institute of Education Sciences U.S. Department of Education June 2004. [On-line] Available: <http://www.nwrel.org/indianed/cbe/2004.pdf>