

PS 18 AMERICAN INDIANS AND MAINSTREAM SLPs: THE MERGING OF TWO WORLDS

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BACKGROUND

Between 1990 and 2000, the population of American Indian and Alaska Natives in the U.S. grew 26% based on the 2,474,956 persons who were identified during the census as American Indian by “race alone.” Those who identified themselves as American Indian by “race alone or in combination” totaled 4,119,301. If one uses the latter figure, there was a 110.3% rate of growth among American Indians between 1990 and 2000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). In the United States, there are approximately 650-700 separate and distinct American Indian tribal entities with distinct languages and cultures (Westby & Vining, 2002). Thus, there is considerable heterogeneity within and across tribes; they may differ in terms of cultural, sociological, linguistic, and demographic variables. It is critical to remember that not all American Indian groups have the same customs, beliefs, and values. However, SLPs can be aware of cultural tendencies as well as common historical, cultural, and environmental variables that may influence their interactions with American Indians.

CULTURAL AND FAMILIAL VARIABLES

First, many American Indians believe in taking life as it comes and accepting all circumstances; SLPs should not interpret this as passivity and as resistance to change. Some tribal groups are forced to constantly choose between White people's modern medicine and traditional American Indian approaches. This can cause uncertainty and guilt for some tribal members. It is often appropriate to consult with an Indian medicine person before recommending a therapeutic intervention or medical procedure. Some American Indians may be unwilling to discuss family affairs freely. They may believe that words have power to hurt as well as heal, so they feel that if they even discuss a disabling condition, the discussion itself can bring greater problems to the person or the family as a whole. Thus, it may be difficult or impossible to gather important case history information. Personal questions may be viewed as prying into one's personal affairs. It is important to explain the reasons for asking specific questions.

It is critical to reach out to the families, both immediate and extended (especially the grandparents), of American Indian students (Joe & Malach, 2004). One should not attempt to treat the student or adult in isolation. Many American Indian families view rehabilitation as a family-centered rather than client-centered affair (Westby & Vining, 2002). SLPs should address all family members during meetings. At the beginning of meetings and visits with families, it is important for SLPs to engage in small talk to establish rapport with family members. When families do seek health care or services such as speech-language remediation, they may be slow to open up to SLPs. It is important to take time to build trust, because many American Indians do not trust members of the majority culture and do not expect to be treated fairly (Sue & Sue, 2003).

U.S. schools have historically viewed the language and culture of the American Indian as detrimental to the child's future. Thus, parent involvement has been viewed as negative. Because of the consequent adversarial relationship between parents and schools, parent involvement has often been limited and parents

viewed as “apathetic” (Robinson-Zanartu, 1996). Thus, SLPs should be careful to avoid this judgment and encourage parental/family involvement.

Family members may feel that it is a sign of respect to avoid eye contact with SLPs and to refrain from asking them direct questions. If families feel that personnel are hurried, they may not discuss their true concerns. We need to allow plenty of time for meetings so that families will not feel rushed. Some researchers found that the families of the Pueblo Indian children in their study valued the professional’s emotional support and respect for them much more than they valued the professional’s title or the agency’s status. Thus, SLPs must be especially careful to take time to build rapport (Joe & Malach, 2004).

Support groups should be provided when possible. The traditional group approach to problem-solving in some tribes fits ideally with the support group concept, and SLPs can take advantage of this. The concept of special education may be unfamiliar to American Indians, who often have little knowledge about specific available services. The little that is known about special education tends to be negative, and some parents have removed their children from school rather than allowing them to be placed into special education (Robinson-Zañartu, 1996). Because of this, SLPs should ensure that families truly understand the nature of services that are offered. Working with a member of the particular tribe, who can serve as a cultural mediator, is recommended.

CONSIDERATIONS IN WORKING WITH STUDENTS

Students may experience religious conflict in educational situations in which they are asked to complete culturally inappropriate activities (e.g., dissecting animals in traditional biology classes). Professionals should give American Indian students alternate assignments in these situations. School SLPs need to be aware that certain markings or objects (e.g., amulets) may be placed on American Indian students during sacred ceremonies. It is important to learn about these customs so that students are not criticized or punished for culturally appropriate behavior.

Some studies have shown that American Indian students tend to do better on tests of spatial ability and visual skills than on tests of verbal and/or auditory skills. SLPs should be aware of this in assessment situations (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2008). Certain pictures, toys, dolls, and animals may be viewed as causes of evil or bad luck within certain tribes. The family should be consulted to make certain that the materials used in assessment and intervention are appropriate. It is culturally appropriate within many American Indian groups for children to avoid eye contact with adults. SLPs may misinterpret this as evidence of shyness or as a deficit in interpersonal language skills. Some Navajo children may not respond when asked for their name. American Indian students may be incorrectly diagnosed as having language disorders if they do not interact with adult examiners or if they give limited responses. These behaviors, however, are often culturally appropriate for situations in which children are asked to respond to questions from an adult authority figure (Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 2006). During assessment and intervention, silence is often a culturally appropriate response. Remember, students are taught to reflect before answering a question. Students should not be penalized when they fail to respond immediately to questions that are asked.

In many tribes, children observe while elders tell stories. Thus, when asked to perform narrative tasks in an assessment, young American Indian students may not respond in the desired manner. Scores on formal tests may fall “below the norm” because of a variety of factors. Low parental education, poverty, nonstandard English usage, lack of facility with English, poor health and nutrition, limited experience in taking formal tests, and other factors are likely to influence the test performance of American Indian students. This is especially true of tests that emphasize auditory and verbal skills (Robinson-Zañartu, 1996).

Many American Indian children will not respond to a question if the answer is something that the person asking the question already knows. The child, for example, might not respond to the test question, “What color is a banana?” Thus, in testing situations, they may be nonresponsive (Harris, 1998). American Indian students tend to have strengths in the visual modality and often learn quickly by observing the behavior of others. SLPs can make use of these strengths to enhance learning. Many American Indian students perform more readily when learning activities are presented in a group situation. Individual instruction may, therefore, be less effective than group instruction. Many American Indian students feel uncomfortable in competitive situations—they believe they should not stand out from the group (Robinson-Zañartu, 1996). Thus, they should be provided with cooperative rather than competitive learning experiences. The cooperative learning model is ideal for many American Indian students. American Indian students often do not wish to be singled out from the group and, therefore, should be praised for special accomplishments in situations where others are not present.

Some children may give less feedback than Anglo children during interactions (e.g., nodding, smiling, looking at the speaker). It is important not to judge these children as having clinically significant pragmatic language problems. SLPs should use materials in assessment and intervention that are culturally relevant. American Indian children and children from other cultural backgrounds may enjoy learning about local Indian history and traditions. Celebrations of holidays such as Thanksgiving and Columbus Day may be perceived as "prejudiced" by American Indians. SLPs should avoid materials and terms that portray American Indians in ways that promote negative stereotypes (e.g., "squaw, savage, papoose, brave;" singing of songs such as "Ten Little Indians;" collecting scalps, making a whooping war cry). To reduce prejudice, SLPs can discuss the stereotypes of American Indians and other minorities as portrayed through the popular media.

Many American Indian students are "whole concept" rather than linear learners. They may understand explanations more easily when they progress from the whole to the parts, rather than from the parts to the whole. Multi-sensory, whole language activities are likely to be successful with American Indian students. Many American Indian students will observe an activity repeatedly before attempting to do it themselves (Harris, 1998). In the European-American culture, children are encouraged to use the trial-and-error method of learning; for some American Indian children, however, the cultural norm is that competence should truly precede performance. Thus, SLPs should allow American Indian students to watch activities several times before asking them to do the activities. In addition, American Indian students may respond more often if they are allowed longer “wait times” (Harris, 1998). Because of the cultural emphasis on silence, these students often do not answer a question immediately—but they will respond eventually if SLPs are willing to wait. Culturally, because of the emphasis on cooperation rather than competition, American Indian students may feel uncomfortable defending themselves verbally or openly disagreeing with others. Thus, American Indian students may need extra support when situations are encountered that require one to show disagreement or to defend a position. Story-telling is important within American Indian families and can be used as a tool for teaching vocabulary (Englebret, Bear Eagle, & CHiXapKaid, 2007). Stories should be accompanied by clear, non-biased, realistic illustrations. Some students may prefer to hear a story in its entirety before discussing it or answering questions about it.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

SLPs’ interactions with American Indian students and their families can be influenced by a number of variables. When culturally appropriate assessment and treatment procedures are used, American Indian students and their families will benefit.

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