

American Encounters: Teaching U.S. History from Indian Country
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Abstract

This paper is designed to discuss “American Encounters: Teaching U.S. History from Indian Country,” a staff development initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education Strengthening the Teaching of American History (STAH) program. This paper describes how this program attempts to increase the understanding, appreciation, and excitement for traditional American history among native and non-native students in Gallup-McKinley County New Mexico, centered on achieving this goal by actively involving teachers in the in-depth study of American history. The focus of the project in general is on increasing the history content knowledge and pedagogical skills of teacher participants as well as their understanding of the connection between the two areas. Data from surveys, observations and document analysis reveal that teachers, for the most part, are equipped to encourage student voice and enable multiple perspectives in the classroom when teaching American History.

Conceptual Framework

There is an unquestioned need for well-trained teachers for students representing American Indian/Alaskan Native groups. These native students are among the most "at risk" students in our schools with the highest dropout rate of any ethnic group in the United States (Indian Nations at Risk, 1991). The National Center for Education Statistics reported that in the 2001-2002 school year, 47% of Native American fourth graders were below the basic level of proficiency in history. In the Gallup-McKinley school district's report card for the 2001-2002 school year, elementary schools fell well below the New Mexico average in social study skills. Third graders are 22.3% below the New Mexico average of 50%, fourth graders are 22.9% below the New Mexico average of 51%, and fifth graders are 18.4% below the New Mexico average of 38.1%. The national average is at 50% based on New Mexico's reporting method. It is apparent that the school district needs to take some measure to improve student learning, and in turn, school performance numbers.

Evidence is limited about how culturally relevant pedagogy and the use. In 2003, the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning published an overview of strategies

designed to impact the achievement of Native students. While scholars have argued that Native students thrive at school when instruction is congruent with their culture, connected to their history, and consistent with their community's worldview, this review by McREL found that causal conclusions could not be drawn about the effectiveness of these conditions for helping students meet standards (McREL, 2003). Other research has shown that increasing the amount of Native culture in traditional schools appears to have an influence on student success in a traditional school setting (Barnhardt, 1990). This success is also present when the school's philosophy and goals emphasize cultural programs (Barnhardt, 1990).

This research is situated around teaching and learning social studies, because it is the area of the curriculum where, as Ladson-Billings points out, we cannot ignore race. In terms of examining contents areas of teaching, Social Studies, and American History in particular, lends itself to participatory learning and multiple perspectives. The social studies are broad enough, and cover enough disciplines, that by nature that are interdisciplinary. Based on the research about multicultural education, it is clear that when implemented correctly multicultural education

can have a positive impact on students and greater society. What the research does not present is how teachers are using these ideas in their classrooms. Multicultural education is a major buzzword in education courses and research, but how are teachers thinking about and using this in their classrooms? What are teacher attitudes towards the role of voice in the classroom? These questions guided this study.

Pewewardy and Hammer (2003) point out that, in the absence of corps of Native teachers large enough to teach Native students in a culturally appropriate way, student achievement is enhanced when non-Native teachers create an learning environment, *place-based education*, where students acquire the knowledge, language, and skills to function in the mainstream culture by incorporating opportunities to learn more about their own Native culture and language from the resources in their communities. It is becoming more and more obvious that teachers need the proper training and tools to create a culturally rich curriculum so that their students will advance and perform above standards. Increasingly, research is showing that the reasons Native students do not do well in school has to do with the nature of schools, education, and teachers in the United States. Researchers are increasingly rejecting the old "deficit" ideas about the cultural deprivation and/or intellectual inferiority of Native students (see for example Reyhner, 1992; Reyhner, Lee, & Gabbard, 1993) in favor of approaches that more explicitly involve culturally relevant pedagogy (Kung, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This research project examines such practices with Navajo and Pueblo students (as well as students of Hispanic origin) in and around Gallup, New Mexico.

The Gallup-McKinley school district's report card also shows that attendance rate in the district are lower than that of the state of New Mexico. The attendance rate is 2.6% lower

than the attendance rate in New Mexico (the district does not report a drop out rate for elementary school grades). Additionally, it has been shown that school attendance rises with culturally relevant programs (Smith, Leake, & Kamekona, 1998). Not only do attendance rates rise, but also dropout rates decrease when culturally relevant content is used in the curriculum (Stiles, 1997; Yagi, 1985).

Ongoing data collection and analysis for this project involves formative and summative analysis regarding the impact of the program, particularly the Summer Institute, on teachers' attitudes, knowledge, and teaching behaviors in American history and the impact upon student learning in their classrooms. One specific for this program is to increase teachers' depth of knowledge of American history content and of techniques for teaching it to their students that are enjoyable for their students and effective.

Methodologies and Findings

American Encounters: Teaching U.S. History from Indian Country not only a staff development program provided by Gallup-McKinley County Public Schools (GMCS) in cooperation with the faculty of the History Department and the School of Education at American University in Washington, D.C., but also an ongoing research project for the authors. In terms of staff development, each program year teacher participants travel to American University in Washington, D.C., and take part in an intensive three-week Summer Institute consisting of two graduate level courses: one in history and the other in education. American University faculty provide both the history content and pedagogy courses during the three-week Summer Institute. The Summer Institute emphasizes the partnership between history content and strategies for improving instruction, which are the primary vehicles of the project leading to improvement in the learning of American history by Gallup-McKinley County Public School students.

The power of this model is in the alignment of the two courses, which encourages an intense investigation into American history content in the history course and the immediate exposure to practical techniques for transferring that learning in the education course. Data for this paper were collected during the first year of the project, the 2005-2006 academic year.

A variety of research methods have been used to collect qualitative and quantitative data to measure the outcomes listed above. Teachers completed an evaluation at the end of the summer institute designed to measure several of the goals and objectives of the program. In October 2006, teachers filled out a survey designed to query their attitudes towards several of the themes presented during the summer, as well as their attitudes about the program as a whole. Also in October, teachers were observed in their classrooms. An observation sheet that looked at classroom set up, student interaction, and evidence of student work was used to allow for a qualitative discussion of the use of the skills taught during the program. Finally, teachers completed an Action Research project in their classrooms, where they each established a research question, pertaining to their university coursework, and then did research in their classrooms to discover the impact of these new teaching practices. This research allows for an initial evaluation of the impact of the teaching practices advocated by the summer program.

As described above, mixed methods were used to measure the outcomes of the American Encounters project. Each method looked at a few of the objectives of the program, and provided insight into the effectiveness of the institute on teacher awareness and student achievement as a result of the coursework undertaken by the teachers during the summer of 2005. Below, we present the methods that were used to collect data in each area, and some findings.

Survey Findings: Institute Evaluation

Following the summer institute evaluation described above, a questionnaire containing a section about the acquisition of skills and strategies, and addressed two of the primary objectives of the project, which were to increase teacher content knowledge in the area of American history, and to help them to acquire strategies for teaching American history in a culturally responsive way and increasing student achievement. The program evaluation had a 3-point likert style of questioning. The data from this instrument has been tallied and comments from the teachers have been recorded. The rationale for the specific pedagogical methods taught is explained above, and is research-based. The questionnaire used a 3-point likert scale, with choices of agree, neither agree nor disagree, and disagree. Agree is scored as 3 points while disagree is scored as 1 point. Arithmetic means have been calculated for each of the twelve survey questions, with any unanswered questions not included in the mean for that question.

According to the survey, all participants said they agree with the statement, "I gained knowledge of early American History," giving a mean score of 3. For the statement, "The process of developing materials to teach Early American history was learned," there is a mean score of 2.76, with all but 3 people agreeing. In terms of teaching strategies, 16 of 17 teachers agreed that they, "Have a greater understanding of the value/importance of using artifacts with my students." The same 16 teachers agreed that they, "Have a greater understanding of the value/importance of using primary sources with their students." Fourteen teachers agreed with the statement, "I have a greater understanding of the value/importance of using historic places with my students," with a mean score of 2.75 for that question.

Survey Findings: Teacher Attitudes

The survey of teacher attitudes was an attempt to measure whether or not teachers self-report using certain methods in their classrooms, and whether they find these methods to be appropriate for their students. The survey queries two major themes that are applicable to measuring the effectiveness of the project. These are, first, how teachers choose the content they teach, and second, the methods of instruction and assessment utilized by the teachers. The data on this survey was analyzed using a 5-point likert scale, with 5 meaning strongly agree and 1 meaning strongly disagree. Arithmetic means have been calculated for the responses to each question, with questions left blank receiving no value.

In terms of how teachers choose content, this theme relates directly to ideas about culturally responsive teaching. Teachers were asked questions about their reliance on the textbook, use of outside sources, the role of multiple perspectives, and the role of student interest and culture in choosing content. There is an overwhelming correlation between positive teacher attitudes and the teaching practices advocated by the summer institute. In response to the statement, “I choose my Social Studies content based on the assigned textbook,” teachers responded with a mean of 2.36, which is in between “neither agree nor disagree” and “disagree” on the likert scale. In response to, “I teach using information from outside of the textbook,” teachers had a mean score of 4.63, or in between agree and strongly agree.

In addition to queries about content form within and outside of the assigned textbook, teachers responded to the statement, “Multiple perspectives play an integral role in my classroom,” with a mean score of 4.63. This is important because multiple perspectives were stressed as a method of teaching that allows for cultural relevancy and responsiveness. When presented with the

statement, “My students learn better when they see their culture represented in course content,” the teachers responded with a mean of 4.31. When queried about the role of student interests in choosing content, “Student interests play a role in how I choose Social Studies content,” teachers responded with a mean of 3.86. This score is lower than some of the others, however, in Gallup-McKinley County Schools, as may other places due to NCLB, state standards and district curriculum dictate fairly specifically what can and should be taught to students during each class period. As such, a mean of 3.86 demonstrates that teachers are trying to allow room for student interests in their already tight curricular schedules.

Observations

Classrooms observations took place in October of 2005 for all participants in this study, but for the purposes of this paper, two classrooms in Gallup will be presented as “case studies”. An observation protocol was used to direct the observer to look for particular elements of the classroom interaction and environment, both in terms of the actual lesson and also the physical set up of the room. Observers looked for evidence of encouragement of student voice, as present in the classroom set up, for example chairs or desks in circles rather than rows, and the student work displayed on walls (if any). In the lessons observers were looking for teacher-student interaction, students interacting with each other, multiple perspectives, artifacts and primary sources, cultural relevance, and active student discovery. Observations were conducted in pairs, with two observers using the same form during the same time periods in each classroom, and data from both observations were used in data analysis to strengthen the validity of the observations. The teachers in Gallup present slightly different pictures. “Jocelyn” entered teaching through the Teach for America program, which is an alternative route to teacher licensure. She finished the

program, and has continued to teach in Gallup, and this is currently her fifth year in a classroom. She teaches at an elementary school that has not made AYP. The students at her schools are predominantly Native American. “Ben” teaches seventh grade Social Studies in a Middle School in Gallup. Ben is a traditional career-switcher who decided to teach after many years in the business world. This is his sixth year teaching. His school has a more diverse student population than Jocelyn’s, though still predominantly Native American, a significant percentage of students are Hispanic. His school has not made AYP, but is not undergoing corrective action under NCLB.

Jocelyn’s classroom in New Mexico also included ideas of perspective and voice. The students had created personal histories on poster boards with two purposes. The first was to have students understand what artifacts are. The second was to include student ideas in their definition of history. They set up the room like a museum, with half the students walking around the exhibits, and the other half standing by their boards. Then the students switched the posters and changed roles. The walls in Jocelyn’s classroom contained student work and goals. In Gallup, charts of student progress are required according to the Baldrige criteria method, which the school district mandates. As evidence of this system, charts were on the walls to measure student progress and efficiency. Her walls contain a calendar in English, Navajo, and Spanish languages. She also had the Navajo alphabet displayed.

Ben’s class in NM remained active and appeared to be engaged throughout the lesson. Ben’s school also did not use bells to signal the change in periods, but all of the teachers knew when the students had to switch and let them go promptly on time. The 25 students sat down quickly, and Ben began the lesson. The students were learning about making comparisons, with the example

being two types of basket makers in early New Mexico history. Throughout the lesson Ben would call on students to role-play or pantomime different vocabulary words that they needed to learn for the unit and then other students would guess which word was being presented. He would also ask questions, and the class moved at a quick pace. Ben’s classroom walls showed his inclusion of perspective and student voice. He had student work on the bulletin boards, and this work shows those goals. The project displayed was about family and personal history, and included overlaps between family and local NM history.

Interviews

After the classroom observations each teacher participated in an individual unstructured interview, conducted in person or over the phone. The questions focused on issues of student voice and what the teachers think that means. Questions were posed about power and whether or not they see teaching as being connected to power relations. In the dialogue from these conversations, more in-depth information was gleaned about how the teachers viewed their instructional delivery and the classroom interactions among their students, particularly related to voice and power in the classroom. During interviews, teachers in Gallup spoke about projects they had students complete with the ultimate goal of creating a framework for how the students would be looking at history throughout the year. Both spoke about using student experiences to make their framework and discussion of history accessible to the students. One teacher wants her students to learn that history is constructed, and so she tried to use multiple ways to discuss the same period of time or the same events. Another said about his students, “they have experiences and a history. They need to share that.”

Document Analysis

Teacher Action Research Reports were an important component of the American Encounters project. Action Research was the major assignment for the Education course. We did this because teacher research has the potential to make significant impact on the culture of teaching and in the field in general. For example, Cochran-Smith and Lytle have concluded that teacher research is an important tool to use within the context of the standards movement and other current reforms that create an educational climate for dramatic change (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999)

Document analysis was used to analyze the data made available by the participants Teacher Research. Using the research questions for the study as guides, themes that reflected on the goals and objectives of the project, specifically, primary sources, local resources, teacher use of technology, and artifacts, as well as general respect for student voice and perspectives. These research reports are unique to each teacher and classroom, and they reflect aspects of our program that each individual teacher thought would be applicable to his or her classroom.

A total of 19 teachers completed and turned in their action research projects at the end of the program, in March of 2006. Of those 19 teachers, only three did not use one or more of the specific methods advocated in the program during their action research. One of those teachers was a special education teacher, and another was teaching reading. While they could have integrated the methods into their projects, it is understandable that they did not, as one teacher was working under a classroom teachers lessons, and the other was not teaching American History content.

Of the 16 teachers who used the advocated techniques, 5 report using primary sources, 10 report using images, and 6 report using artifacts. This division begs the question, how

do you classify an artifact as compared to an image or a primary source? The American Encounters program advocates the use of all three, and based on the papers, many of the images being presented to students were in fact pictures of primary document or artifacts. Also evident in the papers, was that teachers were using artifacts as primary source material for their students. This overlap between categories is to be expected. For data collection purposes, we used the words that the teachers chose to use in their papers.

Nine teachers specifically mentioned using culturally relevant teaching methods or materials, including the use of visual aids, historical fiction, primary documents, and culturally specific content. These practices were taught and discussed during the summer program. Several of the teachers were trying to see if the cultural relevance of their content and methods would increase student engagement or achievement. Of those nine teachers, only one did not report an increase in student engagement, however, this same teacher did not comment on engagement at all in her project. Two of the projects reported inconclusive results in terms of student achievement, one said she could not discern what exactly had caused the increase in grades, and the other did not share out information about achievement. However, seven of the teachers who used culturally relevant content and methods reported an increase in student achievement.

Beyond the group of teachers who specifically defined their project as culturally relevant or responsive, 13 teachers cited an increase in student achievement, generally as measured by pre- and post-assessments. Fifteen of the teachers reported an increase in student engagement, excitement, or interest, as measured by teacher observations, class discussions, student surveys and participation.

Conclusions

Our desire in developing this research agenda was to directly address challenges to create a model in which students of Native-American heritage study traditional American History through investigations into their own cultures. The program is likely not only to improve performance in history content and achievement overall. In many ways, the first year of the American Encounters: Teaching US History from Indian Country, has met many of its objectives. For example, we found that teachers have deepened their understanding of American history from the perspectives of both American Indians and European colonists and have acquired strategies for teaching American history in ways that are culturally responsive to students' needs and lead to greater student achievement. Teachers were also able to incorporate more work with primary sources and artifacts into instruction to enhance student learning and look to local resources in their home communities for authentic artifacts and primary sources and monuments to help in teaching American history from multiple perspectives.

In the summer institute post-evaluation, teachers reported an increase in American history knowledge as well as an increase in teaching strategies that are culturally relevant. Through the survey of attitudes completed by teachers in October, we see that teachers value the use of primary sources and artifacts, as well as have respect for encouraging

multiple perspectives in history. The teacher's Action Research reports reflect the use of these sources, as well as an increase in student engagement and academic performance. Nine of the 19 papers specifically mention using technology to access primary sources and content materials for their classes and research projects, which demonstrates an increase in the use of technology by the teachers.

Interestingly, of the 19 research projects, twelve teachers used the advocated methods in conjunction with writing and literacy assignments. Teachers used American History content to meet district literacy goals, which shows an innovative use of the skills they learned at American University. As American University becomes more familiar with the Gallup-McKinley County Schools, it is clear that they are an extremely standards-driven district, without any form of Social Studies or American History standards. This leaves the Social Studies teachers with the responsibility of tying their content to the literacy standards for the district. Directions for further research include the impact of specific instruction on how to use American History content and the methods taught during the summer institute, to teach for literacy goals and standards. In this way, the program would still be able to meet its obligations under the grant proposal, and also to better meet the district's needs and the needs of the Native Students they are responsible for.

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