Factors Impacting the Graduation and Dropout Rates of American Indian Males with Disabilities

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Native education is in a state of emergency, and the federal government needs to take immediate action to ensure that Native students grow into engaged, productive citizens of both their tribes and the nation as a whole

— National Indian Education Association, 2012

Introduction

Since the 1970s, the federal government has mandated the provision of special education and related services to students whose learning, behavioral, and/or physical differences negatively impact their academic performance in schools. Although such services are mandated, many students with disabilities do not remain in school or graduate. To address this issue, the Office of Special Education Programs requires states to report data on a number of indices, including Indicators 1 (graduation) and 2 (dropout). Indicator 1 reports data on the “percent of youth with IEPs [Individualized Education Programs] graduating from high school with a regular diploma” (National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, 2012a). Indicator 2 reports data on the “percent of youth with IEPs dropping out of high school” (National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, 2012b).

Although reporting requirements are in place, states have opted to use a variety of methods to calculate graduation and dropout rates, thus resulting in wide variations in data reported. For example, in 2010, among the 20 states using the adjusted 4-year cohort model, the average graduation rate was nearly 57 percent compared to 68.4 percent among the 30 states using the leaver calculation model (National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, 2012a). Of these 50 states, 36 (54 percent) reported dropout rates that met or were lower than their designated targets and 24 (46 percent) states reported dropout rates that were higher than their target goals (National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, 2012b). As these data demonstrate, a large percentage of students with disabilities leave school before graduating, either through the process of dropping out or being pushed out.

According to the American Psychological Association (2010), “Students with disabilities drop out of school at disproportionately higher rates than their peers. Most recent available data found over 30% of students with disabilities were estimated to have dropped out” (p. 5). This is a particularly critical issue when one considers the fact that one-third (32 percent) of all students with disabilities are between the ages of 14 and 17 (Swanson, 2008), ages at which students typically begin to think about and plan for life beyond school.
Although not specifically referenced in the 2010 report cited above, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has recognized a growing issue of concern: disparities in the rates at which minority males (i.e., African American, Hispanic, and American Indian) with disabilities graduate or drop out of school. For American Indian students, an example of this disparity is found in schools operated and/or funded by the federal Bureau of Indian Education, formerly known as the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), which serves slightly less than 10 percent of the nation’s American Indian students. During 2009–2010, 50 percent of all American Indian males attending BIE operated or funded schools graduated compared to 44 percent of males with disabilities (BIE, 2010). Although the majority of American Indian students, with and without disabilities, attend public schools, little is known about the extent to which these students go on to graduate or drop out from school.

In response, this chapter addresses the following: (a) What are the factors that impede graduation rates for American Indian males with disabilities? (b) What are the current gaps/barriers in dropout prevention services for American Indian males with disabilities? (c) And, what is the desired state of practice when working to decrease the dropout rate and increase the graduation rate among American Indian males with disabilities? The following sections address the significance of this problem; summarize extant research specific to American Indian students; and provide recommendations and implications for a wide range of stakeholders, as well as researchers.

Significance of the Problem

American Indians comprise a relatively small—less than two percent—but significant segment of the student population in schools across the United States. American Indian students and their families represent more than 600 federally recognized tribes (U.S. Department of the Interior, Indian Affairs, 2013) and more than 60 state recognized tribes, with approximately 200 different languages spoken with differing degrees of fluency (e.g., Goddard, 1996, as cited in McCarty & Watahomigie, 2011; Krauss 1998, as cited in McCarty, 2013; McCarty & Zeppeda, 1995, as cited in McCarty & Watahomigie, 2011; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2013; Zeppeda & Hill 1992, as cited in McCarty & Watahomigie, 2011). The majority of these students attend public schools, with most of the remainder attending schools operated or funded by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) and tribes. Many of these schools are located in rural, remote, and isolated areas (Ogunwole, 2006), making it difficult for them to access the same level and quality of resources available to schools in urban and suburban areas.

Due to a complex array of issues, American Indians, particularly those with disabilities, are among the students most likely not to finish high school. Unfortunately, this is not a new phenomenon (e.g., Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2010), as American Indians have historically not fared well in the educational system. Two of the most visible indicators of this lack of success are persistently
high dropout rates (Fairelloth & Tippeconnic, 2010; Freeman & Fox, 2005; Senate Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, 1969; Swisher & Hoisch, 1992) and disproportionate representation in special education programs and services (e.g., DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008; Hosp, 2004; Obiakor & Wilder, 2003), particularly among males. It is important to note that although having a disability may not be precursor to school failure, misdiagnosis and inappropriate treatment and services has been shown to link to poor performance in school and increased rate of dropping out (e.g., Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999).

Although American Indians represent a small proportion of the overall student population they represent a significant proportion of students receiving special education services. In total, nearly 14 percent of all American Indians between the ages of 6 and 21 participate in special education programs and services, compared to 12 percent of African Americans, 9 percent of Whites, 8 percent of Hispanics, and 5 percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders. American Indians are 1.5 times more likely to be placed in special education programs and receive special education services than their peers. American Indians are also more likely than all of their peers, with the exception of Black students, to be suspended or expelled for more than 10 days (1.69 percent compared to 2.78 percent of Blacks and 1.12 percent of all students) and to be suspended or expelled on multiple occasions for periods of less than 10 days (1.03 percent compared to 2.39 percent of Blacks and .93 percent of all students) (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Further, American Indians are more likely than their peers to be identified in the categories of specific learning disabilities (1.81 times) and speech or language impairments (1.42) (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Data also indicate that the percentage of American Indian males identified as having a specific learning disability (SLD) tends to increase as the percentage of nonwhite students in the school increases. However, the likelihood of American Indian males being identified as having a SLD tends to decrease as the poverty level of the American Indian student group increases. While this first finding is markedly different for all other students groups, the second finding is markedly different from that of all student groups with the exception of White students (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002). In sum, as a school becomes more racially diverse, Native American students are more frequently identified as having a SLD; however, as the socioeconomic status of a student population declines (and more students live in poverty), the number of American Indian students identified as having a SLD also declines. This is an important point to explore when one considers the potential relationship between disability status and graduation/dropout status.

Although the majority of all students with disabilities who attend public schools graduate with a diploma (54 percent), data indicate that a significantly smaller percentage (42 percent during the 2004–2005 academic year) of American Indian students with disabilities go on to graduate (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). As demonstrated in Table 1 (at end of chapter), these percentages also vary by disability category. As this table illustrates, the dropout rate for American Indian students

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1 Commonly referred to as the Kennedy Report.
2 The term American Indian is used here to refer to two groups: American Indians and Alaska Natives. State and national data collection efforts have tended to collapse the data for these groups, although they represent two distinct cohorts.
in the categories of emotional behavior disturbance and intellectual disabilities is particularly high, with 58 percent of American Indian students with emotional disturbances and 18 percent of those with intellectual disabilities dropping out of public and BIE-funded or operated schools. (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Although these percentages are telling, it is important to note that not graduating from school does not necessarily mean that a student has dropped out of school; thus it is important to also consider data specific to those who are known to have dropped out or been pushed out of school.

Data for BIE schools indicate that American Indian students with disabilities continue to lag behind their nondisabled peers in terms of overall graduation rates. For example, the 2011 BIE Annual Report indicates that 52 percent of students with disabilities within BIE-operated or funded schools graduated during the 2009–2010 academic year, compared to 58 percent of all students (including students with disabilities), 51 percent of all males and 48 percent of all male students with disabilities, compared to 65 percent of all females and 62 percent of female students with disabilities (BIE, 2011). Although these figures represent a slight improvement from the previous (2008–2009) academic year, the fact remains that more than 50 percent of American Indian males with disabilities attending BIE-operated or funded schools are not graduating each year. This is a significant number of children not completing high school. Similar data are found in public schools, with only slightly more than half (51 percent) of all American Indian students with disabilities graduating with a regular high school diploma and 39 percent dropping out (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

These are important findings, as failure to earn a high school degree has lifelong consequences for individuals’ attainment of social and economic capital. According to Sum et al. (2009), individuals who drop out of school experience high rates of joblessness and reliance on state and federal financial assistance in order to provide for such basic life needs as food, housing, and health care. Many of these individuals also find themselves unmarried and parenting on their own. Individuals who do not graduate from high school are also more likely than their peers to be incarcerated as a result of criminal activity. This later point is of particular concern to males. As data indicate, approximately 90 percent of the U.S. prison population is male and approximately 10 percent of males who do not graduate are incarcerated. In effect, for many youth, failure to graduate creates a situation characterized by a former Illinois State Senator as “an apprenticeship for prison” (Sum et al., 2009, p. 11).

Overview of Existing Research

**Why do American Indian students drop out of school?**

Although Lehr et al. (2004) cite a lack of studies specific to dropping out among students with disabilities (e.g., Lehr, Johnson, Brewer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004), Swansan (2008) argues that the reasons for dropping out among students
with disabilities are similar to those found among their non-disabled peers. These include: dislike of school, poor relationships with teachers and students, high levels of absenteeism, poor academic performance, low grades, failing courses, retention in grade, behavioral problems, serious disciplinary infractions, suspension and expulsion, poor teaching, low expectations, social isolation. (p. 20)

Similarly, while no empirical studies have been published that specifically identify the reasons why American Indian students with disabilities drop out of school, research does indicate a number of factors associated with the general population of American Indian students who drop out of school. These factors include large schools, unresponsive and uncaring teachers, lack of culturally sensitive curriculum, lack of parental involvement (Reyhner, 1992), lack of school readiness/academic preparation, low socioeconomic status, and poor health care (Lohse, 2008). Further, anecdotal evidence suggests that American Indian students with disabilities are sometimes devalued by the educational system, making it difficult for them to remain engaged and physically present in school. According to an American Indian higher education program director,

It’s easier for a school district to accept that a student who is in special education has dropped or may drop out of school than it is for them to accept a student who is not in special education dropping out. (C. Wesberry, personal communication, June 13, 2011)

**Effective Educational Practices for American Indian Students with Disabilities**

Although a review of literature revealed no studies specifically addressing dropout prevention or effective special education services for American Indian males with disabilities, a limited number of publications do address strategies for improving outcomes for all American Indian students with disabilities. These publications underscored the importance of working effectively with parents and families. This requires educators to understand the cultural and familial dynamics of their students and to establish effective communication with families (Pewewardy & Fitzpatrick, 2009). According to Tepper and Tepper (2004), open communication, trust, and dialogue—all elements of healthy relationships—are especially important during the development of the Individualized Educational Program (IEP), a documented plan mandated for all students receiving special education services under IDEA. In establishing these relationships, it is important to note that American Indian families often include extended family members, such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles as well as other members of the community who may not be biologically related but who play key roles in the family. Pewewardy and Fitzpatrick (2009) emphasize this point and cite the importance of families and educators building strong relationships as they work collaboratively toward improving student outcomes. The authors also underscore the importance of culturally responsive teaching practices and strategies when working with American Indian students with disabilities. Such practices may include, but are not limited to, schools appointing a cultural liaison, hosting American Indian-focused events, and translating materials into the local tribal language(s).
Tepper and Tepper (2004) also cite the importance of considering students’ cultural needs during the IEP process as well as in the design and delivery of instruction. This requires thinking critically about the development and implementation of culture-based curriculum. Three steps in developing a culturally appropriate curriculum include (a) avoiding content and strategies that directly conflict with the values of the local/tribal community; (b) building on the background knowledge of students and using culturally responsive strategies, examples, and analogies; and (c) helping students to increase their cultural confidence by teaching, when appropriate, the history, language, stories, and values of their culture(s) (Applequist, 2009). According to Tepper & Tepper (2004), the IEP provides a unique opportunity for team members to address students’ culture(s) and language.

**Gaps in existing research**

Although the strategies above are specific to American Indian students, they are not specific to American Indian males with disabilities. As noted by Orfield, Losen, & Ward (2004), there is a need for research regarding the educational experiences and subsequent outcomes of American Indian males with disabilities (Orfield, Losen & Ward, 2004). If these students are to be effectively served, research must also identify and document effective strategies and practices for use with this population. Although there are a number of publications regarding the education of American Indian students, there are no studies that specifically address low graduation rates among American Indian males with disabilities. While it is possible to draw from existing research on other student groups, to be effective, educators must acknowledge the linguistic and cultural characteristics specific to American Indians, as well as their unique sociopolitical status, which affords them the right to certain protections—beyond those guarantees outlined under IDEA and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and not guaranteed to other racial, ethnic or cultural groups within the United States. Foremost among these rights is the right to education. According to the National Congress of American Indians and the National Indian Education Association (n.d.),

>a unique government-to-government relationship exists between federally recognized Indian tribes and the Federal Government. This relationship is grounded in numerous treaties, statutes, and executive orders as well as political, legal, moral, and ethical principles. This relationship is not based upon race, but rather is derived from the legal status of tribal governments. The Federal Government has enacted various regulations that establish and define a trust relationship with Indian tribes. An integral element of this government-to-government relationship is that consultation occurs with Indian tribes. (p. 5.)

Unfortunately,

the United States history is replete with policies created to destroy Native identity and assimilate [American Indians] into the values and beliefs of European immigrants migrating to America. This same history has given birth to a trust responsibility enshrined in the U.S. Constitution requiring the
U.S. to care for its Native American beneficiaries, including a duty to educate them. Unfortunately, the trust responsibility was too often used as a tool to impose ideals and beliefs that harmed rather than helped the Native American beneficiaries it was intended to serve (National Indian Education Association, 2011, p. 3).

While all students with disabilities who qualify for special education services have the right to free and appropriate public education under the IDEA, the legal protections and right to education for all American Indian students, including those with special educational needs, may at time supersede and in effect extend the legal protections and rights outlined in the IDEA. This makes American Indian students unique among the population of students in the United States found eligible for and currently receiving special educational services. Unfortunately, this is a point often not well understand within either American Indian communities or educational arenas.

Key Findings

As stated above, the linguistic and cultural diversity of American Indian students, particularly those with special education needs, necessitates the development and use of educational strategies, practices, and interventions designed specifically with this student population in mind. However, as also noted above, a review of extant research revealed a lack of published studies specific to this populations of students. This review also pointed out a lack of data detailing graduation and dropout rates among American Indian students with disabilities and, more specifically, American Indian males with disabilities. However, anecdotal evidence coupled with professional experience within the field of Indian education did yield three key findings specific to American Indians: (a) the need to transform the conversation around student attrition from one focused on students actively dropping out to one that recognizes the potential for schools to either actively or inactively push students out of school; (b) the lack of parental/community engagement with schools; and (c) insufficient transition planning. These themes are discussed in brief below.

Need to transform the conversation: From dropping out to pushing out

As we work to increase the graduation rate and decrease the dropout rate among American Indian males with disabilities, we must critically examine the extent to which schools and communities serve to facilitate (i.e., push out) students’ premature departure from school (e.g., Deyhle, 1989). As a former transition coordinator commented,

Upon close examination of numerous schools’ behavior policies, it is clear that the policy itself pushes students away from the learning environment. For struggling students, this is a reprieve
from engaging in an activity of known difficulty. It is easy for students who struggle to disengage from learning, and many policies enable this disengagement. Early intervention largely does not exist for stand-alone high schools because of the lack of communication from feeder elementary and mid-schools. The paperwork that does transfer with the student also lays the groundwork for the low professional expectations upon the student (Portley, personal communication, June 6, 2011).

Indeed, dropping out is more complex than a student simply deciding to leave school because he or she perceives school to be too difficult. In fact, the act of dropping out is often times a long-term process of students being either intentionally or unintentionally encouraged to disengage from education, thus the use of the term “push out” as opposed to “drop out.” By purposefully switching the use of terminology from dropping out to pushing out, we help to demonstrate the shared responsibility for students leaving school rather than placing the blame solely on the shoulders of the students themselves, their families, and their communities.

**Lack of engagement**

A potentially key element of this phenomenon of pushing out may very well be linked to the historical ways in which schools have served to acculturate and assimilate American Indians into the dominant Western culture (e.g., Fairecloth & Tippecconnic, 2013). As a result of such practices, many parents, families, and communities view schools as cold and unwelcoming places; and they are reluctant to actively engage in them. Although schools are becoming more culturally aware and responsive, some educators continue to hold negative stereotypes of American Indian students. According to a former American Indian educator and school leader, American Indian students are often characterized by having low levels of self-efficacy for learning and success. As a result, educators perceive these students as apathetic. In response, many American Indian students resort to self-isolation due to feelings of inferiority or of not being as smart as the other students (D. Owens, personal communication, June 6, 2011). To reverse this trend, educators must find ways to encourage students to believe in themselves and their potential for success—a first, important step in combating the dropout/pushout crisis among American Indian students. According to Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, and Anderson (2003), “Promoting school completion implies much more than the reduction of dropout rates. Preparation of youth for productive and meaningful participation in a community begins, for educators, with the promotion of students’ engagement in school and learning” (p. 39). In essence, if students see themselves being successful they will be more likely to remain in school.

**Lack of transition planning**

For those students who do persist until high school, there is still the potential to encounter a lack of formalized planning geared specifically toward life after school. This is an unfortunate oversight, given IDEA’s mandate that students with
In working with students, we must demonstrate to them that we believe in them and their potential for success both in and outside of school. Without these positive, affirming messages, students are often not apt to see the benefit of staying in school until they graduate.

disabilities be provided transition planning and related services in preparation for their eventual graduation and transition out of school. While there is little documented evidence of neglect in this area, there unfortunately is anecdotal evidence of a lack of clearly planned and executed transition planning for American Indian students with disabilities. For example, a former transition coordinator noted that

... the utter lack of postsecondary transition planning that occurs within schools, even at the high school level, attributes to the students’ inability to prepare [for] and believe they can succeed in the postsecondary settings. Studies have shown . . . that even for students with low incidence disabilities [e.g., autism, blindness, Deafness], proper transition planning and programming early in school increases their success for both graduation as well as postsecondary outcomes (J. Portley, personal communication, June 6, 2011).

If we want our students to be successful beyond school, we must begin preparing them for their eventual transition earlier rather than later. In working with students, we must demonstrate to them that we believe in them and their potential for success both in and outside of school. Without these positive, affirming messages, students are often not apt to see the benefit of staying in school until they graduate.

Examples of successful practices

On a positive note, there are schools where the graduation rate is increasing and the dropout rate is decreasing among American Indian students. One example is the Menominee Indian School District in Wisconsin,\(^3\) which incorporates students’ cultures into the curriculum and encourages active and intensive family and community involvement in its schools. According to the superintendent, Wendell Waukau (2012),

About seven years ago, we began our school improvement journey. While academics are a focus, the effort extends far beyond academics to include healthy eating, physical activity, Menominee language and culture, and on-site health care services. The results include dramatic gains in graduation rates; improved student learning, test scores, student attendance and retention; and vastly improved student behavior.

In 2012, Mr. Waukau was recognized by the White House as a Champion of Change. When interviewed about this award, Mr. Waukau commented,

It is an honor to be recognized. It’s an honor, I gladly share with everyone in our district. . . . In order to be successful in turning things around, you have to design your plans to fit your own community. We have certainly done that and the results in areas like higher graduation rates, better student retention and higher

\(^3\)For additional information, see www.misd.kl2.wi.us/
test scores show our plan is working. We’re not done yet, but it’s
great to have educational leaders recognize our efforts (White
House Office of Communications, 2012).

Another example is the Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD) in Northwest
Alaska. The schools within this district work with the National Dropout
Prevention Center¹ to provide E-mentoring for students most at risk, provide
peer support, improve social competence, foster self-determination, and develop
leadership skills.² The dropout prevention model utilized in Lower Kuskokwim
focuses on three remote Yup’ik Eskimo villages in rural and remote areas of
Alaska. E-mentoring is utilized with students in grades four through eight who
are considered to be at high risk for dropping out. E-mentoring helps to provide
the mentoring and other interventions that students cannot otherwise receive
because of the long travel distances and harsh weather conditions, which make it
difficult for service providers to travel to these students and their schools. These
types of interventions have resulted in increased attendance, decreased dropout
rates, and a decrease in disciplinary infractions (Cash, 2011).

What is unique about these programs is that they incorporate the strengths
of language and culture that many Indigenous students, their families, and
communities bring to the process of education. However, although anecdotal
evidence suggests that these interventions are making a positive difference in
both the in-school and post-school outcomes for students, what is missing is
empirical data to demonstrate to the educational research community, as well as
to policymakers, that these interventions are in fact responsible for improving
students’ educational conditions and subsequent outcomes. Given the current
climate at both the state and federal levels—a climate in which empirical research
and related data are required to document impact—it appears that such evidence
will continue to be called for in the years to come.

Although empirical evidence is important, it is equally important to recognize
the utility of professional wisdom or “craft knowledge” (e.g., Whitehurst, 2002),
what educators learn through the act of teaching and engaging with students,
their parents, families, and communities. Given the lack of empirical research
specific to American Indian students with disabilities, and an even greater lack
of research specifically related to American Indian males, there are numerous
instances in which practitioners are called upon to use their own professional
knowledge of what works and does not work with their students. Much of this
knowledge base about American Indians is informed, or should be informed, by
the cultural underpinnings of the communities within which these students live
and from which they come. Failure to incorporate such cultural knowledge into
the teaching and learning process will most likely result in continued failure to
appropriately and adequately educate these students (e.g., Castagno & Brayboy,
2008; Demmert & Towner, 2003; Powers et al., 2003).

¹ For additional information, see http://www.dropoutprevention.org/about-us
² For additional information, see www.lksd.org/
Recommendations from the field

The importance of involving the community in these efforts to combat the graduation/dropout crisis prompted an informal query of a small number of individuals in the field of Indian education. This query was conducted via email and yielded a variety of responses similar to those presented in the literature and evidenced in working with American Indian parents, families, and educators across the nation. These findings are outlined in brief below.

1. There is an ongoing need to establish an overall guiding framework from which a set of interventions and services can be developed. This framework should be based on the five principles of culturally responsive pedagogy: respect, responsiveness, relevance, rigor, and research-based practices (Gay, 2000). In doing so, it is important to acknowledge and value what has been described as “craft knowledge” or professional wisdom (e.g., Whitehurst, 2002) rather than to rely solely upon what is typically defined as research-based practices. This is particularly important given the dearth of currently available empirical research that is specific to American Indian males with disabilities.

2. There is an ongoing need to focus on the individual whole child by fostering physical, social, emotional/mental, and spiritual health and well-being. If needed, efforts should be made to provide counseling and other supportive services for students, families, and community members. Supportive services may include assigning case managers to follow student progress and meeting with parents and family members throughout the year (J. Portley, personal communication, June 2, 2011).

3. There is an ongoing need to hold high expectations for all students, to expect students to graduate and succeed, and to assist them in developing a plan to achieve their goals post high school. Unfortunately, as one mother described, students are successful in spite of educators’ failure to see their gifts and talents:

   My youngest son is LD [learning disabled]. He is also gifted. He took AP [advanced placement] classes and did well. The teachers did not have that [high] expectation of him because of the LD [learning disability] label. [Today] he has a recording business and has eight albums out and one on the way. He works two jobs and takes classes. He is two classes short of his AA. It has taken him a long time but he is getting there. He is 27 (D. Owens, personal communication, June 6, 2011).

   In establishing goals and expectations for students, educators are also encouraged to think critically about cultural conceptions and notions of what is behaviorally acceptable within American Indian communities and to work to incorporate these values into school policies.

4. There is an ongoing need to ensure the sustainability of programs and services aimed at improving the educational conditions and subsequent outcomes of American Indian children and youth. Too often programs
and services have been implemented on a short-term basis and then terminated without allowing adequate time to assess the effectiveness of these interventions. For these programs and services to work, there must be adequate commitment of time, funding, and other resources needed to promote and document the success of these programs.

5. There is an ongoing need to foster more active and involved parenting and parental involvement in the educational process. For some parents, this will require intensive support from educators and other community members as they work to help parents see the relevance of schooling and how schooling relates to local/tribal cultures and traditions, as well as to the world beyond school (e.g., Robinson-Zanartu & Majel-Dixon, 1996).

6. There is an ongoing need to diversify the teaching, administrative, and service provider ranks to more closely resemble the demographic characteristics of their students, schools, and communities. This requires intensive recruitment, as well retention efforts, targeted at American Indian teachers (e.g., Tepper & Tepper, 2004). For American Indian males, it will also be important to identify male role models and mentors who can work with schools and students (e.g., Dianda, 2008). As Sauter and Sauter (2010) point out, the need to diversify the teaching ranks is critically important.

7. Failure to train, recruit, hire, and retain a more culturally representative pool of educators threatens to increase the cultural discontinuity in the classroom. However, it is also important to note that teachers, regardless of their racial or ethnic background, must work to understand and relate to children from cultures other than the teachers’ own. Without this understanding, there remains a strong potential for teachers to encourage the removal of students from their classroom through disciplinary, behavioral, and academic referrals, often resulting in misplacement or overrepresentation in special programs and services such as special education (e.g., Sauer & Sauer, 2010), due in large part to these teachers’ lack of cultural competence.

8. There is an urgent need to improve transition planning and related services (Swanson, 2008). Although not specifically designed for use with American Indian students, Person Centered Planning (PCP) is one example of an inclusive method of engaging students with disabilities in planning for their own future. PCP encourages individual and family participation in planning for educational and social services. It is a process whereby families, service providers, community members, and the individual work together to identify barriers to successful community membership (Callicott, 2003).

9. There is an ongoing need to examine discipline and academic placement rates and patterns, as well as attendance and in-grade retention rates as they are related to high dropout rates (Dianda, 2008). This calls for increased efforts to carefully examine data for disparities based on gender, race/ethnicity, and other demographic factors.

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successfully graduate students are (1) “personalized, (2) offer rigorous and relevant curricula and instruction, (3) provide substantive assistance to students” and “employ qualified instructional staff” (Dianda, 2008, p. 17). In effect, these schools are student centered, high-quality sites of teaching and learning.

Discussion

Given the overall lack of data detailing graduation and dropout rates among American Indian males with disabilities, there is the danger of educators, policymakers and others in positions of power to minimize this issue. Failure to contextualize this lack of data may make it appear that a graduation or dropout crisis does not exist among American Indian male students with disabilities; or worse yet, this failure may prevent American Indian males with disabilities from being adequately included in national conversations on this issue. This possibility raises fear among educators and community members, a fear that is not unfounded, as similar arguments have been used to minimize the need for research on American Indian students at large, resulting in these students being deemed the “asterisk population,” referred to only as a footnote in studies of educational conditions, aspirations, and attainment (e.g., Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). Although research with other student populations is available, it is important to point out that this general research does not always accurately capture nor reflect the unique academic, social, and emotional experiences of students with disabilities, unique experiences that often result in their dropping out, stopping out, or being pushed out of school. Further, because research fails to include American Indian students, the field remains unaware of strategies for addressing the cultural and linguistic uniqueness that the students themselves, their families, and their communities bring to the learning experience and to the way these students approach school.

Barriers to educational persistence for American Indian students

It is apparent that there are numerous barriers that prevent American Indian students from graduating from high school. However, given the lack of research specific to this population, it is necessary to couple the available empirical evidence with anecdotal evidence to better understand this issue. Indeed, American Indian students’ failure to graduate from high school is multilayered, as outlined below:

1. The first layer deals with structural-, institutional-, and governmental-level barriers that deter a coordinated system/method of student tracking. To address these barriers, it is important to understand the unique context(s) within which the education of American Indian students takes place. Although a complete discussion of these context(s) is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to note the existence of a unique relationship between American Indian tribes and the federal government, resulting in the federal government assuming responsibility for the education of American
Indian children as part of its federal trust responsibilities. In spite of this relationship, slightly less than 10 percent of American Indian students attend schools operated or funded by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) and tribes (National Indian Education Association, 2011). Some of these students migrate between BIE/tribal schools and public schools. Although the BIE acts as a separate school system it is subject to the standards established by the 23 states in which its schools are located. This variability makes it difficult not only to calculate and report data in an accurate and timely manner but to also ensure that school records follow the students who transfer out of or into BIE-funded or -operated schools. In turn, this has implications for the quality and timeliness of services provided to American Indian students. The ability to provide timely and appropriate services (e.g., provision of IEP-mandated services such as speech, language, occupational and physical therapies) is also compromised by a lack of long-term organizational and structural stability of these services within the BIE, with ripple effects felt at the regional and school level (e.g., United States Government Accountability Organization, 2013). It is also important to note that although the federal government holds trust responsibilities for American Indian tribes and the education of their students, this does not relieve individual states from their responsibilities to educate these students as well.

Another critically important example of an institutional barrier is high teacher turnover (National Indian Education Association, 2010). This is an issue faced by many of the schools serving American Indian students. As these schools tend to be located in rural, remote, and often impoverished areas, and they tend to be under resourced, these schools are often viewed as less attractive to prospective teachers than those schools located in more urban, affluent areas. Failure to adequately staff and resource schools has implications for the overall quality and continuity of services students receive (e.g., Reyhner, 2001), thus increasing their likelihood of not doing well in school.

2. The second layer involves familial and community-level barriers for promoting student success. Such barriers include lack of student support (e.g., financial, emotional, social), as well as a lack of community and parental engagement in schools, resulting in premature departure from school (e.g., Deyhle, 1989). For American Indian parents, failure to engage schools must be viewed and understood from a sociocultural lens that acknowledges the historical role of schools in working to limit the involvement of parents, families, and communities in their children’s education, as schools worked to acculturate and assimilate American Indians (e.g., Mackety & Linder-VanBerschot, 2008). As a result, schools have often been viewed as unwelcoming, thus limiting parental and community engagement. If this trend is to be reversed, schools must work to address the lingering effects of such policies and practices.

3. The third layer involves student or individual-level barriers related to personal responsibilities, such as parenting and high rates of student mobility/transiency (e.g., Beaulieu, 2000). Other student-level barriers
include poor academic performance, absences from school/class, and behavioral referrals (e.g., Rumberger & Lim, 2008). For some students, these barriers are intensified by the lack of role models and mentors that help to foster their desire for higher academic goals and aspirations. As a former transition coordinator noted, “There is a great deal of literature suggesting students with higher self-determination rates (mostly of non-Native, but minority students) have higher completion rates. This lends itself to understanding personal characteristics such as persistence, self-efficacy level, self-awareness (weaknesses and strengths), individual identify, ability to plan, goal setting, value performance, and adjust behavior” (J. Portley, personal communication, June 6, 2011). Although self-determination implies that students are self-motivated to achieve or accomplish their goals, for many students the development of self-determination requires the initial support and assistance of others both within and outside the academic environment.

As discussed above, the process of dropping out among American Indian males is multifaceted. It generally does not happen quickly nor will it be resolved quickly. However, if we are to begin to evidence positive movement in this fight to keep American Indian males with disabilities in school, we must do as Brown and Rodriguez (2009) recommend and begin considering how each of these factors interacts and serves to promote the act of dropping out and/or pushing students out of school. We must also assume responsibility for the ways we as educators, researchers, policymakers, parents, community members, governments, and tribes have been complicit in allowing this situation to progress to this point. As numerous scholars have noted, we have a moral and ethical obligation to promote educational environments that are equitable for all students, regardless of their race, disability status, or gender (e.g., Frick, Faircloth, & Little, 2013; Frick & Faircloth, 2007). In sum, responding to the graduation/dropout crisis among American Indian males with disabilities requires collaborative, deliberate, and swift action from policymakers, educators, researchers, community members, families, and youth themselves.

Implications for Improved Practice

Policy Implications

Three of the most pressing issues related to the graduation/dropout crisis among students with disabilities are (a) the need to revamp disciplinary policies to better promote the inclusion rather than exclusion of students with disabilities from the regular education environment; (b) the need to streamline and clarify how graduation and dropout data are collected and reported so that there is increased accuracy in the reporting of these numbers across, schools, districts, and states; and (c) the need to mandate the disaggregation of data—by race and gender, in combination and in isolation—so that trends in graduation and dropout rates among even the smallest of minority groups, such as American Indians, may be more accurately determined and reported. Specifically:
1. At the local, state, and national levels, policymakers are strongly encouraged to revisit, reconsider, and revise discipline/behavior policies that serve to remove or encourage the removal of American Indian students with disabilities from the regular education environment (e.g., suspension and expulsion). For example, data indicate that African Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians are more likely (by 67 percent) to be removed to an alternate setting (1999–2000 academic year) than White students (NEA, 2007). Such disparities have implications for students’ access to the general education curriculum as well as for opportunities to interact with their nondisabled peers. Although some schools have already begun to address this issue, too few have made significant progress. One exception is the Menominee Indian School District, one of several districts in Wisconsin working to provide alternatives to expulsion as well as supplemental supports to students who are expelled. The provision of such services is in keeping with IDEA’s requirement that students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education. Alternatives to expulsion include “community service, short-term suspension with a behavior intervention plan, or other forms of in-school interventions” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2009, p. 9). Students who are expelled may be eligible to receive tutoring, attend a community college, or complete a GED program. Social and emotional supports are also provided for the students and their families (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2009).

2. Overall, there is a pressing need to clearly define how we determine who is graduating, dropping out, or completing school. Currently, each of these acts falls under the term “exit.” According to Swanson (2008), exit is measured by the number of students who drop out, earn a diploma or alternate certificate, or age out of the educational system. This definition differs from the cohort model used to measure graduation and dropout rates among the general school-age population. Local and state education agencies need to dedicate sufficient resources (Swanson, 2008) to ensure ongoing, timely, and accurate collection, analysis, and dissemination of graduation/dropout-specific data among American Indian students with disabilities, in both public and BIE operated or funded schools.

3. Related to this, we must address the need for disaggregated data. According to Swanson (2008), although students with disabilities are included in most measures used to determine school and district-level attainment of adequate yearly progress, little attention is placed on the graduation rates for students with disabilities, particularly in the calculation of AYP (or “Adequate Yearly Progress,” a measurement of school academic progress mandated by the federal No Child Left Behind Act). This has two immediate implications. The first implication is at the school level, where schools may not see an immediate incentive to tackle disparities in graduation and dropout rates if they are not required to collect, report, and respond to the data by picking it apart by race, gender and disability type. The second implication is for researchers and
While the first step to addressing the graduation/dropout crisis is to obtain accurate data, an important next step is to design and implement effective programs and practices aimed at increasing the number of students who stay in school and go on to graduate. Thus, at the school level educators need to ask the question: What are the essential characteristics of an effective dropout prevention program for American Indian males with disabilities?

4. In order for any of these recommendations to gain traction, we must make Indian education a priority at the local, tribal, state, and national levels. For years, educational programs and services for American Indian students have been provided in a fragmented and uncoordinated manner. Although the bulk of these students are primarily served by public school programs and services funded in part by the federal government and funneled down to the state and local school level, in many cases, students transition between public schools and BIE-funded or operated schools with minimal to no coordination, collaboration, or consultation between the various entities charged with providing educational services and supports to these students. Transition is further complicated by a lack of coordination of services within and among the schools operated or funded by the BIE and tribes (e.g., United States Government Accountability Office, 2013), not to mention the lack of documented coordination of services within and among public schools and school districts.

School-level Implications

While the first step to addressing the graduation/dropout crisis is to obtain accurate data, an important next step is to design and implement effective programs and practices aimed at increasing the number of students who stay in school and go on to graduate. Thus, at the school level educators need to ask the question: What are the essential characteristics of an effective dropout prevention program for American Indian males with disabilities? In doing so, educators must move away from the notion that there is one set of strategies or interventions that will effectively meet the needs of all American Indian children and youth. Rather than attempting to implement wholesale intervention models or best practices, educators need to identify key elements (i.e., promising practices) of these interventions that may be effective when modified and implemented in accordance with local beliefs and practices. Niles (2007) describes “best practices” as those that incorporate one’s cultural identity and acknowledge the “roles, relationships, and responsibilities” (slide 15) that families play. In this sense, best practice is a fluid rather than static concept that is shaped in large part by local/tribal context and that incorporates “Native language, ceremonies, stories, dances, and art” (slide 15). While Niles’ argument supports the recognition of the local context, it is also important to recognize the potential
Although much of the attention given to dropouts focuses on high schools, students are deciding in the primary grades whether school is something for them. If they are failed, if they do not find school interesting, if school is something alien and foreign, then they are ‘at risk’ of dropping out (p. 53).

Research has shown that risk factors, such as delayed reading skills, high levels of absenteeism, in-grade retention, and poverty—all associated with dropping out of school—are often present in early school years. The early identification of students presenting with these factors can lead to the implementation of intervention programs, which may potentially lessen students’ likelihood of dropping out (APA, 2012).

Communities, Families, and Youth-Related Implications

In order for the educational system to better serve American Indian students, educators must be aware of the unique cultural and linguistic characteristics of these students, as well as the context(s) within which these students live and learn. To be successfully implemented and sustained, programs and services for American Indian students must be developed in concert with parents, families, communities, tribes, and other stakeholders (e.g., tribal organizations, tribal education departments, the National Indian Education Association, National Congress of American Indians, National Indian Health Board, Tribal Head Start Program, Office of Indian Education, Bureau of Indian Education, Urban Indian Centers Indian Health Service). This requires relationship building, fact finding, and the demonstration of a genuine desire to improve the educational conditions and subsequent outcomes for American Indian students and their communities. Dianda (2008) argues that the conditions that foster and sustain the act of dropping out of school are fundamentally local in nature; therefore, responses must be crafted at the local level. She urges us to recognize that dropping out is a cumulative process and does not occur over night. Remediation of the conditions that serve to promote low graduation and high dropout rates necessitates the development of an early warning system in which particular attention is paid to transition points within the lives of our children and youth. According to Dianda, this should include a “tiered prevention and intervention system” (p. 16) that is able to respond to the unique circumstances each student presents.

To understand and respond to the conditions that enable or inhibit American Indian student success in schools, we must honor the knowledge and voices of those who are most directly involved in the formal and informal education of these students and who have the most up-to-date, comprehensive, and accurate knowledge of the factors that shape the educational experiences of children and youth and the subsequent outcomes. A critical element of this work entails capturing students’ voices. Fine (1991) speaks specifically to the importance of seeking student input into the question of why students drop out or are pushed out of school. As she writes, “those most likely to leave high school prior to graduation carry with them the most critical commentary on schooling” (p. 73). As Smyth (2006) writes,
for the term “best practices” to promote the notion of a one-size-fits-all model. Thus, it is recommended that the term “promising practices” be used. This term encompasses the recognition that there is no single set of practices that works best for a student group as diverse as American Indians; rather, each effective or promising practice should be shaped in large part by the unique characteristics of the students, schools, and communities with whom and within which these practices are implemented. Such practices affirm the use of culturally responsive practices (e.g., Gay, 2000) that speak to the unique cultural and linguistic nuances of a diverse student population.

The use of promising practices also requires the design and delivery of culturally and linguistically appropriate and relevant instructional practices that incorporate such Indigenous values as relationship, reciprocity, and respect (e.g., Oakes & Maday, 2009). When these values are reflected in the philosophies and actions of schools and educators, they serve to build strong, healthy relationships and learning environments in which American Indian students can thrive. Such practices also help to promote strengths-based rather than deficit-based models of American Indian students and families by focusing on the funds of knowledge (e.g., Moll et al., 1992) these students, their families, communities, and tribes bring to the teaching and learning process. Failure to recognize these strengths serves to negate the fact that, in spite of high rates of poverty (Ogunwole, 2006), low levels of educational attainment (Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2010), poor health care (Indian Health Service, 2006), and a host of other social, emotional, and economic maladies (Ogunwole, 2006), American Indian people continue to survive and in many cases thrive. Regardless of what data indicate, we, as American Indians, are a resilient people with much to offer to the education of our children and youth.

Although this practices hold promise, it is important to reflect on the work of Garrett (1995) who points out that it is important to recognize the potential for cultural discontinuity between the school and the home/community. Responding to these issues requires work on the part of educators to become more aware of and responsive to students' cultural practices and ways of knowing, thinking, and doing. Unfortunately, this does not readily occur. Given the wide array of cultural and linguistic diversity represented among the American Indian population (Ogunwole, 2006), it is critical for colleges of education, designers of professional development materials and trainings, and schools to work to increase the cultural competence of preservice and practicing educators. In doing so, teachers should be encouraged and supported to incorporate American Indian languages and cultures (as appropriate) into the development and implementation of educational practices and related interventions. Similar training involving effective intercultural communication should also be made available to educators. Such training and support must be ongoing both at the classroom level and in leadership ranks.6

Finally, schools are encouraged to develop and implement a process for early identification of those at risk of dropping out and a system to respond to these warning signs. As Reyhner (1992) points out,

6 For additional information, see the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems.
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When students feel that their lives, experiences, cultures, and aspirations are ignored, trivialized, or denigrated, they develop a hostility to the institution of schooling. They feel that schooling is simply not worth the emotional and psychological investment necessary to warrant their serious involvement (p. 285).

Increased emphasis on listening to and responding to the concerns of students is an important step in empowering these students to reinvest and engage in their education. Ways in which to facilitate a greater presence of and power for the student voice include hosting student and community forums or listening sessions and respecting and valuing what we hear and learn from these students, their families, and communities.

**Research Implications**

Although the educational conditions and academic outcomes of American Indian students have been documented (e.g., Pavel & Curtin, 1997), there is limited empirical research detailing successful strategies and interventions aimed at improving the educational system and increasing the academic persistence and subsequent life outcomes of American Indian students, particularly those identified as having special educational needs (e.g., Faircloth, 2006). According to Orfield, Losen, Wald, and Swanson (2004),

> The extremely low graduation rates of Black, Native American and Latino males cries out for immediate action informed by research. While the plight of minority male children is no secret in America, there is little research, intervention or accountability directed specifically at subgroups of minority males. Education policymakers need to use research and proven interventions more proactively to address the unacceptably high rates of school failure experienced by Black, Latino and Native American males (p. 16).

In response, researchers are encouraged to do the following:

1. Conduct further research to better understand the relationship between students’ race/ethnicity and their likelihood of being identified as students with disabilities.

2. Conduct further research to better understand the relationship between students’ socioeconomic status and their likelihood of being identified as students with disabilities.

3. Conduct further research to understand the relationship between the racial/ethnic composition of schools and the effect of this composition on students’ likelihood of being identified as students with disabilities.

4. Conduct studies focusing on the location (e.g., rural versus urban) (Smoker Broadus, 2008), racial/ethnic composition (e.g., low and high concentrations of American Indian students), school size, and socioeconomic status of the schools attended by American Indian students. We know that low income and diverse schools tend to have
poor academic outcomes (Dianda, 2008). Many of these schools are what Balfanz describes as dropout factories—schools that consistently yield poor academic outcomes and are characterized by high poverty and high numbers of racially and ethnically diverse schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). According to Balfanz (2008, cited in Dianda, 2008), 81 percent of all American Indian students attend schools characterized as dropout factories (p. 55). These schools are located across the nation, with approximately half in urban areas and the other half in the south and southwest (Balfanz, 2007).

5. Conduct studies that pay particular attention to the key transition points in the lives of American Indian males with disabilities (Smoker Broadus, 2008), and the impact of these transitions on these students’ subsequent academic outcomes, including graduation and dropout rates.

6. Ensure that future research includes sufficient numbers of American Indian students to allow for disaggregation and reporting of data specific to this student group.

7. Identify and publicize existing dropout prevention strategies specific to American Indian males with disabilities that have been found to decrease the dropout rate among this population.

The next step is for researchers to work to disseminate their findings and to facilitate the translation of their research into practice at the school and classroom levels.

Conclusion

Although little is known about the educational experiences and subsequent academic, career, or social outcomes of American Indian students with disabilities, empirical and anecdotal data tell us that many of these students do not persist until high school completion or graduation. Failure to complete high school has far-reaching consequences for individuals, their communities, and their families. As Sum et al. (2009) so poignantly write,

There is an overwhelming national economic and social justice need to prevent existing high school students from dropping out without earning a diploma and to encourage the re-enrollment and eventual graduation of those . . . who have already left the school system (p. 16).

This issue is particularly urgent among American Indian students. For years, generations of American Indian students with and without disabilities have dropped out or been pushed out of school systems across this nation. Our challenge, as educators, community members, researchers, and policymakers is to work collaboratively to develop, implement, and sustain educational programs and services that support the successful retention and school completion of all students. Failure to do so places the future of these students and their communities at risk for social, economic, and other maladies (e.g., Faircloth &
Tippecomic, 2010). As Klug and Whitfield (2008) caution, “Unless this situation [the dropout crisis] can be reversed, we will keep witnessing the terrible price paid by our youth as they fail to reach their promise within our education system” (p. 13). For American Indian students, this reversal calls for radical shifts in the way we educate students as well as in the way we engage their parents, families, and communities in this education. “By persisting to insist there is only one ‘right way’ way of doing things, that of the dominant culture, we continue to lose Native students from our schools” (Klug & Whitfield, 2008, p. 13).

Table 1
Percentage of American Indian students with disabilities, by disability type, exiting high school (2004–2005)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Public schools</th>
<th>BIA schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Dropped Out</td>
<td>% Graduated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Learning Disability</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech/Language Impairment</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Disabilities</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Disturbance</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Health Impairments</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Asterisk (*) indicates total number of students with speech or language impairments not provided. Insufficient data provided on the following categories of disabilities: multiple disabilities, hearing impairments, orthopedic impairments, visual impairments, autism, deaf-blindness, and traumatic brain injury.
References


