Educational Poverties in Alaska: Teacher’s Perspectives

Abstract

In this study, I explore deprivations of educational entitlements as an example of poverty. I include among educational entitlements: appropriate teacher attitudes, appropriate educational materials and instructional strategies, relevant curriculums, and school and classroom structures that support the familial and cultural experiences of the children in them. Through interviews, surveys, and an examination of participant demographics, I explore Alaska teacher’s identification of instances of educational deprivations in their classrooms and schools and the relationship between identified deprivations and their personal and professional attitudes toward diversity.

*Keywords:* Alaska Native, Educational Poverties, Attitudes, Diversity, Dispositions

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I position this study within critical social theory (Levinson, 2011) particularly social justice education because this perspective allows us to ask different questions about social injustices, in this case the distribution of attributes and resources and the impact of teacher attitudes.I base our work on the precepts laid out by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965: equality (i.e. equal opportunity), participation, and recognition.

**Context**

Alaska remains the nation’s most rural state, with more than half of all schools located in rural or rural-remote areas***.*** Within the vast 586,000 square miles of Alaska are scattered 31 rural and remote school districts; 64% of Alaska’s districts, 53% of its schools, and 40% of its population are rural. These isolated school districts serve over 19,000 students, 14,000 of whom are Alaska Native. Alaska’s rural schools face critically high levels of student poverty and serve very high percentages of both students learning Standard English and minorities, primarily Alaska Natives. In Anchorage, Alaska’s largest city, minority students are prevalent. Anchorage School District students speak 91 different languages. After English, the five most common are Spanish, Hmong, Samoan, Filipino and Yup'ik. Approximately 5,440 hundred students receive English language support. Minority students comprise more than 50 percent of the student population (Anchorage School District, 2012).

**Review of the Literature**

I accept the precepts of the ESEA (1965); that all children are entitled to an education that includes equal opportunity, participation, and recognition. In this study, I will examine deprivation of these entitlements in the context of teacher attitudes, the appropriateness of materials and strategies available to and used by teachers, the relevance of implemented curriculums, and the suitability of classroom and school structures.

Teacher educators have focused on the pedagogical practices of teachers as contributing positively and negatively to student success (Sleeter, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Zeichner, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Multicultural education researchers and curriculum theorists have focused on the nature of the curriculum and the structures of schools as sources of deprivation for some children (Banks, 2004; Gay, 2004; Grant, 2003; Apple, 1990; Cornbleth & Waugh, 95; Popkewitz, 1990). I explore educational deprivations from both perspectives, using specific instances of deprivations as our context.

**Teacher Attitudes**

A significant body of research indicates teachers’ attitudes and beliefs about students have a considerable influence on student learning and development (Taylor & Wasicsko, 2000). Beliefs influence how and what teachers teach (Kagan, 1992) and how they interpret and apply ideas about multiculturalism (Sleeter, 1992). What teachers perceive, believe, and think can improve or damage student’s educational experiences (Nel, 1992). Social psychological research has long confirmed that attitudes influence what I notice, how I interpret information, and what I remember (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1998).

In a summary of the National Study of American Indian Education that included four different measures of attitudes and perceptions on the issue of assimilation, Dehyle & Swisher (1997) found the majority of Native American and Alaskan Native teachers interviewed tended to take the "man of two cultures" position. Native American and Alaska Native teachers in their study maintained that Native Americans and Alaska Natives should acquire skills and attitudes required for success in society, but they should also maintain their culture. Native American and Alaska Native teachers' position on assimilation was similar to that of the non-Native American group (Dehyle & Swisher).

**Appropriate Materials and Strategies**

Currently, the curricular norm is a set of academic standards and prescribed instructional pacing (Tomlinson, 2000), bereft of opportunity for teachers to differentiate learning for groups or individuals. Nearly all students benefit from curriculum and instruction that has focus on meaning, problem solving, logical thinking, and transfer of learning and is engaging for students (National Research Council, 1999).

Rios and Montecinos (2008) found ethnically diverse teachers are likely to employ culturally relevant instructional approaches, supporting Sleeter’s (1993) finding that ethnically diverse teachers tend to offer a curriculum that challenges the status quo more often than White teachers do. Further, Dilworth (1990) suggests ethnically diverse teachers enhance the academic and social experiences of diverse students because they share communication styles. When teachers understand, appreciate, and implement Alaska Native communal and hands-on learning styles, naturalistic intelligences, and strong oral story telling traditions (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1999) learning for these students is improved.

The work of Gay (2000), Foster (1995), Hollins (1996), and others demonstrates that explicit knowledge about students’ cultures (by the teacher) is ‘imperative’ to diverse students’ learning needs and to creating learning experiences that are relevant. This body of research suggests that when academic learning is relevant for students, and when diverse students learn through their own cultural and experiential filters, they show higher interest and learn more easily. Alaska Native students exhibit distinctive patterns that they bring to the academic setting (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1999); cultural traditions, language, behaviors, style, dress, learning styles, movement, and perspectives. Because of these differences, Alaska Native children may experience the kind of cultural discontinuity described among African American children by Irvine-Jordan (1991). Irvine-Jordan explains that this cultural discontinuity can produce apathy, academic disengagement, and school discontent evidenced by the well-documented academic achievement gap. The achievement gap has led many scholars to examine the culturalrelevancy of the curriculum as a way to increase achievement and schoolconnectedness for diverse learners (Asante 1992; Banks 2001; Gay 2000;Giddings 2001; Hale 2001; Ladson-Billings 2000, 2006; Thompson**,** 2004; Webster 2002). Several researchers have demonstrated that school achievement and motivation improves signiﬁcantly when material and instruction align with the abilities, learning style, and perspectives of diverse learners (Albury 1992; Boykin 1994; Diamond and Moore 1995, Gay 2000; Howard, 1998; Krater et al. 1994; Tatum 2000). According to the NIES (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), among fourth grade American Indian and Native Alaskan students, 76% had teachers who reported never having them study traditional American Indian and Native Alaskan mathematics and only 2% had teachers who reported integrating American Indian or Native Alaskan content or cultural standards when planning mathematics lessons. Among eighth grade American Indian and Native Alaskan students, only 33% had teachers who reported integrating relevant culture and history into reading instruction at least once a month and 60% had teachers who reported never having them solve mathematics problems that are relevant to the Native community. A scant 7% of American Indian and Native Alaskan eighth-graders reported knowing a lot about American Indian and Native Alaskan systems of counting.

**Suitability of Classroom and School Structures**

Meidl & Meidl (2011) ask, “Are all environments equally good for helping all students reach their learning potential and future academic achievement?” When diverse students come to school, they often need to adjust to vast differences in structures; differences between ‘how things work’ at home and ‘how things work’ at school (Gay, 2002).To succeed at school, diverse students may need new skills; skills that they often learn on their own (Gay, 2002; Garcia & Dominguez, 1997; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Nasir & Hand, 2006; Valencia et al., 2001). These skills, characteristic of middle-class White culture are the standard by which all children are judged (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Nasir & Hand, 2006).As a result, diverse students, especially poor and minority students, have been judged as inadequate (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Valencia et al., 2001).

Physical environment, tone, and the quality of interactions among students and between teacher and students can have a tremendous impact on learning (Ware, 2006). Further, a growing body of literature supports the importance of caring teacher-student relationship to the academic success of diverse students (Chu, 2012).Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) acknowledges and understands the importance of race, language, culture, and ethnicity in the classroom and enhances the kinds of environments and relationships described by Ware and Chu. Culturally responsive teaching practices can improve outcomes for diverse students (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995).Using the experiences and perspectives of diverse students are tools for teaching (Gay, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

The majority of teachers in Alaska are white, middle-class, and are likely generally limited in their knowledge of or experience with diverse cultures (Sleeter, 2001; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005) and of Alaska Native cultures in particular. Many of these teachers do not share the cultural background or lived experiences of their students; they tend to be white, middle-class, and speak English as their primary language(Sleeter, 2001). This cultural mismatch makes it difficult for teachers to connect with their students and to make student learning relevant (Gay, 2000). Some education researchers, Irvine (2003) and Lee (2004) for instance believe cultural mismatches between teachers and students contribute to the achievement gap.

Preparing culturally aware and responsive teachers for all of Alaska’s schools is essential to delivering a quality and equitable educational experience for Alaska’s students. Although the literature does not reveal a consensus definition of effective teaching, most agree **e**ffective teaching must facilitate student learning and have a positive impact on student achievement (Rilke & Sharpe, 2008). This is particularly true for Alaska Native students (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1999). Explicit knowledge about cultures of students is ‘imperative’ to meeting diverse students’ learning needs (Gay, 2002) and creating relevant learning experiences. Preparing culturally aware and responsive teachers for all of Alaska’s schools is essential to delivering a quality and equitable educational experience for Alaska’s students.

**Participants**

Participants are sixty-one teachers enrolled in the M.Ed. Reading Specialist program, past and present, and graduates of the Elementary Master of Arts in Teaching program. Twenty of the participants are Alaska Native teachers. Participants teach in schools throughout Alaska and participate in coursework via distance, in the Elluminate web-meeting environment.  Thirty-seven participants report having accomplished between one and twenty years as a state certified, public school educator (mean = 6.76, s = 5.894).

**Methods**

Semi-structured interviews and likert-type surveys provide evidence for this study. Within their first weeks of their programs, we interviewed participants in a web meeting session via Elluminate using the following open-ended questions:

* What is your role as a teacher in Alaska?
* What do you believe to be your greatest teaching challenge?
* What are your feelings about the use of Standard English and teaching it in school?
* Are there barriers that Native students face in acquiring Standard English literacy?
* What is the best way to help Native students acquire Stand English literacy?

I recorded the interviews in the web-meeting environment for later analysis.   
           Following the interview, we sent participants a 75-item on-line questionnaire.  This questionnaire consists of three scales. The Professional Dispositions toward Diversity Scale (Pohan & Aguilar 2001) consists of 25 items, nine of which are reverse items. Item analysis of this scale items yielded a Chronbach’s alpha of .828. The Personal Dispositions toward Diversity scale (Pohan & Aguilar 2001) consists of 15 items, 10 of which are reverse items. Item analysis of this scale items yielded a Chronbach’s alpha of .874. The Social Justice Beliefs Scale (Ludlow, Enterline, & Cochran-Smith, 2008) consists of 12 items, 7 of which are reverse items. Item analysis of this scale items yielded a Chronbach’s alpha of .793.

In the final part of the survey, which we call the Differentiation Scale, we ask participants to rate the following statements on a scale of 1 (most negative) to 5 (most positive):

• The reading program or curriculum adopted by my school or district is appropriate for my students.

• I have sufficient recreational reading material in my classroom.

• I have freedom to deviate from the adopted reading curriculum when necessary.

• I have choice in the instructional strategies I use to teach reading.

• I have support in providing differentiated instruction for students who need it.

• I have the freedom to differentiate all instruction when necessary.

• I have sufficient and appropriate materials to differentiate instruction when needed.

An analysis of the Differentiation Scale produced two factors that we call Resources and Choice. The factor Resources consists of the items; “The reading program or curriculum adopted by my school or district is appropriate for my students”, “I have sufficient recreational reading material in my classroom”, “I have the freedom to differentiate all instruction when necessary”, and “I have sufficient and appropriate materials to differentiate instruction when needed”. The factor Choice consists of the items; “I have freedom to deviate from the adopted reading curriculum when necessary.”, “I have choice in the instructional strategies I use to teach reading,” and “I have support in providing differentiated instruction for students who need it.”

Participants wrote a very short narrative to explain each response in this final group of questions.

**Data Analysis**

Overall, participants with stronger attitudes toward social justice (Social Justice Beliefs Scale; Ludlow, Enterline, & Cochran-Smith, 2008) and stronger personal attitudes toward diversity (Personal Dispositions toward Diversity Scale; Pohan & Aguilar 2001) reported being less satisfied with their resources to differentiate (Resources factor of the Differentiation Scale) the school experience for groups and individuals (r = -.524, p. = .000; r = -.289, p. = 052, respectively). Only 30.4% of respondents reported their reading program to be ‘very appropriate’ for their students and 50% reported having ‘much freedom’ to deviate from the reading curriculum, only 41.3 % reported having ‘somewhat sufficient’ materials to do so. Sixty-five percent reported having ‘much freedom to differentiate instruction when necessary’, but only 34.8 % reported they had “some support’ to do so and only 52.2% reported having ‘some materials’ with which to differentiate.

Non-native participants, overall, demonstrated a significantly more positive attitude toward diversity (Personal Dispositions toward Diversity scale; Pohan & Aguilar 2001) and social justice (Social Justice Beliefs Scale; Ludlow, Enterline, & Cochran-Smith, 2008) than did Native Alaskan participants. Native Alaskan participants were less inclined toward social justice overall, (Personal Dispositions toward Diversity scale; Pohan & Aguilar 2001, the Social Justice Beliefs Scale; Ludlow, Enterline, & Cochran-Smith, 2008) than non-VT Grantee participants (t(61) = 3.408, p. = 001). I also found a weak negative correlation between years of teaching accomplished and personal attitudes toward diversity (Personal Dispositions toward Diversity scale; Pohan & Aguilar 2001).

In examining the narratives, interview transcripts and narrative responses on the Differentiation Scale, we first grouped ideas in to categories, then defined and refined these categories based on units of analysis and finally, consensus among the researchers. Two strong themes emerged. Participants expressed concern about students’ inability to access the curriculum either because it is not academically or developmentally appropriate (funds of knowledge) or because students cannot connect to the content (cultural relevancy):

“There is a big gap between what is in the curriculum and what the students’ background knowledge is. I may be reading about a story about the city that has the high rises, most kids haven’t had the opportunity to travel even to Fairbanks, they haven't seen a building that was even three stories high.”

“I am challenged to activate prior knowledge or make the reading material more relevant to the children, in rural Alaska especially.”

“It is hard trying to connect students to the materials that they have because they are so irrelevant to our area to rural Alaska. For instance the past two stories that I’ve been working with the children have been about, one was about the elephant and the other about fireflies, which they don’t exist where I’m at.”

“I have always had lots of books, but the problem has been and continues to be having books that relate to the students at their understanding and still be relevant - most books that are culturally diverse are at a more difficult reading level - the mainstream basic books are still very mainstream culture! Also, it's hard to have easier books of high quality for my lower readers.”

“I think it’s the culture of our people and just in general the way that our values, and beliefs, and knowledge play in a big part in how we perceive things. I think that’s probably the biggest barrier the misunderstanding between the Native way and the western ways.”

In addition, while they felt they had the freedom to differentiate instruction; they report they lack the time, the resources, or the personnel support to do so:

“I think it’s time more than everything else, especially with all the demands that are placed goals, and data bases and stuff like that.”

“I have a lot of engaging, interesting activities and lessons I’d like to do with my class. But, our school is mandated to do certain things during the reading block and then we have writing block and math block and during those times we can’t do anything but what is prescribed in our curriculum. So, time is one of my challenges.”

“I'm still building a classroom library and learning the reading preferences and interests of my students. Unfortunately, we don't get much recreational reading time in class.”

“I are expected to use the curriculum with fidelity, I have 30 minutes daily to differentiate appropriate lessons.”

“The test scores are all that matter. Differentiation is my own burden.”

**Conclusions**

A review of the literature resulted in three broad areas, that when lacking in the education experience of children, could be described as poverties: positive teacher attitudes toward diversity and social justice, the use of appropriate materials and strategies including a culturally relevant and meaningful curriculum, and classroom and school structures that reflect and support the lived experiences of students.

**Teacher Attitudes**

Non-native participants demonstrated a significantly more positive attitude toward diversity and social justice than did Native Alaskan participants. The first result raises more questions than it answers. Do Native Alaskan teachers understand diversity and social justice in a way that is different from how we measured it? Perhaps our articulation of social justice is yet another example western hegemony. This might also explain Dehyle and Swisher’s (1997) result, where Native American and Alaska Native teachers seemed to have the same attitude toward assimilation. If the accepted articulations of social justice stand, what does it mean for programs specifically designed to increase the number of Alaska Native teachers in classrooms?

**Appropriate Materials and Strategies**

Overall, about half of the participants in the survey reported being at least somewhat or satisfied overall with the appropriateness of their classroom materials, their freedom to use effective strategies, and their access to culturally rich and meaningful materials. However, the other half reported the opposite. They had materials their students could not access, they felt there was too great a focus on testing, or they did not have the time and resources to differentiate for groups and individuals. This result supports the recent NIES (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012) findings and is in conflict with expected practice laid out in the Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1999).

**Class and School Structures**

Participants in this study view the issue of appropriate classroom and school structures as a home-school culture mismatch. However, the focus of the mismatch was clearly placed on the home and children being changed rather than making changes in classroom and school structures:

“It’s very difficult to get my students to write in Standard English when they don’t speak in Standard English.”

“I realize that some of our kids in the village were not only missing the academic stuff, but they were also missing the citizenship part. You know being a good person, being a helpful person.”

“Many of my students had single parents’ or parents who were going through a divorce, or their parents were married but their dad is in jail. You could just tell that their needs were so strong.” “I have a lot more parents that are young and have difficulties at home raising their children with all of the issues that we have to deal with in our society today.”

This is not a unique perspective to these participants or to Alaska. But, it raises a similar question to the first finding. Why did Native Alaskan teachers, some of whose personal experiences reflect those of the families they reproached, place blame on the families rather than on the structures of the school?

Our next step in this project is to develop case studies with Native Alaskan teachers and explore some of the questions raised in this study.

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