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This Digest briefly reviews the events that led to the development of the "American Indian and Alaska Native Education Research Agenda" (2001), the basic assumptions and premises underlying it, and the priority research topics it ultimately included, organized within six topic areas. Begun in 1998 under the Clinton administration, the Research Agenda was approved and released during the first year of the Bush administration. Currently it provides a touchstone, guiding a national effort to produce high-quality research focused on effective education practices and ways to implement them in schools and programs serving American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students.

BACKGROUND

In 1997, more than 130 Indian organizations and individual tribes pressed the federal government to develop a comprehensive Indian education policy. In the preface of their "red book," this coalition reminded the federal government about the difficult history of Indian education:

* The Meriam Report (1928) and the Kennedy Report (Senate Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, 1969) documented the failure of formal education and called for more Indian involvement, control, and relevancy in the educational process. The Indian Nations At Risk Task Force (1991) recognized "twenty years of progress" during the 1970-80s, but concluded that Indian communities were "nations at risk" educationally. The White House Conference on Indian Education (1992) reached similar conclusions and made specific recommendations for improvement. (National Congress of American Indians and National Indian Education Association, 1997, p. i)

The following year, President Clinton signed Executive Order 13096 (1998), which stipulated that the federal government is committed to improving the academic performance and reducing the dropout rate of AI/AN students attending public schools and Bureau of Indian Affairs schools.

Section F of the Executive Order required the development and implementation of a research agenda for AI/AN Education. The development of the Research Agenda was assigned to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) and Office of Indian Education (OIE). These offices established a working group made up of federal and non-government organizations, which set out to identify a limited set of high-priority research topics that could serve as a framework and guide for federally sponsored research over the following decade.

The working group solicited ideas and comments in general from Native and non-Native

educators and researchers, and the group specifically sought suggestions for high-priority research topics. Ideas and comments were solicited via a series of regional partnership forums; a national Research Agenda conference attended by tribal education chairs, educators, and researchers; a tear-off comment page on a project brochure; a visitor comment page on a special Web site; and solicitations at national and regional meetings of Native educators and researchers. In all, the working group gathered well over 300 unique suggestions through these activities.

Unlike earlier projects (e.g., Cahape, 1993), however, the purpose of the Research Agenda project was to identify research "priorities," not to list the universe of possibilities. Consequently, the sorted and combined list of suggestions was distributed for several review iterations by all working group members and an expert committee to assign priorities. The final set of topics was discussed in a series of focus groups with educators and Native parents, and the report was released in November 2001.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS AND PREMISES OF THE RESEARCH AGENDA

The Research Agenda proceeds from a set of basic assumptions about conducting research in Indian country.
Research should include a focus on success. Instead of focusing on educational and social barriers (i.e., deficits), educators and administrators are eager for information about best practices. Programs, pedagogy, and curricula need to be systematically studied to identify both what is and is not successful as part of a larger school reform and improvement effort.

Studies must be conducted from a perspective that respects Native languages and cultures. One of the primary ways cultural bias can and has colored research is through the implementation of standards and assessments for AI/AN students that focus on the educational goals and norms of the larger society, without also incorporating the perspectives of Native communities and parents.

Researchers, Native or non-Native, need to respect tribal rights and work actively with the tribes and villages to find ways to conduct research while being responsive to local concerns and seeking to produce findings useful to locals. When research includes Native children as a focus in large-scale studies, researchers should seek the advice and support of such groups as the National Advisory Committee on Indian Education, work closely with the Office of Indian Education Programs (Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Department of Interior) and the Office of Indian Education (U.S. Department of Education), and include experienced Native researchers as members of study teams.

Considerable cultural, linguistic, economic, historical, social, and status (federally recognized and unrecognized) differences exist among the Native peoples of North

America. Research proposals should take these differences into account, especially in designs for large-scale studies that will involve multiple tribes and villages.

Research methods and issues. Determining what to study, where, and how is a politically and ethically charged process. In the past, educational research involving Native students and their communities typically has been directed by outsiders and has focused on deficits rather than strengths. It also has tended to focus on small samples and unique populations, often restricted to the roughly 10 percent of Native students who attend reservation schools or the 17 percent who attend off-reservation schools where Native students are in the majority. Consequently, the educational experiences of the majority of Native students have seldom been studied. One of the most important needs identified in the Research Agenda was for more resources to be concentrated on larger and more inclusive studies than have been possible in the past. The working group identified several other important research methodological issues:

* Detailed national data are needed, including over sampling in national studies and collecting tribal or village affiliation data about Native participants.

* Definitional issues should be resolved by AI/AN tribes and include precise methods for identifying who is Native, along with their tribal or village affiliations.

* Research on Native students should involve researchers with demonstrated knowledge of Native culture(s).

* Research quality should receive a high priority; one measure of methodological quality is knowledge (on the part of researchers) of the culture and language of the groups studied.

* Generalizable research findings are needed.

* A clearinghouse focused on Native education is needed; a Web site created by the working group, www.IndianEduResearch.net, could be used for this purpose.

RESEARCH PRIORITIES FOR AI/AN EDUCATION

The priority research topics fell into six general categories outlined below. They are not listed in order of importance, and all should be considered to have the same level of priority.

Educational outcomes of AI/AN students. We need to know much more about the current status of Native students on a range of outcome measures and about the individual, family, community, classroom, and school factors that explain differences among students. Priority research topics include:

* status of AI/AN students in terms of academic achievement and status changes in the last two decades

* status of AI/AN students in terms of educational attainment and status changes in the last two decades

* status of AI/AN students on other education-related outcomes such as job skills and readiness, health and fitness, substance abuse, etc.

* best practices and reform models that have been demonstrated to be effective in enhancing academic achievement, attainment, and/or other education-related outcomes of AI/AN students

Native language and culture. Probably no subject generates more interest and discussion than the idea of structuring education for AI/AN students around the concepts and language that lie at the core of tribal or village culture. Priority research topics include:

* effects on educational outcomes for students and schools of incorporating AI/AN language and culture into the school curriculum

* best practices demonstrated as effective for implementing a culturally relevant learning

environment and identification of factors that serve as barriers or facilitators for implementation

Teachers, schools, and educational resources. What happens to young people as students ultimately depends on their encounters with their schools, individual teachers, the curriculum and materials, and how those encounters relate to their own capabilities, interests, motivations, and experiences. Priority topics in this category include:

* effective methods for developing, recruiting, and retaining qualified teachers for schools with large AI/AN enrollments

* effective and replicable teaching approaches, models, etc. for enhancing outcomes for AI/AN students

* best practices for promoting positive parent or community involvement in schools serving AI/AN students

AI/AN students with special needs. AI/AN students appear to be over represented in special education and compensatory/remedial classes and underrepresented in classes for gifted or talented students. Priority topics in this category include:

* personal, social, and educational characteristics of AI/AN children in special, compensatory, and gifted or talented education programs, and best practices for valid assessment of special needs

* effective practices for working with AI/AN students with special education needs

Early childhood education needs of Native children. AI/AN children appear to be less prepared on average to begin their first years of school than children in other American racial/ethnic groups. Priority topics in this category include:

* status of infant and preschool-age AI/AN children on school readiness domains

* programs and services available for infants and preschool-aged AI/AN children

Education standards and assessments. Throughout the country, students--Native and non-Native--are facing an unprecedented series of high-stakes tests to determine their levels of proficiency on academic standards established at the national, state, or local level. Priority research topics in this category include:

* characteristics of standards and assessment systems for schools with large enrollments of AI/AN students that are effective in improving performance and address the unique needs and situations of those students

* best practices for implementing standards and assessment systems for schools with large enrollments of AI/AN students

WHERE TO GO FOR MORE INFORMATION

Details about the Executive Order, the working group's activities and copies of most of the products resulting from them, and the full text of the Research Agenda can be found at www.IndianEduResearch.net.

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