

# Multicultural Education for Native American Students in Physical Education

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Today, adolescents entering the United States educational system are more diverse than ever before. Knott (1991) indicated that within the 21st century, 42 percent of public school students will be minorities, and 33 percent of the individuals entering the work force will be of nonwhite ancestry. This demographic transformation within our school system reflects an intricate mix of students with varied ethnic, social, religious, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Should these changes encourage a paradigm shift within the curriculum that reflects a multicultural approach? Would such a move make any difference on how students act and interact with peers? According to Molnar (1989), "schools can have a profound impact in the fight against racism by addressing the interpersonal aspects of racism, and by offering school and classroom activities that teach about oppression and recognize the strengths and contributions of various cultures" (p. 72). This statement recommends that the multicultural approach would help change student perceptions and possibly prejudicisms that might occur on or off school campuses.

The goal of multicultural education is to create equal opportunities for all students by directing educational experiences that help them become knowledgeable and caring toward others. Teachers are not only encouraged to be sensitive to issues of gender, race, and multiculturalism, but are also directed to treat these issues as part of their educational responsibilities (Banks,

1993). The challenge for physical educators is to acknowledge and act upon the diverse student body that is reflected within their classrooms. This can be accomplished by restructuring the curriculum content and addressing new pedagogical strategies that complement the diverse student population.

Contrasting theories of multiculturalism offer a different philosophical approach. One such theory, assimilation, suggests that the minority culture should disregard their personal cultural traits and simply conform to the culture of the majority. Any educational institution operating under this theory ignores issues of diversity when developing curriculum, instructional practices, producing programs, or creating policies. Here all students would be expected to assimilate into the dominate culture in order to find success within that institution. Another multicultural theory is termed amalgamation or melting pot theory (Wyman, 1993). This theory contests that a new culture should be created through the incorporation of positive and beneficial traits of every culture within the system. Through amalgamation all cultures relinquish certain aspects of their culture and gain from others. Both approaches has been implemented in our educational system and has shown limited success. If the challenge of multicultural education is to create equal opportunities for all students, the ideologies of assimilation and amalgamation must be questioned (Janzen, 1994).

## **Native Americans and Physical Education**

One cultural group that brings diversity to our schools is individuals of Native Ameri-

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can heritage. It has been speculated by Hunter (1974) that Native Americans are “wisely observant of the world about them, the original possessors of this continent . . . recognized diversity as an inalienable right, which they were ever ready to defend” (p. 197). One Native American leader, Sitting Bull, offers an advanced philosophy concerning diversity. Generations ago he stated: *“I am a red man. If the great Spirit had desired me to be a white man he would have made me so in the first place. He put in your heart certain wishes and plans, in my heart he put other and different desires. Each man is good in his sight. It is not necessary for eagles to be crows. Now we are poor, but we are free. No white man controls our footsteps. If we die, we die defending our rights”* (Hunter, 1974, p. 112).

This quotation highlights historical significance to present day multicultural education. Sensitivity and appreciation toward individual differences and strengths are paramount in a democratic society. Sitting Bull eloquently documents this need to accept and appreciate these differences.

Students with a Native American background bring to the classroom a variety of gifts and experiences. Yet, with a glorious heritage, Native American students are becoming an academic concern across our nation. Research suggests that Native Americans have been found to be more rejected, depressed, and withdrawn than Anglo children, they have a lower self image, the highest suicide rate, and the highest drop out rate of all ethnic groups (Nel, 1994; Flores, 1991; O’Brian, 1990). This apparent lack of failure appears to connect with their unwillingness to adopt a white heritage, culture, and philosophical orientation, and in a sense, assimilate and act white. Yet, the emerging evidence suggests that assimilation for Native Americans is fatalistic (Bryde, 1970; Garcia, 1991; Nel, 1994).

One area within the curriculum that permits a functional structure toward multicultu-

ral education is physical education. Within physical education the instructor can create learning experiences that teach about oppression while leading students toward a sensitivity, awareness, and appreciation of diverse student population. Specific action toward multicultural enrichment can successfully occur within physical education through the employment of three specific multicultural dimensions which include: content integration, prejudice reduction strategies, and culturally responsive pedagogy. These dimensions developed by Banks (1993) offer a proactive multicultural approach within education. In terms of physical education, each will be addressed with specific examples for classroom inclusion.

### **Content Integration**

Content integration is designed to incorporate the historical and philosophical contributions of various cultures to physical activity and sport. This component of multicultural education is supported through the work of Elrich (1994), Gay (1993), Gollnic & Chinn (1990), and Siccone (1995) who suggest that instructional materials need to move away from a Eurocentric approach and toward a more global multicultural curriculum. To implement content integration for teaching Native American concepts, physical educators should consider two effective options; culturally specific themes and lessons, and historical contributions and achievements.

The first strategy is to develop instructional themes to include lessons patterned after the activities of historical games and skills developed by Native Americans. For hundreds of years these individuals participated in a variety of games, physical activities, outdoor adventure challenges, and endurance training techniques (Oxendine, 1988). Specific skills developed through these experiences were vital for daily living. The activities were designed to improve strength, speed, endurance, general fitness, and cour-

age. Children and adults practiced toward mastery in archery, endurance running, horse-riding ability, swimming, and spear throwing. Team sports were also routinely played. Many realize that lacrosse was developed by Native Americans, but early modified forms of field hockey, soccer, football, were also enjoyed.

Within modern classrooms, the physical education instructor who aspires to promote cultural diversity through content integration of Native Americans can implement any of these activities. The instructor is encouraged to incorporate multicultural themes that incorporate a series of skills and activities associated with the Native American ancestry. During integration periods, teachers should create lessons that reflect the life and leisure skills of Native Americans. Throughout the lesson teachers are encouraged to integrate discussions that reveal the life or death urgency concerning certain physical abilities. Not only will this increase the meaning of the lesson, but might develop sensitivity, pride, and awareness toward the Native American's life.

The second aspect of content integration involves the promotion of heroes or sport related accomplishments. Jim Thorpe, for example, is considered by many as one of the greatest running backs football has ever seen. He was also a very famous Olympic decathlete in 1912. Another well known Native American Olympian, Billy Mills, won a gold medal in the 10,000 meter run during the 1964 Tokyo games.

These individuals represent a very small sample of the hundreds of famous Native American athletes (Oxendine, 1988). It is the physical educator's responsibility to disseminate this information to students. The sense of pride that could flourish within a Native American child makes this multicultural approach meaningful.

Content integration is a vital segment of multicultural education within the physical education classroom. This domain, if prop-

erly implemented, can motivate, inspire, and generate a sense of distinction and contribution that Native Americans have made to physical education. The goal of this infusion is to present a complete truth about the human experience (Hilliard et al., 1990).

### **Prejudice Reduction Strategies**

Prejudice reduction strategies is the second dimension within multicultural education. According to Banks (1994), this component has to do with efforts that help students to develop positive attitudes about different groups. Through initiative and trust building experiences, cross-cultural groups will work together in an attempt to develop an understanding and appreciation of the strengths and similarities of others. This approach is supported by Cushner et al. (1992), Johnson et al. (1994), and Madden & Slavin (1983) who suggest that working and interacting with students from other races decreases stereotypes.

Initiative activities are learning experiences that encourage student groups to cooperative together in order to solve a physical or mental challenge. This approach can be useful in developing an individual's awareness of personal leadership, sensitivity, prejudism, and group commitment. According to Rohnke (1984) these activities are used to: (1) promote an individual's sense of his or her own competence, (2) break down stereotypes, and (3) build group morale and a sense of camaraderie. Specific examples of initiative activities that physical education teachers can utilize for any academic level could include the TP Shuffle, Knots, Human Ladder, or the Spider Web. Ropes course activities such as tire swings, swinging log, two-rope bridge, or an inclined log will add to the initiative challenge while encouraging groups to work together and cooperate. These activities require peers to think, analyze, and contemplate various strategies within a group for success. With successful interactions and proper instruc-

tional guidance, group initiative activities can stimulate a cognitive appreciation and understanding between the difference and similarities of various cultures.

Additional means for implementing prejudice reduction include trust building activities. Traditional activities such as faith fall, human pass, and Sherpa Walk all exhibit elements of student trust. Moving a group of students toward trust is a challenging but rewarding task that is critical for personal involvement (Rohnke, 1984). Once students start to trust each other, they begin to share openly about fears, perceptions, and inner thoughts. This is when the teacher can attempt to make multicultural sensitivity a reality. According to Rohnke (1984), "trust is gained with patience, thoughtfulness and care over a period of time, and can be damaged or lost in a second by carelessness or inconsiderate behavior. Cultivate and protect the trust that an individual offers and shares" (p. 79). When integrating trust oriented experiences the teacher should be cautious and confident in what he or she is proposing in order to guard the trust a student extends.

The physical educator is reminded that successful application with this experience rest with the teacher. Simply creating a group initiative or trust building activity will not be enough to encourage prejudice reduction. The teacher must create an environment conducive to social awareness and sensitivity. Guiding students through these activities is essential. The verbal and non-verbal actions displayed by students toward peer and peer groups can provide the teacher with a platform for discussion. With proper planning and predetermined questions targeting specific social behaviors, prejudice reduction can become a reality.

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Culturally responsive pedagogy encourages the physical education instructor to be aware of social trends, languages, and cus-

toms that all diverse students within a class identify with. Often, family attributes and child rearing practices associated with certain cultural groups dictate how a student will behave and function in the classroom. Culturally responsive teachers are aware of these traits and model attitudes that reflect an appreciation, understanding, and sensitivity toward all students.

When working with Native American students, physical educators must educate themselves about the cultural similarities and differences associated with this group. Without proper information, cultural incompatibilities can lead to misjudgments. This is evident from a letter written by a Native-American father to his son's teacher. The father writes:

*"He is not culturally 'disadvantaged' but he is culturally different! . . . He is caught between two worlds, torn by two distinct cultural systems. . . . I want my child to succeed in school and in life. I don't want him to be a dropout or juvenile delinquent or to end up on drugs or alcohol because of discrimination. I want him to be proud of his rich heritage and culture, and I would like him to develop the necessary capabilities to adapt to, and succeed in, both cultures. But I need your help. What you say and what you do in the classroom, what you teach and how you teach it will have a significant effect on the potential success or failure of my child. . . . All I ask is that you work with me, not against me, to help educate my child in the best way. My son, Wind-Wolf is not an empty glass coming to your class to be filled. He is a full basket coming into a different environment and society to share. Please let him share his knowledge, heritage, and culture with you and his peers"* (Lake 1990, p. 51-52.).

This letter brings into focus critical issues of culturally responsive pedagogy. To alter unfounded dispositions concerning Native Americans or any cultural group, the physical education teacher must be aware of specific cultural traits. To facilitate this process, Nichols (1994) developed a comprehensive

chart designed to help teachers understand cultural differences. The chart is divided into three situational categories: family life, education, and social/cultural. Each section extends several considerations that teachers should contemplate when working with a Native American student (See Figure 1). Those who use the ideas from Nichols will improve relations and develop a positive classroom atmosphere. Yet, the reader is cautioned not to generalize. All of these traits are associated with Native Americans across our country, but that does not mean they are true for each and every Native American student. The specific cultural training and child rearing practices will vary within each home.

### Conclusion

Integrating multicultural concepts within our curriculum is a challenging task. Yet, the need for multicultural education within our physical education classroom is paramount. The drop out rates and feelings of isolation suggest that assimilation is not and never has worked for Native Americans. The physical education teacher can take the lead in redirecting all students toward a successful educational experience. Ogby (1986) suggested that the complex and culturally pluralistic

nature of American society is currently not reflected in the schools. Several propose that this is the reason for the academic misfortunes and high drop out rates of minority students (Apple, 1990; Cummins, 1990; Wyman, 1993). Schools and their instructors will need to become proactive in terms of educating for multicultural understanding. As supported throughout this paper, the evidence suggests that success with many Native American students rests upon a multicultural education program, and it is the authors' opinion that the physical educator is a key player in multicultural education experiences. A curriculum that integrates multicultural education throughout every component is a start, but more is required. Training students to respect cultural differences and become caring and sensitive to individual backgrounds is vital. Educators must develop strategies that promote equality of all persons. The process of empowering the Native American student involves a teacher reeducation. It should be remembered that the objective is not to have students change their cultural beliefs and behaviors, but to help them adapt to specific situations and acquire coping skills (Nel, 1994).

The Native American student who attends a physical education class with a teacher who is culturally responsible will enjoy a more rewarding and meaningful experience. With this responsibilities the physical education instructor will be able to culturally relate and identify more effectively with their students. These positive encounters will create a sensitive and open learning environment. Cultural responsibility requires effort, but the outcomes can be tremendous.

Figure 1

#### Family Life:

Extended family includes all relatives.  
 Look to elders for advice.  
 In disciplining children many parents believe in talking quietly to the child rather than scolding, helping children understand the consequences of the behavior, after which the child decides whether or not to do it.

#### Education:

Education is based on observation of the environment.  
 Listening and observing are expected skills.  
 Hurrying is disharmonious with nature, so clock time isn't important.

#### Social/Cultural:

Taught not to invade other's privacy so may not like teachers or others touching them.  
 Bravery is expected, and one is responsible for supporting friends.  
 Patience is important, as is sharing with others.  
 Sees an important connection between humans and their environment.  
 Have a rich oral history, and enjoy storytelling.

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