

Clinical Exchange

Integrating American Indian/Alaska Native Culture Into Shared Storybook Intervention

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There is currently very little professional literature to guide speech-language pathologists (SLPs) in providing culturally responsive intervention that is specific to American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) children (Robinson-Zañartu, 1996; Westby & Roman, 1995; Westby & Vining, 2002). This presents a particular dilemma when, as a component of evidence-based practice, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) advocates that clinicians consider client background and values in clinical decision making (ASHA, 2005). Furthermore, over the years, national leaders in AI education have called for increased representation of ancestral traditions and knowledge within the learning process for AI/AN children (Demmert, McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, & Leos, 2006;

Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, 1991; Research Agenda Working Group, Strang, & von Glatz, 2001). Presidential Executive Order (2004) has also reinforced the need for school personnel to implement the No Child Left Behind Act to be “consistent with tribal traditions, languages, and culture” (p. 1).

The need to address issues of cultural responsiveness for AI/AN students is of particular importance to special educators, including SLPs. Although the proportion of the public school population aged 3 to 21 years represented by AI/AN students is relatively small at 1.2%, AI/AN children are represented in special education programs at higher rates (12%) when compared to 9% of the overall public school enrollees (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2005). Compounding this concern, results of the National

ABSTRACT: Purpose: The purpose of this clinical exchange is to provide information for speech-language pathologists (SLPs) so they will be able to provide culturally responsive intervention for young children of American Indian and Alaska Native heritage. The focus is on a particular strategy—the integration of culturally based stories into shared storybook intervention.

Method: The use of culturally based stories is presented as it relates to sociocultural theory and the expressed priority of Native peoples to revitalize their cultural teaching and learning practices, inclusive of storytelling. Strategies are presented that SLPs can follow in preparing for the use of culturally based stories, as well as in ensuring that the stories that are selected for use are authentic and appropriate for the children involved. The strategies discussed

represent the collaborative efforts of Native and non-Native professionals to link a review of pertinent scholarly literature with ancestral knowledge that is derived from tribal elders and tradition bearers of the Southern Puget Salish peoples. The article concludes by illustrating the application of these strategies to a program involving young children of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Conclusion: SLPs can integrate culturally based stories into their language and literacy intervention to encourage American Indian and Alaska Native children.

KEY WORDS: American Indians, Alaska Natives, culturally based stories, shared storybook intervention

Assessment of Educational Progress for 2003 indicated that a substantial percentage of Native students at Grade 4 (53%) and Grade 8 (43%) read below a basic level of proficiency (NCES, 2005).

At the same time, demographic shifts have resulted in more than 90% of AI/AN children being enrolled in public schools (Research Agenda Working Group et al., 2001). Of these, the majority (56%) are enrolled in schools where the total population of AI/AN students represents less than 25% of the school's overall enrollment (NCES, 2005). As a result, unique cultural characteristics of AI/AN students have tended to be overlooked (Research Agenda Working Group et al., 2001). Furthermore, research suggests that the need for consideration of Native culture and values in the educational process extends beyond schools on or near reservations and Native villages to include urban settings (Powers, 2006). Thus, SLPs in both rural and urban school settings face the challenge of implementing intervention strategies that are culturally responsive for AI/AN children.

This article represents the collaborative efforts of Native and non-Native professionals to link a review of pertinent scholarly literature with ancestral knowledge that is derived from tribal elders and tradition bearers of the Southern Puget Salish peoples. The purposes of this clinical exchange are to (a) contextualize AI/AN storytelling within sociocultural theory and cultural practices, (b) provide a description of shared storytelling as a language and emergent literacy intervention approach used with young children, (c) present strategies for SLPs to use in preparing for and selecting culturally based stories for intervention with AI/AN children, and (d) illustrate the use of culturally based stories in a specific intervention program involving children of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Sociocultural Foundations

Sociocultural theory provides the foundation for addressing social identity in the intervention process. This theory requires SLPs to look beyond the label of a diagnosed disorder type in order to consider the broader cultural and historical context in which the therapeutic process is situated (Hagstrom & Wertsch, 2004). Individuals bring a sense of self to the therapeutic situation that has grown out of their interactions with family and immediate community members, as well as with educators and others in their environment. Social identity continues to be constructed in interactions between the client and clinician.

The clinician recognizes facets of a client's social identity by organizing activity participation in particular ways (Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chávez, & Angelillo, 2003), such as through involvement of multiple generation groups as well as inclusion of particular materials and methods, such as storytelling that is derived from a child's cultural background. Conversely, the clinician indirectly communicates a lack of recognition (and lack of value) for dimensions of an individual's social identity when particular materials and participation strategies are not selected for inclusion in the intervention process (Hagstrom & Wertsch, 2004). When a Native child's social identity is not validated through educational practices, the child may doubt his or her ability to perform in a school setting, which may then put this child at risk for difficulty in language and literacy learning (Demmert, McCardle, & Leos, 2006).

Cultural renewal is a priority of the tribes, nations, villages, and organizations of Native peoples in the United States. Cultural values, beliefs, and practices lie at the core of a group's social identity. The Indian Education Act of 1972 and the Indian Self-Determination

and Educational Assistance Act of 1975 set the stage for AI/AN peoples to determine educational priorities for their communities. Since the passage of these acts, Native communities and governments have sought to revitalize their historic customs, including traditional teaching and learning practices. These efforts have been driven by a strong belief that re-integration of cultural values and practices into educational systems is associated with an increased sense of positive social identity, improved academic performance, and greater overall well-being for AI/AN students. An extensive analysis of professional literature that was conducted by Demmert and Towner (2003) identified preliminary research that supports this assertion, but these authors also pointed out the need for additional research, including further examination of specific innovative practices.

Storytelling as Cultural Practice

One focus of cultural revitalization efforts involves the use of stories as a central instructional strategy within the process of educating AI/AN children. Historically, storytelling served as a primary means to teach AI/AN children how to live in harmony with other people and with the natural elements of the earth (Inglebret, Bear Eagle, & Pavel, 2007). Through storytelling, the values and philosophies of particular cultural groups were passed on across the generations, thereby contributing to the maintenance of the group's cultural identity and sense of community (Fixico, 2003). Storytelling continues to be valued as a means to help children understand who they are and to make sense of their surroundings while instilling a sense of pride in their cultural heritage.

The AI/AN storytelling process is grounded in the oral tradition. Learning through the oral tradition parallels involvement of children in the daily life activities that sustain the existence of their particular cultural community (Fixico, 2003). For example, children of the Southern Puget Salish tradition learn about canoes through stories as they are involved in the construction of traditional cedar canoes with community members of multiple generations. Initially, the children actively observe and listen to the more experienced elders and adults. After the children become familiar with the elements of canoe construction, they contribute, first through involvement in simple tasks and then gradually taking on responsibility for more complex tasks as part of a cooperative group effort. Oral language is used to provide information and suggestions that facilitate the process of canoe building. Children might use language to build on the concepts expressed by others as the group members explore possibilities for the task at hand. Questions are asked only when there is an authentic need for further information. The focus is on thinking creatively and expressing new ideas.

Traditional AI/AN storytelling parallels a real-life experience that is shared by community members so there is a common referential context. The storytelling event serves to connect the present-day experience with that of cultural ancestors as well as to express interconnections with the physical surroundings (Fixico, 2003). Referring back to the example of cedar canoe construction, a story might vividly describe an ancestor's experience in canoe building through words, gestures, and particular intonational patterns so that the characters and events of the past can be visualized in the present while the underlying values and morals expressed through the story become lessons for the future. Natural elements of the earth play a prominent role in Native storytelling. Thus, a canoe-building story of the Southern Puget Salish peoples will link back to the

resource from which traditional canoes are constructed, the cedar tree, and the multiple roles that this natural resource plays in the lives of the speaker(s) and listener(s). The focus is on presenting a story in a manner that reflects the interconnectedness of all aspects of life through time.

Drawing from the work of Hall (1983), Westby and Rouse (1985) described a continuum of contextualization that contrasts the storytelling process associated with the AI/AN oral tradition with patterns underlying the sharing of written stories typically observed in public school classrooms. On this continuum, the AI/AN oral storytelling tradition is categorized as high context, reflecting its extensive interconnections with the physical surroundings and its grounding in the shared knowledge and relationships among the storyteller and the listeners. The focus is on fostering group cohesion while providing a holistic summation of an experience, with the audience being responsible for constructing the underlying meaning. The AI/AN storytelling format primarily involves children as active listeners. The extent to which children have learned from a story is measured through their subsequent performance of related tasks in the daily life of the community, often through nonverbal means rather than immediate verbal responses or explanations.

In contrast, storytelling in a public school classroom is viewed as low context, with primary reliance on words, both written and oral, as the vehicle of communication between individuals. There is less dependence on the physical environment and the presupposition of shared knowledge on the part of the listeners or readers. Events are broken down into separate elements (e.g., initiating event, response, consequence) that are presented in chronological order, with meaning communicated in a straightforward manner. Assessment of student learning typically occurs as students respond orally or in writing to questions or other verbal cues in the classroom context. The AI/AN child is at a disadvantage when there is a mismatch between a home communication style that emphasizes watching, listening, and demonstration of learning through performance of a subsequent task in daily life and a communication style that relies predominantly on information acquisition through language and demonstration of learning through verbal performance. Westby and Rouse (1985) advocated for teachers and SLPs to implement alignment strategies that bridge the oral, high-context tradition with the written, low-context, educational practices of the mainstream classroom.

Tribal educators recognize the need for AI/AN children to function in both their home communities and their public school classrooms. Thus, some AI/AN educators have taken the lead in developing resources to bridge the oral, high-context tradition of Native communities with the written, low-context structure that dominates school discourse. As an example, tribal culture and curriculum specialists collaborated with the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to develop the *Northwest Native American Reading Curriculum* (Costantino & Hurtado, 2006; Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2002), which contains stories that interweave aspects of the historic and contemporary lives of Native peoples. The stories, which were written and illustrated by Native people specifically for this curriculum, present culturally based content, values, and life ways. The materials are intended for use in both public and tribal schools. Additional AI/AN resources and stories are available through Web sites, such as <http://www.nwrel.org> (The Indian Reading Series: Stories and Legends of the Northwest), <http://www.cradleboard.org> (Cradleboard Teaching Project), [\[uaf.edu\]\(http://www.uaf.edu\) \(Alaska Native Knowledge Network\), and <http://www2.nau.edu/~jar/IndianLinks.html> \(American Indian Education and Indigenous Education Links\). Thus, SLPs and classroom teachers have access to new types of materials that incorporate content that is more likely to be familiar to AI/AN students. This familiar content can serve as the foundation for learning the less familiar discourse style that is expected in the low-context structure of the classroom, thus serving as a bridge between home and school cultures \(Westby & Rouse, 1985\).](http://www.ankn.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Shared Storybook Intervention

Shared storybook intervention has received increased attention as a strategy to promote the development of oral language and emergent literacy skills in young children (Ezell & Justice, 2005). Storybooks provide a stable source of linguistic forms and content that can be targeted as a part of speech and language intervention and, when shared, present opportunities for adult-child interaction to promote various pragmatic functions. This approach begins with the adult taking the lead in storytelling. Through various methods such as open-ended questioning, repetition, modeling, expanding, and cloze techniques, the adult facilitates the child taking an increasingly more active role in storytelling. When responding to adult prompts and in retelling the story, the child practices language targets. Opportunities for further practice of these targets are provided in a variety of situations to promote generalization.

When used as part of the language intervention process, shared storybook reading has been shown to facilitate a variety of purposes, including vocabulary building (Justice, Meier, & Walpole, 2005; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998) and linguistic development (Bradshaw, Hoffman, & Norris, 1998; Crain-Thoreson & Dale, 1999). Justice and Kaderavek (2004) provided a framework for merging oral language facilitation techniques with strategies to promote early literacy development, such as explicit print referencing. When this focus is added, shared storybook intervention has been shown to serve as a means for fostering emergent literacy skills (Justice & Ezell, 2000; Lovelace & Stewart, 2007). Selection of high-quality storybooks that align with individualized goals and objectives for specific children is critical to fostering both language and literacy development.

The shared storybook intervention approach clearly diverges from the oral tradition that is integral to learning in many Native communities. Whereas an AI/AN child might be expected to actively observe and listen during a holistic storytelling event in his or her home community, in the school setting, this child would be expected to listen to a story that is fragmented by questions and verbal cues to which responses are expected. Without consideration of the child's cultural background, the learning situation may become doubly difficult, as the child is required to learn new communication patterns at the same time that he or she is exposed to new and unfamiliar content. The use of culturally based stories provides familiar content, allowing the child to focus on learning the discourse patterns that are typical of the low-context structure of school communication while simultaneously seeing that attributes of his or her cultural background are valued in the learning process.

Preparing to Use Culturally Based Stories

The process of integrating AI/AN stories into intervention begins with gathering contextual information about each story.

Starting at a broad level, it is first important to understand the unique legal status of tribes as sovereign nations with authority over their members and designated lands and resources, including cultural resources (American Indian Lawyer Training Program, 1991). Each tribe has an established government that includes a culture department. A culture coordinator oversees efforts to maintain and renew tribal traditions and language. Based on the oral tradition, elders and tradition bearers have served as the “wisdom keepers” for specific tribes. Historically, specific stories might belong to a family and only be told by certain people at specific times of the day or year and in specific settings. In contemporary times, some stories have been published, allowing access to anyone. Before using these published stories, it is appropriate to learn about the particular cultural values, worldviews, and life ways in which the stories are grounded. Establishing a partnership with a tribal cultural specialist and asking permission to use published stories is highly considerate and will help ensure that an SLP has the background information necessary to tell the stories in a respectful manner that is consistent with the specific tribe’s or Native village’s traditions and cultural renewal efforts.

Other resources are becoming increasingly available that can further assist professionals in preparing to integrate AI/AN stories into intervention. The ASHA Office of Multicultural Affairs maintains a list of professionals who have identified themselves as willing to share their expertise regarding service delivery in Native communities. Programs at higher education institutions are developing centers to build partnerships with tribal communities. Information regarding tribal cultures can be acquired through conferences sponsored by these centers, associated Web sites and library and clearinghouse collections, and affiliated cultural specialists. Thirty-four tribal colleges and universities now exist in various parts of the country, making it possible to consult with their faculty, staff, and students. Many state departments of education have an Indian education office that is charged with facilitating improvement in educational practices used with AI/AN students. Some schools with larger numbers of AI/AN students employ tribal liaisons to assist educational personnel in understanding the culture of specific Native communities. In addition, there are national and state Indian education associations that sponsor conferences and other professional development opportunities. Taking advantage of these educational resources can provide the background knowledge that will help ensure that stories are integrated into intervention with consideration of important contextual factors.

Selecting Culturally Based Stories

The process of selecting AI/AN stories to be incorporated into intervention can be a daunting task, as thousands of Native stories have been published (Bruchac, 2003). The situation becomes further complicated because many of these published stories do not represent authentic versions of stories told from Native viewpoints. Inaccuracies in published stories may exist due to errors in translating from Native languages and to the filtering of content or changing of story structure based on a Western worldview (Seale & Slapin, 2005). Adding further to the complexity of story selection is the fact that AI/AN stories originate from a wide diversity of tribes and Native villages.

There are currently more than 560 federally recognized AI/AN tribes in the United States (NCES, 2005). Each of these sovereign nations has its own unique stories; therefore, selection of stories

for inclusion in intervention will involve a multifaceted process. First, the perspectives of family members should be considered. Parents of AI/AN children in public schools have expressed a desire for increased involvement, particularly in special education decision making, as well as for increased positive representation of AI/AN culture (Banks, 2004; Robinson-Zañartu & Majel-Dixon, 1996). It will be important to consult with families to determine the tribes or Native villages with which they are affiliated and to identify content areas they feel comfortable having incorporated into intervention. For example, knowing that family members reside in a coastal area of the Northwest and are affiliated with the Makah Nation might suggest stories focused on whales and other ocean life. It is also important to consider that families will have maintained varying levels of attachment to their traditional backgrounds. This may impact their preference as to the types of stories they would like integrated into the intervention process for their child.

The quality of specific stories should also be evaluated. Published criteria for evaluation of Native stories can guide the process of story selection. For example, Slapin and Seale (2003) presented evaluative criteria to consider, as well as positive and negative examples of stories focused on Native peoples. For instance, a story that depicts AIs/ANs as strong and proud people who care for their children serves as a positive example. A story that portrays all AIs/ANs as belonging to one generic group provides a negative example. To ensure the accuracy and authenticity of the portrayals of particular groups, consultation with a cultural informant, such as a tradition bearer, elder, and/or the culture coordinator for a specific tribe or Native village will be particularly critical. Generally, stories that have been authored and illustrated by Native peoples themselves will be preferable.

AN ILLUSTRATION—INTEGRATING CULTURALLY BASED STORIES IN INTERVENTION

Culturally based stories were integrated into a university-based intervention program designed to provide speech and language services to 3- to 5-year-olds with hearing loss. A small-group format involving 3 children of diverse cultural backgrounds was used. To be inclusive of the varying backgrounds of each of the children, the stories were contextualized in an “around-the-world” theme. This allowed each child’s social identity to be validated through stories related to each one of them personally while providing the opportunity for all of the children in the group to learn about the diverse cultural backgrounds of their peers. For the purposes of this clinical exchange, the process described here focuses on culturally based stories of the Southern Puget Salish peoples.

Native stories to be incorporated into intervention were selected from the *Northwest Native American Reading Curriculum* (Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2002). The accuracy and authenticity of the stories could be validated as each story is authored and illustrated by Native peoples of the Northwest. In addition, consultation with the mother and father (who is also a tribal tradition bearer) of the Native child confirmed that the selected stories were pertinent to the child’s specific tribal background and that they related to both historic and contemporary life ways of the child’s tribal community. Specifically, the tribe and family were actively involved

in the revival of traditional canoe journeys. Thus, selected stories revolved around a cedar canoe theme: *Canoe, Canoe, What Can You Do?* (Jainga, 2002a) and *In Our Canoe* (Jainga, 2002b).

To prepare for the cedar canoe theme, student-clinicians and their supervisors met with a tribal education specialist who provided a general orientation to the values, worldviews, and life ways of the Salish peoples of the Northwest coastal area. Because traditional canoes are constructed from cedar, the broader significance of the cedar tree to daily life was discussed. For example, the cedar tree has historically provided the material for clothing, housing, and baskets, as well as a mode of transportation—the canoe. The group then identified ways to connect the selected canoe stories to the cedar tree, integrating elements of a high-context, multisensory approach. The children would have the opportunity to handle and smell cedar boughs and bark as well as to visually inspect these materials closely as they were integrated into an art activity. The floating property of cedar, necessary for constructing a canoe, would be explored through a water table activity involving objects and materials that float or sink. Props to promote active engagement in storytelling would consist of a small replica of a canoe paddle for each child. All related activities could be aligned with the individual language goals and objectives for each child in the group.

Broadly, the communication goals for the group involved providing (a) comprehensible language input, (b) ongoing opportunities for the use of language in social interactions, and (c) opportunities for the use of language in situations that replicated school discourse patterns. Provision of comprehensible language input aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development. The adult determines a child's current language status and then provides input that is just slightly beyond. In a high-context learning situation, the adult focuses on providing input that allows for assimilation of new concepts and language structures into those that already exist in the child's repertoire.

To initiate this process, a situational frame as conceptualized by Westby and Rouse (1985) was established by examining relevant, theme-based materials in the intervention setting before their incorporation into storytelling. The attributes, functions, and labels for related materials (e.g., a bulletin board depicting a traditional canoe in a natural setting, canoe paddle replicas, and cedar boughs and bark) were discussed, and the sequence of activities into which they would be incorporated was described. In this case, the child of Native background entered the group intervention room, saw the materials, and initiated the discussion by stating, "These are Indian things. I need to be the teacher." This child then spontaneously joined the adults in describing the items and their uses as they were viewed and handled by the other children.

It should be noted that, typically, a high-context organizational structure would be associated with spontaneous social interaction that related to a cooperative group task. For example, in a classroom setting, children might be involved in the construction of a cardboard canoe to be used later in acting out a canoe journey. The children might work alongside at least two adults on this project so that the adults could model a verbal dialogue. The children themselves would not be required to verbalize, and any communicative attempts (verbal and nonverbal) would be accepted. The adults would not control turn taking but would focus on modeling language to guide the children's engagement in the hands-on activities with comments such as "These two pieces need to fit together. We need to cut the big one." Construction of a canoe would be followed by the

uninterrupted telling of a related story by an elder or knowledgeable adult.

In the current intervention setting, the storytelling activity centered on books containing content that was derived from the social identity of the child of Native background so the basic content was familiar to this particular child. All of the children in the group had been exposed to the key concepts and language structures associated with the storybooks through situational framing and hands-on, multisensory experience with related materials. Low-context ways of communicating about this familiar content were then introduced using the shared storybook intervention approach. Historically, the use of written language and books has not been part of the oral tradition in Native communities (Fixico, 2003). Therefore, the use of books as learning tools, in and of itself, represents an infusion of low-context structure.

Questioning and verbal cueing techniques represent another type of low-context structure characterizing the shared storybook intervention approach. In this case, the clinicians controlled interactions around the storybook by encouraging children to participate verbally at regular intervals throughout the storytelling. To elicit verbal descriptions, the clinicians requested information through statements, such as "Tell me about this picture"; asked open-ended questions, such as "Where are the people going in the canoe?"; or used cloze techniques, such as "The canoe is . . ." The children also made inferences and predictions based on what they saw. For example, each storybook incorporated photographs depicting scenes of the past, such as a man and a woman in front of a cedar canoe with a salmon laid on a cedar mat. The clinicians could ask questions related to this photograph, such as "What do you think is going to happen in this story?" and "Why do you think that?"

At the end of the storytelling, the clinician could go back and ask the children if what they predicted had occurred, using questions such as "What happened in this story?" and "Is this what you thought would happen?" Answering these types of questions requires the use of the more decontextualized language that typifies school discourse demands. Thus, this illustration demonstrates how the storybook intervention process was initiated with a high-context communication process that is likely to be more familiar to AI/AN children. This then led to use of the culturally based stories, which served as a bridge to the low-context communication process that is typical of the storybook intervention approach.

SUMMARY

A cornerstone of evidence-based practice is the consideration of client/family background and values (ASHA, 2005). This clinical exchange represents the collaborative efforts of Native and non-Native professionals to address this aspect of evidence-based practice as it relates to service provision for children and families of AI/AN background. A rationale was presented for integrating the use of culturally based stories into shared storybook intervention based on sociocultural theory and the priorities and efforts of Native peoples themselves to bring AI/AN culture into the educational process. Guidelines for preparing to use and selecting high-quality and authentic culturally based stories were elaborated. Implementation of these guidelines was then illustrated through their application to a program involving young children from diverse cultural backgrounds, one of whom was affiliated with the Southern Puget Salish peoples.

Shared storybook intervention is becoming more common as an intervention approach to build oral language and emergent literacy skills for young children. This approach provides a framework into which a core aspect of traditional AI/AN educational practice, storytelling, can be integrated. Some Native culture and curriculum specialists are now developing storybooks that are centered on AI/AN cultural values and life ways for use in both public and tribal schools. These culturally based stories provide a means to bring familiar content into the educational process for children of Native background. This familiar content can then serve as the foundation for bridging the high-context communication pattern associated with the oral tradition and the less familiar, low-context discourse style expected in the classroom. In addition, these culturally based stories provide a means to validate the social identity of AI/AN children while educating their non-Native peers about the historic and contemporary lives of Native peoples.

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