American Indian and Taiwan Aboriginal Education: Indigenous Identity and Career Aspirations

Sheng Yao Cheng  
National Chung Cheng University  
Taiwan

W. James Jacob  
University of Pittsburgh  
USA

This article investigates the interactions between identity and career aspirations among Taiwanese Aborigines and American Indians. While many similarities exist between the two indigenous groups, several differences remain as well. In comparing the identity issue between these two groups, this study shows that American Indians generally live in a more multicultural society than Taiwanese Aborigines. American Indian students do not experience the same degree of stereotype or racial discrimination from their teachers and peers as experienced by Taiwanese Aborigines. However, affirmative action policies are more favorable in Taiwan than they are in the United States. Drawing from a critical standpoint theory, we argue that families, tribes, and communities should play a more prominent role in the education of indigenous peoples.

Key words: Indigenous education, Taiwan Aborigines, American Indians, identity

With the surfacing of the multicultural movement in the 1960s, and the establishment of a new sociology of education in the 1970s, critical theory, cultural studies, and critical pedagogy have emerged as necessary underpinning thoughts in the “public sphere” of education (Champagne, 1999, 2003; Champagne & Strauss, 2002; Monzo & Rueda, 2001; Nye, Hedges, & Konstantopoulos, 2000). The concepts of ideology, exploitation, and class struggle continue to gain precedence among educators and sociologists (Baker, 2001; Banks & Banks, 2001; Benham & Stein, 2003; Erdrich & Tohe, 2002; Greaves, 2002). Discussions on social justice, marginality, and equity of educational opportunities have become the leading issues in the realm of educational reform (Champagne, 2003; Hawkins, 2003; Torres & Aronott, 1999; Torres, 2003; Weiss, 2001).

Minority issues play an increasing and crucial role in this trend of educational thought (Hawkins & La Belle, 1991; Nakanishi, 1975; Torres, 1998; Torres & Mitchell, 1998). Educators point out that though students of minority groups encounter some struggles (Folds, 1987; Hatch, 2001; Taylor, 1996); they should maintain and be proud of their heritage but not use it as a barrier to isolate themselves or be isolated by others. The connection between students of color and literature are palpable (Dilg, 1999; Kao & Tienda, 1998; McDonough, 1998; Olneck, 1990).

There were 446,473 people in Taiwan officially recognized as Taiwan Aborigines as of 29 February 2004, which is about 1.9% of the total Taiwan population (Council of Aboriginal Affairs Executive Yuan, 2004). According to the Census 2000, the United States population was 281.4 million on 1 April 2000, of which 4.1 million, or 1.5%, reported American Indian and Alaska Natives (Ogunwole, 2002; Reyhner & Eder, 2004).
While the geographic size pales in comparison between Taiwan and the United States, Taiwanese Aborigines and American Indians surprisingly share many similar characteristics not only in population percentages, but also in their historical, social, and cultural backgrounds (Cheng, 2004; Cheng & Jacob, 2007; Chiago, 2001; Jackson, 2002; Sorkin, 1976; To, 1972; Wilkins, 2002). Based on years of research, conference presentations, and panel discussions, we have learned somewhat more about the educational pitfalls of Taiwanese Aborigines and American Indians. From this body of research, we discovered that the topic of identity was a significant academic issue because virtually all of the students, parents, and tribal members expressed the same problems concerning self-identification. Did they view themselves as aboriginal people or not part of modern society? We also reviewed the information about the practice of aboriginal education abroad and focused on examples from Australia, China, Fiji, New Zealand, Canada, Uganda, and the United States. After our survey was administered, we realized that Taiwanese Aborigines and American Indians encounter similar social, political, cultural, and educational circumstances, and that there appears to be a gap in the literature such that there is no comparative study that tackles the educational realities that both aboriginal peoples face in their everyday lives.

According to the 1990 U.S. Census, over two-thirds of the country’s Native Americans live in urban areas; only about 700,000 live on or near Indian reservations (Champagne, 1999, p. 7). By contrast, there are 159,518 Taiwanese Aborigines now living in urban areas, or roughly 35% of the total population in 2004. Furthermore, only 159,407 Taiwan Aborigines live in mountain tribal regions, which constitutes only about 35.7% of the total indigenous population (Council of Aboriginal Affairs Executive Yuan, 2004).

Therefore, in this research, we will review the political, historical, economic, and psychological backgrounds of American Indians and Taiwan Aborigines. First, we will analyze the various influences upon the two forms of urban indigenous schooling. Then we will provide a discussion.

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**Figure 1. Comparative case study research structure**