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INT 239: Native American Culture & Education

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Culture & Formal Education at Ahfachkee: Finding the Perfect Blend

My expectations for the Ahfachkee School differed greatly from the reality I experienced when arriving there. I had foolishly assumed that the Seminoles would be primitive peoples and that their school would vastly contrast ones that I am accustomed to. My assumption was immediately disproved when I arrived at Ahfachkee. The students, teachers, and classes are much like the ones I experienced in school. The only difference I discerned was that culture seemed to creep its way into the heart of Ahfachkee. Students recited the Seminole pledge in the Mikasuki language, thanked me by saying “shonabish”, and attended culture class twice a week. Parents, Ahfachkee Staff, and Seminole community members are worried that this is not enough. Culture needs to have a bigger presence at Ahfachkee. Upon working with Mrs. Clark’s fifth grade class, I learned that Native American children require additional learning techniques and materials than non-Indian children. Observation of the Ahfachkee School reveals an underlying issue in Native American education: establishing a balance of power between formal education and cultural influence.

**1. Seminole Tribe**

The Seminole Tribe of Florida is split into five reservations. The Big Cypress reservation is home to the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum. Current Chairman, James E. Billie, lead the construction of the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum. The museum was built on the location of the Chairman’s old camp. The exhibits at Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki represent a blending of the old and the new within the Seminole Tribe. The museum tour starts off with an informative video, which showcases members of the different clans. When a new chairman is elected, he will be recorded and added to the video to keep it up to date. Another way that the museum is kept up to date is with rotating exhibits featuring current, living members of the Seminole Tribe. A woodworking tribe member was featured in the past, and an artist currently has his work on display. One of the museum’s exhibits is a satire piece on arranged marriage. It is titled “The Happy Couple,” though with arranged marriages that is seldom the case. Many of the exhibits displayed the past ways of the Seminole people and the docent provided commentary on the ways life has changed for the tribe. The tribe has transitioned from their primitive ways to a modern era filled with new technology. There was a large interactive tablet at the museum that displayed just how technological the tribe has become. When one tours the museum, one will notice the emerging balance between the past and present of the Seminole Tribe. The past incorporates the culture and the present is characterized by education and technology.

**2. Ahfachkee School**

 At the Ahfachkee School, the dichotomy between culture and formal education is unmistakably apparent. The children seem to be torn between two worlds. They are expected to balance the old and the new and find a way to incorporate both into their daily lives. The school administrators and staff are challenged to mold culture into classes that can be taught. On the Seminole tribe website one can find the quote, “culture is not a class, it’s a way of life” (seminolewarriors.net). It is this concept that provides difficulty to the administration when incorporating culture into the classroom. Traditionally, culture is not something that is taught in school. It is usually taught at home before one reaches school age and continues the rest of one’s life. This tradition is not always carried on throughout the reservations. Several families on the reservations are of mixed race. Non-Indian parents raising Indian children are not always aware of the cultural aspects that are expected to be passed down in the Seminole Tribe. The Seminole culture used to be passed down orally. Today, administrators at the Ahfachkee School are working to write it down. So far, an alphabet for the Mikasuki language has been established and many words have been recorded using that alphabet. The children are taught the Mikasuki language in E·la´·pon·ke (Culture) Class. The Ahfachkee School’s curriculum is expected to meet the standards of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the U.S. Department of Education, as well as, the cultural expectations held by parents and other members of the community.

**3. Children in the Classroom**

 By the time the children at the Ahfachkee School graduate, they will be millionaires. The children I worked with in Mrs. Clark’s fifth grade class are well aware of this fact. The children’s consciousness of their wealth seems to inhibit their education. Most of them expect to be rewarded with something tangible that holds monetary value. It does not seem like the majority of children are motivated by priceless gains such as knowledge and good grades. Mrs. Clark uses a point system in her class to keep the students interested in school. Each day the students are rewarded for good behavior with points. At the end of each marking period, the points are counted up and the student with the highest amount gets to pick a prize of their choice with a spending cap of ten dollars. Mrs. Clark also uses parties, class trips, and other expensive ploys to give the children something to look forward to. In Psychology, I learned about this technique, which is called positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is a good starting place to get the children interested in school, but eventually they should be weaned off of such materialistic rewards.

At the Ahfachkee School, students are placed in classrooms for reading and math based on their skill level, whereas for all other classes they are placed by their grade level. For example, most eleven to twelve year olds are in the fifth grade. They are placed in the fifth grade based upon their age. Their grade does not reflect their reading or math intelligence level. At Ahfachkee, ten year olds in the fourth grade can be placed into a fifth grade reading and math class, if that is where they rank academically. Vice versa, twelve year olds in the fifth grade can be placed into a fourth grade reading and math class. This system is much like the divide between regular and advanced English and Math classes that exist in many high schools. The system works in meeting the children’s needs by letting them learn at their own pace and skill level, at least until state testing. In Florida, each school is required to administer Florida’s Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT.) Each grade takes a different FCAT designed to test if the students learned what the state requires them to learn in that specific grade level. Scores on the FCAT are a deciding factor in whether the children get to advance to the next grade level or not. Children that are taken down a grade level for reading and math are less likely to pass the FCAT for their actual grade level. Administration and staff members at Ahfachkee designed a different testing system that would better fit the children at Ahfachkee, as well as, test what the children learn in culture class. The test that they designed was approved by the Bureau of Indian Affairs as a replacement for the FCAT, but it was never administered to the children since it would require a hefty amount of work from the staff in preparing practice tests, creating different tests each year, and grading all the tests after the children took them.

**4. Traditional Preservation Department**

The Traditional Preservation Department adds the culture aspects to learning at the Ahfachkee School. E·la´·pon·ke Class, Culture Camp, and the garden at Ahfachkee were created by this department. Before these cultural learning spots were added, Ahfachkee could have easily been mistaken for any public school in Florida. They were added once it became clear that the students weren’t getting enough of their own culture at home. Now, parents are relieved of the duty of passing culture down to their kids, although it is encouraged that they still continue to do so regardless of Ahfachkee’s new culture related curriculum. In E·la´·pon·ke Class, the children learn the Mikasuki language of their ancestors. At Culture Camp, students learn to build chickees, structures that their ancestors used to live and cook in, as well as craft dugout canoes. The garden has all sorts of different vegetables that the children grow. They get to eat them once they’re ready. Miss Maxine runs the garden. She cooks the vegetables for the children in a cook chickee using a fire. Then the children eat the food in eating chickees. Although it seems that the Traditional Preservation Department has come a long way in incorporating culture into the curriculum at the Ahfachkee School, there is still more that needs to be done. I think that the Seminole culture could be integrated with some of the subjects taught at Ahfachkee. Currently, the children draw pictures with oil pastels and other modern media in art class. Instead, the children should be learning to make Seminole crafts, such as dolls, patchwork, and beadwork. When talking to the head of the Traditional Preservation Department it was clear that parents and community members want the children at Ahfachkee to be proud of their Seminole culture. It would be easier for the children to take pride in their culture if they were more exposed to it and learned all that they have to take pride in.

The INT 239: Native American Culture & Education class has been extremely beneficial to me. Prior to taking this class I had no knowledge about the Seminole Tribe of Florida, as well as, no interest in becoming a teacher. After having completed this course, I now know a lot about the Seminole Tribe and Mrs. Clark’s fifth grade class have persuaded me to take up an interest in pursuing art education after my time at CCC. The Ahfachkee School has shown me that being an educator is a difficult job. Changes are constantly being made to the building and curriculum in order to best benefit the children. Each year is taken as a learning experience to see what works and what still needs to be improved for the next year. I am always up for a challenge, so I feel that being an educator would be a great fit for me.

Works Cited

"Home." *Ahfachkee School*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Jan. 2013.<http://www.seminolewarriors.net/webpages

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