

High School Policies Which Place Natives in 'Slow' Classes Can Harm

High school policies which place rural Native students in "slow" classes may penalize those students who are academically talented.

This is the conclusion reached by a study of the Achievement Profiles of Native Ninth Graders—a study which describes the results of tests given to 68 students in the Boarding Home Program.

Native students from rural areas in Alaska arrive in Fairbanks, as in many other Alaskan communities, each fall to attend high school through the Boarding Home Program.

Often, these students arrive without records from their former schools—records which would give school personnel some basis on which to place the children in classes.

Experience has shown school personnel that students from these rural areas usually need supplementary instruction. So, these Native students are placed in lower achievement classes.

What this may do, says Dr. Judith Kleinfeld of the University of Alaska Institute of Social, Economic and Government Research, is penalize those students who are academically talented.

Dr. Kleinfeld is engaged in a study of students in the Boarding Home Program and has administered achievement tests to ninth graders in Fairbanks for a fall orientation program prior to starting school in Fairbanks, Big Delta and Nenana. The students came primarily from the smaller villages in the Interior.

"Rural Native students appear to vary widely in their achievement levels, and many are capable of more advanced academic work," writes Dr. Kleinfeld in her study of the achievements of these students in abstract reasoning, numerical ability, verbal abilities and language usage.

"The current general placement practice is especially likely to retard the academic progress of the group of rural Native student that the schools should carefully nurture—the academically talented."

Achievement tests given to children who are "culturally different" from the students on whom the norms are based can be a dangerous measure of intelligence and competence.

However, says Dr. Kleinfeld, it can be "far more serious not to test and to assume that rural Native students fall into the lowest category."

Students from the Boarding Home Program were given a set of four achievement tests called the Academic Promise Test.

One of the four tests is relatively "culture-fair", one rests heavily on a familiarity with Western culture and the English language.

The other two tests measure levels of present achievement in arithmetic and English usage—useful for determining at what point further English and arithmetic instruction should begin.

On a test of abstract reasoning, the 68 Native students from rural areas who took the test scored about as high in abstract reasoning skills as the national student average.

"A number of students appear to be highly gifted in abstract reasoning ability; seven of the 68 students scored at the 90th percentile and above."

These high scores cast doubts, according to Dr. Kleinfeld on "certain unfortunate stereotypes about Native students' ability to abstract."

"The abstraction difficulty to which teachers refer may be based not on ability to abstract, but rather on cultural differences in beliefs about the things it is proper to generalize about and a limited knowledge of English vocabulary relating to abstract concepts."

These students, as do many other Natives, show great skill in reasoning with diagrammatic figures—a fact which may be helpful to teachers in planning lessons. Test results show students might benefit from instruction centered upon graphs, charts, pictures and other visual presentations.

What is the danger in placing these students together—in classes where teachers can aid those students with problems in English, math or areas in which their cultural background may make them weak? Some students don't have these problems and will be held back.

"In many cases these students are too shy to aggressively demonstrate their competence, and the placement error may not be discovered," writes Dr. Kleinfeld. "Moreover, the teacher's mistakenly low expectations about the student's ability may depress his level of performance."

A teacher's expectation can be an important contributor to a student's level of performance. If a teacher believes a student has low ability he will not expect achievement—and will not get it.

Teachers who base their expectations of a student on their stereotypes of rural Native students may not be encouraging individual students to do their best work.

Boarding Home students show wide variability in their achievements. A student who is strong in math may have difficulty in English—thus depressing his math scores due to difficulties in understanding the problems.

The ISEGR research note, Achievement Profiles of Native Ninth Graders is the first published result of a study begun last year of the Boarding Home Program. The set of achievement tests on which this paper was based was administered at the request of the Fairbanks Native Association. Students tested included Eskimos, Athabascans, one Aleut and several children of mixed blood.

Most of the students came from homes where English was not the primary language. They all attended a summer orientation program for students entering the Boarding Home Program.

Many of the students are performing at average levels or well above average levels and have no need for preparatory work. Placing these rural students as a group may seriously damage their ability to gain the most from their experience in high school.