A STUDY OF THE EDUCATION OF THE
AMERICAN INDIAN

Senior Honors Thesis
by
Stephanie Wolfe

Adviser: Dr. Margaret Wheeler

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana
November 20, 1971
I recommend this thesis for acceptance by the Honors Program of Ball State University for graduation with honors.

November 20, 1971

Margaret S. Wheeler
Thesis Adviser
Department of Elementary Education
TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION ........................................... 1

II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EDUCATION OF AMERICAN INDIANS ........................................... 2

III. THE EDUCATION OF AMERICAN INDIANS TODAY ........... 6

IV. PROBLEMS IN AMERICAN INDIAN EDUCATION ............. 9

V. RESOLVING THE PROBLEMS IN AMERICAN INDIAN EDUCATION ........................................... 15

VI. THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN INDIAN EDUCATION ........... 20
I. INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper may be a simple one, but the education of Indian youths is a complex issue of today.

The purpose of this paper is to help us as American citizens become aware of and sensitive to the problems in Indian education. A concerted effort is needed to improve the quality of education that American Indian children are now receiving so that they can better function in the larger community, while maintaining their dignity as an Indian and functioning in the Indian community.

Perhaps the 1970's will be the decade when teachers, educators, and citizens alike will realize that we are failing a segment of the people in this country, and in so doing, we are failing ourselves. After this realization then we can make provisions to ensure that American Indian children will receive an education which best serves their needs and the needs of their community.
II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EDUCATION OF AMERICAN INDIANS

Before looking at Indian education as it is today, it would be most helpful to take a look at how Indian education developed and emerged into what it now is. We can see what has been accomplished and what has not. We can evaluate past experiences. And in so doing, we will have a framework for the understanding of the present trends in the education of American Indians and the planning for the future education of these people.

Indian education in its beginnings was largely under the direction of missionaries. The Jesuit Fathers in 1568 organized a school for Indian children from Florida at Havana, Cuba. This was the first school to be attended by American Indian children.¹ Later with the signing of numerous treaties between Indian tribes and the United States government, schools for Indians were to be provided by the government in exchange for land. Yet the federal government was hesitant about operating the schools itself, and during the late nineteenth century,  

¹U. S., Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Statistics Concerning Indian Education for Fiscal Year 1970 (Lawrence, Kansas, Haskell Indian Junior College), p. 1.
funds were given to different religious denominations for the operation of mission schools.\(^2\) The mission school was the avenue of education for Indians for nearly three centuries; today they still educate about six per cent of all Indian children of school age.\(^3\)

But then came public protest against any federal aid to sectarian schools, and the government was forced to set up a system of schools itself. The system's efforts were aimed in the direction of civilizing the natives. This was attempted in differing ways. Children were sent to boarding schools, sometimes long distances from home. They were forbidden to use their native tongue, and their native religions were suppressed.\(^4\)

One wonders if this is the way to make an Indian an American? But such a policy as the one described did not succeed for two main reasons. There were not enough facilities available for the number of students; thus, many were untouched by the policy. Secondly, many Indian children just ran away from the boarding schools set up by the government.\(^5\)

Also significant to the history of Indian education is the


\(^3\) U. S., Department of Interior, Statistics Concerning Indian Education, p. 1.


\(^5\) Ibid.
economic policy of this period. The Dawes Act of 1887 provided for the distribution of tracts or reservation lands, referred to as allotments. Each allotment of from 40 to 160 acres was given to individual Indians. The land left over after the allotments had been made was surplus. Ninety million acres of former Indian lands had been seized by 1934 in this manner.6 It is not easy for the Indian to forget that acres of his land were taken away from him. It is not easy for him to forget that due to land allotments many of his people did not succeed with his allotment and became impoverished.

Then in 1928 a Senate investigation made a survey of the federal programs for Indians, and this study, the Meriam Report, called for a change in policy so that the Indian family and social structure would be strengthened rather than weakened, boarding schools would be radically improved, and the expansion of the day school program would be made.7 The years of the New Deal which followed the Meriam Report were more sympathetic to the Indians and more understanding to his plight. Land allotments were halted with the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. It seemed like progress was being made in righting some of the country's previous wrongs.

But not for long. World War II broke out and funds for

6Ibid.
7Ibid.
Indian affairs were cut back considerably. And with the cutback came a new policy. **Termination**, a policy of the 1950's, had as its goal the severing of reservations from the Bureau of Indian Affairs services. Although this policy has been currently stopped, issues today in Indian affairs are considered in relation to any halting of services to Indians.

---

III. THE EDUCATION OF AMERICAN INDIANS TODAY

Now we have arrived at the point of present-day education of Indians. Where and how are American Indian youths being educated in the 1970's? Table 1 shows the total number of Indian children, ages five to eighteen, enrolled in school in fiscal year 1970 and breaks down the number of children enrolled in either public, federal, private and mission schools.9

TABLE 1

SCHOOL CENSUS REPORT OF INDIAN CHILDREN 1970

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>126,859</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal</td>
<td>47,878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other schools</td>
<td>10,850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand total</td>
<td>185,587</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is plain to see that over half of school-age Indian children are in public schools. Controversies over the facilities available, the quality of education received, and the kinds of teachers in public schools are many.

But let us look at the system of schools set up by the

Bureau of Indian Affairs. The BIA operated 215 schools in 1970. Indian children enrolled in these schools numbered 52,195.10 Listed as the primary objective of the federal schools for Indians living on Indian owned or restricted trust lands is that of a need "to prepare them for successful living." Furthermore:

In Federal schools children develop basic academic skills, acquire an understanding of the social and economic world which surrounds them, learn improved standards of living, follow practices which assure optimum health, acquire the necessary vocational training to qualify for gainful employment, and obtain sufficient education to enter special schools and institutions of higher learning.11

Generally the schools operated by the BIA are of a mixed lot. There are old buildings used for classrooms, but there are new and modern facilities in some areas. But whether old or new Fuchs reports that "the usual Federal school sets apart from the Indian community it serves. The schools are characterized by what has come to be called compound culture in which staff members socialize with one another rather than with the Indians. There is little visiting back and forth."12 One wonders if such a situation presents rather than resolves problems.

10 Ibid., p. 1.
11 Ibid.
Presently sixteen per cent of the teachers in the BIA schools are Indians, and there are efforts being made to employ more Indians as paraprofessionals. All of the teachers in the federal schools meet the national standards with requirements of at least a Bachelor of Arts degree from an accredited university and training in education or relatively high scores on a national teaching test. There seem to be few differences in educational background, sex, age, and experience between public school teachers and teachers in the BIA system of schools.13

This is a picture of American Indian education today, but the picture is not complete. Problems are many, and these problems in Indian education will be the next topic of discussion.

13 Ibid.
IV. PROBLEMS IN AMERICAN INDIAN EDUCATION

The National Study of American Indian Education, directed by Robert J. Havighurst of the University of Chicago, is the major and most comprehensive study of the situation today in American Indian education. This report listed six factors which influence Indian pupil performance in school. These factors were the Indian tribal culture, poverty, the local community, teachers and schools not geared to Indian ways, the growth of urban Indian population, and the quality of education received in either the public school or the BIA's schools. A brief look at what constitutes each of these factors will help to explain why Havighurst considered them the major determinants in the behavior, attitudes and achievement of Indian pupils in school.

First, the Indian tribal culture includes, among other things, the language, values and life-style of the particular tribe. An example of how one's culture and life-style might

---

make a difference in how one looks at a situation and performs accordingly, although it might not be accepted in the dominant culture was given in an issue of Childhood Education:

An irate owner of an orchard came to school and reported that a group of Indian boys had stolen some of his fruit. The four boys involved were equally indignant when they were accused of stealing. Yes, on their way from town they had gathered some fruit. No, they had not stolen it because there was no fence around the trees. At home, on the reservation, property not enclosed by fences belongs to all the people.15

The second factor, poverty, affects the Indian pupil in some of the same ways it affects any student from a low-income family. It prevents the buying of clothing and school supplies, and it also prevents the adequate feeding of the family members. Poverty also presents problems such as uncertainty of employment and income, oftentimes resulting in the disorganization of family life. This in turns affects the attitudes and the behavior of the child from such a home environment.

The third factor, the local community, is explained very well in the Havighurst study. The study reports that most Indian communities are isolated geographically and do not provide contact with people, Indian people, who have profited from education. The isolation also prevents access to jobs with good incomes. Therefore, the Indian child can see rel-

atively little value to education and schooling. The study further reports that even if a student is raised in a traditional Indian community and is well-adjusted there, he still may find difficulty adjusting to life outside his community and to the skills necessary for success.16

Teachers and schools not geared to Indian ways can cause many problems for the Indian youth. Several schools are now incorporating courses of study in Indian history and culture into their curricula. By studying about his people the Indian child can gain self-respect, and he may have a more avid interest in school. The previously mentioned example of the boys and the fruit from the orchard also shows how a teacher who might not have been familiar with this Indian law could have punished the boys for their actions. This might in turn have destroyed any rapport established for the boys knew that they had not stolen any fruit.

As far as the controversy over the quality of education received in the public school versus the quality of education received in the BIA's schools goes, there is good in both. But the good should be more fully realized. Although the boarding school may not be the final answer, Havighurst remarks that at present they seem to be the only solution to educating Indian youngsters who live great distances from day schools.17

16Summary Report and Recommendations of NSAIE, p. 23.
17Ibid., p. 24.
Finally, the growth of urban Indian populations presents the problem of the alien environment. The problem of an alien environment in urban areas has been encountered in past years by other migrants of a minority group to the city. The number of Indians in urban areas is rising, and thus, plans for educating them and helping them to better adjust to the environment are necessary.

All of these factors together, just a few, or only one can be detrimental to the performance in school of an Indian youth. Are the problems widespread, or are they posed to only a small number of Indians?

For many years there has been the problem of getting the youngsters in school. Even today there are over 12,000 Indian children of school age who are not in school.18 Still there are more Indian youngsters in school today and they are staying in school longer. Indian parents are beginning to realize the value and necessity for an education for their children. Therefore, one can probably say that the problem of getting the youngsters in school is one that is being resolved. But after the children are in school one needs to keep them there. A report showed the drop-out rate among Indians to be twice the national average.19 Certainly Indian youngsters cannot be


Another educational problem centers on what is referred to as the cross-over phenomenon. For the first few years of school Indian achievement parallels that of whites, and then slowly but persistently it regresses. Thus, between the sixth and tenth grades the achievement levels of Indian youths falls noticeably behind that of whites. 20 Perhaps correlated to this problem is that of the difficulty for Indian youths in the development of a good self-concept. One study showed Indian twelfth graders to have the poorest self-concept of all minority youngsters of that age tested. 21 Dr. Karl Menniger and other noted psychiatrists who have studied this problem say that "Indian children have one of the lowest self-images of any group in the country, perhaps the lowest." 22 This poor self-concept may further be related to the fact that suicide among young Indians is over three times the national average. 23

There are also problems of the schools themselves, for instance, much criticism has recently been made of the BIA's schools. Such criticisms include "a gifted teacher in the BIA

system has to deal with so many bureaucratic levels in order to get reform that he's virtually helpless."24 One author reported the manner in which teachers in the system are assigned. Teachers' names are all placed on a national civil service roster. Then when a local principal or school needs a teacher one is assigned from the roster. No one considers whether or not the teacher fits the community.25 And yet another criticism is that "inasmuch as it succeeds at all, the BIA program achieves its goal of eliminating the Indian problem by assimilating individuals into the larger culture."26

These are some of the problems in Indian education today. The next section of this paper deals with some of the ways and means that are being used to solve the problems and to provide a better education for American Indian youths.

25Ibid.
V. RESOLVING THE PROBLEMS IN AMERICAN INDIAN EDUCATION

One of the more publicized programs that has proved successful in providing for an education which best suits the needs of the Indian people is the Rough Rock Demonstration School, the first Indian operated elementary school in the country. The school, located on the Navajo reservation in Arizona, has tried in many ways to provide a suitable education for the Indian children in that area.

The staff at Rough Rock is made up of ten full-time classroom teachers, a remedial reading specialists, speech therapist, art teacher, librarian, two TESL (Teaching English as a second language) specialists, and two recreation leaders. Fifteen VISTA members also work at the school. Of the ninety-one full-time people forty-six are Indian, and thirty-five per cent of these are from Rough Rock. The school's first director Robert A. Roessel, Jr. spoke of instilling a sense of pride in them in being an Indian. He also remarked that "We want to show them that they can be Indian and American at the same time, that they can take the best from each way of life and combine it into something viable." 27 Seven Indians comprise the school

board; they set school policy, hire and fire teachers and manage the school's budget.28

The curriculum at Rough Rock includes daily instruction in Navajo culture, history and language. Cultural identification lessons about Navajo hogan, farming, reservation facilities and tribal government are given every day. "What the Indians at Rough Rock have proved is that given effective control of the immediate forces that shape their lives, they can be a success, qualified in measurable achievement, total in terms of self-respect."29

Two other programs on a smaller scale, but probably as effective, are the school at Fort Duchesne, Utah and the Follow-Through Program on the Hopi reservation in Arizona. The school at Fort Duchesne has been pioneered and entirely financed by the Ute Indian tribe. A spokesman for the group that heads the program remarked,"We believe in providing an atmosphere where children can fall in love with life and learning. We believe in teaching the three L's-living, loving, learning. This is a preparation for teaching the three R's and when they are ready for it, growth becomes a reality."30

29Ibid.
The Follow-Through Program for first and second graders on the Hopi reservation in Arizona is part of a national program for poor children, who because of their deprivation begin school below the readiness level for their age group. The objective is to help these youngsters catch-up and be able to keep up with their grade level by the time they reach upper elementary grades. Follow-Through is funded under the 1967 amendment to the Economic Opportunity Act and administered by the Office of Education.31

Because it would be impossible to mention all the things that are being tried to improve the situation in American Indian education, a look at what one community with a number of Indians is doing might be helpful. Rapid City, South Dakota has a population, according to the last census, of 43,836, and of this number 2,364 are not Caucasian or Negroid.32 More than likely the majority of that number are of Indian blood. The community has two high schools and a number of elementary schools and junior highs. Last spring the Rapid City PTA Ad Hoc Committee on Indian Education drew up a number of suggestions for improving education for Indian children in the Rapid City schools. The committee listed as one of its high priority items the enlargement of


Indian studies in the public schools. In answer to this one of the two high schools is now offering a course entitled "Indian History and Culture," which will focus on "westward expansion and would include a study of all North American Indians with special emphasis on the Sioux." Furthermore, the committee recommended that orientation on Indian education be required of all teachers by the means of a workshop. Finally, another priority is the provision of Indian counselors. Rapid City is studying the problems in Indian education through committees such as this, and they are trying to solve some of the problems encountered in Indian education.

Yet another attempt is being made in the Rapid City area to help the Indian children of poor families. To reiterate, poverty is one of the factors affecting pupil performance in school. World Changers is providing clothing and school supplies for needy Indian children on the Pine Ridge and Cheyenne River Sioux reservations and in Rapid City. Sponsors adopt a child, receive personal information about him, correspond with him, and contribute regular amounts to the headquarters of World Changers who distribute vouchers to the children which can be used only

---


34 "Central High to Offer Indian Studies Course," Rapid City Journal, June 8, 1971, p. 3.

for specific items. This then is just another way to let the Indian child know that "their world can be changed and made better." 

VI. THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN INDIAN EDUCATION

Finally, consideration must be taken of what lies ahead for the education of Indian youths. Progress is being made and it must continue to be made to assure the Indian people of the education of their children as one which best serves their needs and the needs of their community.

One of the major trends is that the responsibility for the education of Indian children will lie more and more in the hands of the Indian people. This means that special committees such as the National Indian Education Advisory Committee be composed almost, if not entirely, of Indians. It also means that more Indians should be recruited as teachers or teachers' aides in schools with a significant number of Indian children. Furthermore, it means that Indian parents must assume the responsibility for keeping their youngsters in school. Indian parents must also increase their participation in school affairs and school functions. One author has recommended to the Indian people:

It's up to you the parents to demand a voice in the education of your children and to take a more active interest and encourage your children in their school work. Indian
children have the same curiosity and the same ability to learn as other children, but these innate qualities are being stifled partly because of your indifference. The schools alone cannot give your children the excellent education which is their right unless you the parents become involved. 37

With the rise of Indian urban populations, more schools must recognize the fact that ignoring Indian history and culture or presenting it in a distorted way hinders all students. Negative stereotypes of Indians living in teepees and scalping whites will only prevent good relationships and understandings between Indians and others. And special attention must be given to programs for career training so that when an Indian youth completes school he will have some preparation for a job.

Recommendations to BIA schools or schools with a large percentage of Indian students include:

Understand and respect your Indian students and show greater interest in Indian culture.
Demand high performance from your students.
Become more involved in the community. In this way you will become more aware of the problems facing the Indians and the familial situations of your students. This will make it possible for you, the teachers, to be able to better resolve classroom problems, use more realistic examples in teaching, and discuss more intelligently with your students their problems and needs and those of the Indian society. 38

37 Eileen Maynard, That These People May Live (With the Indian Health Service, Pine Ridge, South Dakota), 1969, p. 98.
38 Ibid., p. 99.
For more detailed and exacting recommendations for the improvement of Indian education, a reading of the summary report of the National Study of American Indian Education would be most helpful.

And finally, I would recommend that those who recognize the difficulties in Indian education make others aware of them. This was the purpose of this paper. Let us make clear the image of the American Indian as a human being who is unique and from whom we can learn much. Those who refer to Indians as lazy people who have no pride in themselves should heed an old Indian prayer: "Let me not criticize another man until I have walked a mile in his moccasins." We must walk many more miles and take other great strides so that our first Americans will receive a first-rate education. We must.
**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


--- "Central High to Offer Indian Studies Course." June 8, 1971, p. 3.


