



# Hindrances to Indian Education

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**A** LITTLE over three hundred years ago a group of Europeans arrived on the North American continent, fleeing from oppression and seeking a new home where they could be free. These poor, ragged refugees told their tale of woe to the native inhabitants, who took pity on them and gave them a place to live. Rather than be grateful to the native peoples for their kindness, these immigrants set forth on a program of oppression that went far beyond the oppressions they themselves had suffered in Europe. Their aim was to civilize the Indian and drag him down to their own level; and one of their greatest weapons was the educational system. While the plan to acculturate through education was sound, it failed to take into consideration the strength of Indian culture and, to this day, Indians are staying away from the classroom in great masses.

This almost complete lack of Indians taking advantage of educational opportunities can be attributed to several factors. During a recent survey of Indian education problems in the Northwest, it was found that many eligible Indian youths did not want to talk to the Bureau of Indian Affairs education officer because all he wanted to talk about was vocational training. These were youths who had expressed a desire to study specific subjects such as law, veterinary medicine, history, and education.

Probably the greatest deterrent to continued education among Indians is lack of familiarity with white culture and distrust of

white institutions. Indians have never actively participated in white social life and many have only rarely been off the reservation. The campus of a white university is like a foreign country. Indians are not familiar with filling out forms that are required for admission and registration, they are not familiar with customs of life in dormitories on white campuses, they perceive themselves as surrounded by "hostile" whites, and frequently the first day is so overwhelming that they leave, never to return.

Most Indians have a very low self-concept. It has always been the policy of the white culture to consider the Indians an inferior race as a justification for their treatment. The whites who are willing to associate socially with Indians are usually from the lower strata of society and are looking for someone toward whom they can feel superior. The white businessmen look upon them with contempt because they are easily cheated. The schools are geared to educating white middle class students, so that Indians do not do well and their ideas of inferiority are reinforced.

In these white oriented schools the Indian values are deprecated and the Indian student is expected to take pride in the great American heritage. However, it is not the

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Indian heritage he is to be proud of, but the heritage of a cruel and hostile white race whose puritan ministers had hunted Indians for bounty. Like other people, Indians do not like to fail; thus, rather than take a chance on failure in an institution where there is little chance for him to succeed, he refuses to compete and thus never obtains a college education.

## Characteristics

The following characteristics are common to many Indian students:

1. English in many cases is a second language. An Indian child who learned an Indian language first and English later will have trouble with communication, but even the Indian who has never spoken anything but English will also have problems. He learned English from Indian parents, and his grammar may be different and certain words may have different connotations. There are many subtleties of white middle class communication with which he is not familiar, and there is just as much nonverbal communication among Indians which is lost on the white teacher.

2. Indian students generally have a low self-concept. Everything an Indian child comes in contact with, outside his own community, tells him he is inferior. When everyone with whom you associate treats you as inferior, you soon begin to think of yourself as inferior. It is a well-known fact that a person will live up or down to his self-concept. An average family income of \$1,500 per year, an average life expectancy of 44 years, an unemployment rate 10 times the national average all contribute to the low self-concept.

3. Indian students are not accustomed to high competition, particularly as it occurs in the classroom. Indians are primarily a cooperative rather than a competitive group; and many do not understand why they should have to alienate a friend just to place themselves higher on the "normal curve," to get a grade which does not have that much meaning to the Indian student in the first place. The Indian student usually approaches school for the purpose of gaining knowledge rather than to compete for grades; and it does not matter if some other person gains more or less knowledge than he. Many teachers unknowingly use competition to motivate stu-

dents, but rather than motivate the Indian student, competition simply turns him off.

4. Different value systems are perceived. White teachers in the past have operated on the assumption that their values and morals are universal truths, or anyway should be, and any deviation is necessarily lower and other people must be raised to their high standards. The Indian, on the other hand, views most of white Protestant morality as a manifestation of a sick society. Teachers, in the name of orderliness, are forcing Indian students to conform to value systems that are not their own and that are sometimes abhorrent to them.

5. Indian students may lack social supports for academic achievement. The Indian community values the gaining of knowledge, but it does not value the educational system in which it is forced to participate. An Indian child first approaches school with enthusiasm and anticipation, but soon finds that the school has little to offer him. Since the parents have had similar experiences, there is little encouragement from home. His peer group of course is in the same situation, so it gives no encouragement. Many teachers do not expect academic excellence from the Indian student, so he receives little encouragement there. The author's third-grade teacher told him that he could not expect to keep up with the white students in the class; but if he would sit in the back of the room and not create a disturbance, he would be passed. This is a reward for mediocrity.

6. Indian students lack successful academic role models. Very few Indians in the past have graduated from college, and most of those have had to leave the reservation areas to find employment. Only one percent of the teachers of Indian children are Indian. There are practically no Indian college professors. Without these visible role models, there is no evidence for the Indian child that academic success is possible. He never sees his people in positions of authority, only in subservient roles.

Throughout the history of white-Indian relations, there has been an assumption on the part of white people that when Indians saw the advantages and superiority of white culture, they would naturally adopt white ways. When this failed to occur during early contact, it was assumed that the savages were too primitive to be civilized; but when it still did not come about after prolonged contact,

a policy of coercion was adopted. Since the beginning of Indian education, the stated purpose has been to civilize the Indians and only the terminology has changed. Today they speak of acculturating the Indian or bringing him into the mainstream, and there is a program to relocate Indians in urban centers; but the aim is still to separate him from what poor, rocky, nonproductive land he has left.

### **Built-in Failure**

Things are not, however, as simple as they appear at first glance, because the Indian is never allowed to succeed. When the Cherokees were moved to Indian territory to make room for white people, they were almost wiped out on the trip. When they arrived in a new and hostile area, they were told that they were on their own and that they were to govern themselves. From nothing they built up a highly successful governmental system, developed an alphabet, built schools that were educating Indian youth, and were well on their way to becoming successful farmers and businessmen. Then the U.S. Government decided to renegotiate the treaty and destroyed everything the Cherokees had built.

The Nez Percé who had befriended the Lewis and Clark expedition became the most successful cattlemen in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho, yet were not allowed to live peacefully in their own land.

The Indians who had been moved to the coast reservation in Oregon were told they had to become farmers, so they went together and planted potatoes. The potatoes were sold in San Francisco for an excellent profit; and they were told they could not raise potatoes any more but had to plant cereal grains, for which the land and the climate are poorly adapted.

As long as the Indians in the state of Washington were catching only enough salmon for their own subsistence no one cared, but as soon as they started fishing commercially and running competition to the big money interests, the state tried to abrogate the treaty rights.

The lesson is obvious. Indians must adopt white ways and become like white people, but only second-class citizens. White people are not going to allow Indians to become independent and are only going to help them as long as they remain in a dependency relationship.

Those few schools that have found successful ways of educating Indian children have also found that their dropout rate is greater among teachers than among students. The teachers, upon leaving, have expressed their feeling of incompetence in working with Indian children. Nothing in their training has prepared them to teach in an Indian school that is oriented toward educating Indian children. The entire program of teacher training is white middle class oriented. Since few persons from minority groups can qualify to get into college, this leaves white middle class people in the schools of education. These white middle class students, when they graduate, are usually required to do their practice teaching in white middle class oriented schools because it is believed that this is the only place that they can get proper supervision. With this situation, it is no wonder that teachers are not prepared to relate to students from a completely different culture.

The time has come for the field of education to recognize that American Indians have a different culture and they are not going to adopt white ways. If the American system of education still wishes to work with Indians to educate them rather than to attempt to acculturate them, then it is time to give teachers the skills and knowledge necessary to do their job. I know of only two schools of education in the country which are attempting to give special training to teachers of Indian children, and neither of these schools has Indians on its staff. It does no good to have white people telling other white people about Indians because this only perpetuates the same old misconceptions that have hindered Indian education in the past. Any school that is truly sincere in wanting to improve Indian education will have to go to Indians to gain the knowledge needed to do the job. □

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