



Navajo Education: Is There Hope?

C. C. CASE *

THE history of Navajo education is a chronicle of great problems, misunderstandings, and neglect. Early educators thought the Navajo could be treated simply as Anglos who had not had proper educational opportunities. Taken away from his parents and put in school, the Indian child would learn to be a good American just like everybody else. Although sensitivity to the real difficulties has greatly increased in recent years, the lack of understanding, the forced removal to boarding schools, and the beatings are not forgotten by the Navajo. Unfortunately, most Americans have little awareness of this history.

From 1868, when 7,000 Navajo returned to their land from the four-year imprisonment at Fort Sumner, until after World War II educational progress was hindered by the very real physical problems created by remote distances on the reservation, and by lack of school buildings and suitable living quarters for teachers and pupils. There were almost no funds, few trained personnel with the interest or capacity for teaching Indian pupils, and little in the way of administrative support.

Although the first Bureau of Indian Affairs teacher arrived on the reservation in 1869, she was unsuccessful in her attempts to establish a school for Navajo children. Several years later, a second effort to found

a government school also failed. It was not until 1880 that the first boarding school was established on the reservation, and it was four years more before this school at Fort Defiance was in full operation.

During this period one of the greatest obstacles was the negative attitude white people held toward Indians, an attitude which was widespread among government and military personnel as well as local citizens. It should not be forgotten that the Navajo were a conquered people.

Cultural Contrasts

The real difficulty, however, was the contrast between Anglo and Indian culture. Although anthropologists like Washington Matthews began studying the Navajo in the 1880's, it is amazing how little the results of this work influenced school and federal personnel or policies. Cultural differences in language, motivation, basic knowledge, literacy, and world view were totally misunderstood or ignored. It was not realized or accepted by Anglos that the Navajo had a complex, elaborate, and unified culture which provided a satisfactory life plan in its own

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right. Indian culture was something to eradicate, not something to value.

There were many cultural differences that made the education of Navajo children difficult. There was the problem of permissiveness, since Navajo did not stress coercive demands or physical punishment. Navajo children are more often guided rather than pushed or forced. The Navajo language itself lacks a direct method of commanding another person, and traditional Navajo consider it extremely poor manners to tell or order someone else to do something.

There was the question of kinship and the related concept of incest. The Navajo are matrilineal rather than patrilineal, clan-organized, and possess strict concepts of behavior toward kin. Their ideas of kin, however, differ from the white man's. For boys and girls of the same clan to be together or touch each other was apt to be thought of as incestuous, even when there was no close biological relationship. Yet the Anglo teacher seldom knew or cared about the kin relations of her students.

Anglos, or at least middle class Americans, can be said to be oriented to future achievement which they attempt to reach through a plan of orderly activity. Navajos are more present-time oriented and primarily concerned with satisfying current needs, and less concerned with planning and postponing for future gratification. Saving for the future may in fact be viewed negatively. If you have enough of something so that you are able to save, the Navajo may interpret this to mean you have too much or more than your rightful share or that you are selfish and stingy. It is a common concept among non-Europeans that there is only so much wealth available and no one should have more than his part. If a person has more than his share, he must have acquired someone else's, and that person is deprived. The primary way an

individual acquires more than his share is through immoral or illegal activity, and consequently the display of wealth is merely an advertisement of this activity.

Another contrast is found in the attitude toward nature. While many Anglos view the environment as a treasure house to exploit, change, and manipulate for their own ends, the Navajo views his task as living in harmony with nature. He does not attempt to alter and destroy, but adjusts his life to the conditions of nature. Nature will take care of man if he works in harmony with the natural forces. The Navajo are oriented toward tradition and are not so interested in constant change as Anglos are. While they will borrow cultural goods, they like to fit new traits into their cultural framework at their own pace.

The Navajo differ greatly from the Anglo with regard to religious behavior. The Navajo respect other peoples' religion and do not attempt to convert or disparage other beliefs. For example, they attend Pueblo Indian religious ceremonies as spectators in great numbers, and appear genuinely to enjoy these performances. Yet they never try to convert the Pueblos. They see religion as a total way of living and not as a separate and special aspect of life.

In terms of personality structure, Navajo children are often characterized as noncompetitive relative to the aggressive behavior demanded in Anglo life. Navajo children may not attempt to excel over their classmates, but on the contrary may actively help each other in school, which may be terribly frustrating to the Anglo teacher. In general, Navajos have not stressed getting ahead through ambitious, aggressive, self-centered behavior at the expense of other tribal members. They may regard such actions as reprehensible. They often prefer group anonymity to individuality. In the same vein, they tend to be modest and have what Anglos call low self-esteem. The Anglo child, on the other hand, is encouraged to develop a high opinion of himself. The Indian is apt to be more patient and less excitable than an Anglo. The type of student personality that many Anglos mistake for

intelligence, that is, the clever, aggressive, self-centered, intent student, is as opposite to the Navajo's concept of the intelligent, well-rounded person as one can imagine.

Children's textbooks often show Anglo life as play- and child-centered, whereas Navajo life is more work and adult oriented. In such books Anglo adults often engage in children's activities, but in Navajo life children participate in adult affairs. Navajo children are apt to be shy, passive, and quiet, at least in the classroom. They also see different family roles and interrelationships in the textbooks and an easy, safe life, a far cry from the harsh winters, the lack of water and fuel which they may experience on the reservation. All these contrasts are not merely words, but represent real problems for the Navajo student who lives one thing at home and is taught another at school. It is small wonder then that so many Navajo young people are confused, unhappy, and aimless. The Anglo school system has taught them these things.

While Navajo culture presents a vast array of difficulties for the educator, perhaps none is more trying than the language itself. For people brought up to think French is a foreign language, Navajo can be astounding. Unfortunately, too many people expect the grammatical categories of English to be universal, and they are apt to be dumbfounded to discover that Navajo has few nouns or that it selects verbs by mode rather than tense. The Navajo language is verb-centered,

and complete thoughts and sentences can be expressed by using only verb stems and prefixes. Navajo is especially precise in delineating movement, noting rather exactly many aspects of an action which English does not include in its verb structures.

There is little question that many educators think Navajo education has not been overly successful. They point out that, after 100 years of exposure to the American education system, Navajo culture is still strong and viable, a large percentage of the people are functionally illiterate, and serious emotional problems are reflected in the high rate of alcoholism and suicide. Vast numbers of Navajo do not know how to earn a living in the white man's world and the school dropout rate is excessive. Even after the Navajo receives a good education he may return to the reservation, where his diploma is of little use. The per capita income of the Navajo is far lower than in the black ghetto, and the death and disease rates are much higher.

The Enduring Navajo

It is incomprehensible to many Americans that their way of life can have had so little success among these people. The natural thing is to blame the Indian. Yet perhaps the greatest problem in Navajo education is neither the Indian nor the situational difficulties, but the white man . . . the teachers, administrators, and government officials who refuse to learn something about and accept

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Navajo culture. Too often they are hung up on an inadequate psychological model of human behavior and cannot comprehend the cultural model.

Despite all the difficulties and failures of Navajo education, the fact remains that the tribe is still intact, that it has grown from 7,000 to 125,000, and that this culture remains today a distinctive sub-entity in America. It is not Navajo culture of 50 or 100 years ago, but neither is it Anglo culture. Thousands of Navajo have learned to speak English, have finished high school, and have gone on to college. While only 22 pupils enrolled in the first school in 1884, 54,000 were attending primary and secondary schools in 1970. Today there are 48 reservation boarding schools, nine day schools, and eight dormitories operated by the BIA. By 1968, 93 percent of the schools on the reservation had local school boards. The educational division of the BIA alone employs 3,865 persons. Of these, 1,207 are teachers, supervisors, and administrators. The remaining individuals are in various kinds of sub-professional and supportive positions. Of the total number of employees, 2,471 are Indian, with 95 of these in professional positions, 1,156 in semi-professional jobs, and the remainder in nonprofessional tasks.

During 1968, 500 Navajo students attended college on tribal scholarships, and 244 more held federal college grants. Some 800 persons also received adult vocational training. The Navajo Community College at Many Farms High School opened in 1969 as the first college in America to be developed on an Indian reservation. Today it is almost entirely run by Navajo administrative personnel.

More and more the Navajo are running their own affairs and their own schools. Many are teachers or teacher aides. A large step has been taken, but perhaps the most significant lesson that can be learned from this is not that there have been some significant successes, but a lesson which seems to elude so many educators, namely *that culture is a powerful determining force in a person's life, and that when two opposing cultural groups come into conflict, there may be im-*

mense difficulties. Culture, however, has too often been treated as a passive set of strange customs rather than a source of behavior.

Lack of understanding of others and inability to accept cultural differences are the primary problems in the world today. Certainly these have been great barriers to educational success for the Navajo. Until 1940, the Navajo had little experience with white man's culture, and the ordinary American hardly knew the Navajo existed. Nevertheless, the responsibility for supporting Navajo education rested and rests today almost entirely on the white man's shoulders. It was the white man who demanded and forced change, and this change was in the direction of the white man's culture. It was the white man who had the more complex civilization and the greater world knowledge, and therefore the burden of success or failure was his.

The Navajo had no way of knowing whether he was succeeding or failing. In actuality the Navajo was quite content to be left alone by the white man, since he had a reasonable adjustment to life as he knew it. It was white men who wanted him to change, and therefore it is the white man's responsibility to see that the process is carried out with a full regard for the Navajo person and his culture. This has not been done.

Additional Reading

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