

The American Indian: From Assimilation to Cultural Pluralism

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AT ALL times in the history of America, the American society has been a polyglot and polycultural mixture of several of the following: English, Irish, European, African, Oriental, with native Indians and Eskimos, together with strongly cherished religious subcultures.

During the century from 1850 to 1950, the dominant group in terms of population and wealth and political power was the Anglo-group, partly Protestant and partly Catholic. Most of the other groups participated in the common agricultural-industrial economic life of the society, generally becoming more prosperous as the country prospered. However, the native Indian group did not join this enterprise, but either fought against it, or stayed away from it, until about 1900. Meanwhile the Indian population was decreasing, reaching a low point of about 240,000 in 1900.

It was generally supposed that the larger society would assimilate the Indians, possibly through a good deal of intermarriage, and that only a few isolated groups would persist as a kind of cultural curiosity.

But a number of Indian tribes held on stubbornly to their tribal land, customs, and religion; and the Indian population began to grow. In 1970 the Indian and Eskimo popu-

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lation was 840,000, and the rate of natural increase was about twice as high as the rate of increase of the white population.

By 1970 the policy of assimilation had given way to a policy of cultural pluralism, the "in" concept for intergroup relations since about 1960. No longer do members of the dominant group blandly assume that they will do the minorities a favor by "assimilating" them. Several of the minorities, especially the blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Indians, and southeastern Europeans resist this idea. They now demand a combination of opportunity to earn money and become educated through the common economy and public-supported education, with the right to main-

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tain their own cultural identity and to be respected for this identity.

What Cultural Pluralism Means

Cultural pluralism, as the term is now used, means the following:

1. Mutual appreciation and understanding of the various cultures in the society
2. Cooperation of the various groups in the civic and economic institutions of the society
3. Peaceful coexistence of diverse life styles, folkways, manners, language patterns, religious beliefs, and family structures
4. Autonomy for each subcultural group to work out its own social future, as long as it does not interfere with the same right for the other groups.

Cultural pluralism is not an appropriate term for a multiethnic society. This latter kind of society consists of a number of ethnic groups which try to keep themselves apart, and try to minimize integration of the political and economic institutions. Some of the very small subculture groups do favor a multiethnic society. The Black Muslims, the Amish, and the Hutterites are examples of groups which deliberately refrain as far as possible from cooperating with other groups, and their desire to live separately is respected by the rest of the society.

Teaching for Cultural Pluralism

An educational program aimed at cultural pluralism has a goal of helping the members of each subgroup to retain and value their cultural identity and to enhance their self-esteem. This is mainly done by using books and other educative materials, such as arts and crafts, which are the best and truest products of the group. The history of each group should be written positively, and also accurately. Members of each group would be exposed to the same positive history of every group, but would spend more time and get more satisfaction from studying their own history. Where a certain group has suffered a disaster or difficulty of some sort, this need not be omitted or disguised, but

Professor Havighurst has studied Indian cultures and Indian Education rather intensively at two different periods. From 1942 to 1946, he worked with teachers and social researchers on a study of Indian families and Indian schooling in six tribes. At that time, he co-authored the book *American Indian and White Children* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955). Then, from 1968 to 1971, he was Director of the National Study of American Indian Education, which was funded by the U.S. Office of Education. Through colleagues in seven other universities, field studies were made in 27 Indian and Eskimo communities. A popular version of the report was written with Estelle Fuchs, entitled *To Live on This Earth* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972).

the emphasis should be put on the positive.

The curriculum may well deal realistically with problems the group faces today, and with the actions being taken to meet these problems. Teachers for pupils of a given group should be drawn heavily from the group itself, though not to the exclusion of members of other groups. The elders of the group may be invited into the schools to tell the story of their past. The outstanding performers in the music and other arts of the group will be presented in person or on film or videotape. If the subgroup has a language different from the standard language of the society, this will be used as far as possible, if it is a current living language.

In 1969, the National Study of American Indian Education made a systematic inquiry of parents, community leaders, students, and teachers in about 30 Indian schools or school systems spread through the United States. Out of 700 Indian parents, 80 percent gave a generally favorable rating to the local school. However, even this favorable group made criticisms, and the most common suggestion was that the school should pay more attention to the Indian heritage.

Some of the individual statements (each separate one is introduced with an S) were:

(S) I'm satisfied with the things she is

being taught. (S) She learns reading and arithmetic and history, and that makes me happy. (S) I wouldn't mind if she is taught about the Apache history and culture; in fact, I think it would be good. (S) She already knows her own language so I don't think she should be taught in school. (S) I think it would be worthwhile to have some subjects taught in Apache. (S) They should be teaching more training in different trades to prepare for jobs later. (S) Yes, they should learn about their culture and history, to preserve their heritage and take pride in it. (S) Classes could be given in Indian dancing, beadwork, weaving, and basket weaving. (S) Yes, they should teach about our tribal history and culture so that the children of today won't lose sight of their Indian heritage and also so they'll learn how much easier life is for the Indian today. (S) They should be taught all that can be found out about our tribe and set down in a history book as it really happened, not how the white man wants it written. It should be an elective course in high school.

Recent Progress in Indian Education

In the past five years, it has been deliberate policy of the federal government to strengthen the Indian voice in matters of education. Developments up to 1971 are summarized by Fuchs and Havighurst in

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To Live On This Earth.¹ More recent developments are summarized in the newsletter and other publications of the Indian Education Resource Center at Albuquerque, New Mexico.² However only about 20 percent of all Indian youth are in government-operated schools for Indians. Another 40 percent are in public schools operated by state and local school authorities in communities or reservations populated mainly by Indians. Another 40 percent of Indian students are in schools where they are a minority, and the curriculum cannot be tailored to Indian needs or interests.

A principal method for the promotion of cultural pluralism through the school has been bilingual education, where the pupils have a home language which is not English. This has been promoted in Indian communities where the numbers of pupils are large enough to justify the preparation of teaching materials and the employment of bilingual teachers or of native teacher aides.

The Navajo tribe is the best example for the use of the tribal language. In some Navajo schools the children speak only Navajo in the earliest grades, and they learn to read Navajo, after which they turn to English as a second language at about the age of 8 or 9.

The theory is that the child will learn to read more successfully in this type of program and will learn English fairly readily, when the time comes for it. The other argument for this program is that the child feels more favorable about himself as an Indian when his native language is so obviously valued. Less systematic use of the native language is found in some of the Pueblo villages, in some schools in the Sioux area, and in Alaskan Eskimo village schools.

There is not a unanimous sentiment among Indian leaders and parents for the use of Indian language and culture in the

¹ From the book: *To Live On This Earth: American Indian Education*. Copyright © 1972 by Estelle Fuchs and Robert J. Havighurst. Published by Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972.

² Bureau of Indian Affairs. *Education Research Bulletin*. Albuquerque, New Mexico: Indian Education Resources Center, P.O. Box 1788.

school curriculum. The contrasting views of two leading Indian educators illustrate the differences.³

A Pueblo Indian teacher, Joe Sando, speaking for the All Pueblo Tribal Council, said:

In the Pueblo system, the learning of language and culture is the responsibility of the families. Each Pueblo student living in the village generally speaks in the vernacular. And if the student speaks the correct language, he or she is more than likely to have learned the culture or be aware of its customs. Consequently, we would not or could not justify teaching Indian languages or culture in the classroom.

A contrasting view was stated by Dillon Platero, director of the Navajo Rough Rock Demonstration School:

In addition to what is demonstrably sound in a typical non-Navajo oriented curriculum, the people (the Navajo) would like to add courses in both Navajo culture and history. By making these indigenous subjects an integral part of the curriculum and giving them an importance equal to any other subject, we would accomplish the task of reinforcing a positive self-image and assisting learners to optimal self-realization.

Curriculum for Economic Competence

The largest problem with respect to successful cultural pluralism has to do with minority groups which suffer from poverty or a low material standard of living compared with the other groups in the society. This applies to Indians, and to large sections of black and Spanish-surnamed groups. Should the educational system for them be aimed primarily at teaching the mental and the vocational skills that enhance earning ability in the economy? If so, is there time or space for much study of the history and values and arts and language of a minority culture? Can the minority group keep the loyalty of young members who do succeed in school and learn the economically valuable skills of the main culture?

Training for agricultural and mechanical skills has been emphasized in secondary schools attended by Indian youth. Furthermore, the federal government has provided funds since 1952 to assist young Indian adults to go to cities, get vocational training, and get jobs.

The numbers of Indian youth who are going on from high school to technical institutes and to colleges and universities have increased very much since about 1960. By 1970, approximately 18 percent of Indian youth were entering a post-secondary institution, compared with about 40 percent of all American youth; and 4 percent of Indian youth were graduating from a 4-year college course, compared with about 22 percent of the total American age cohort. These Indian youths will gain incomes above the average level of American adults, and will participate quite fully in the economic and civic life of the society.

To what extent will these young people retain their Indian identity and reinforce the Indian aspects of cultural pluralism? To what extent will the more isolated Indian groups preserve their isolation, gradually improving the economic standard of living, and maintain much of their tribal identity?

The general attitude of the American public, and the general attitude of the federal government, will probably be favorable to as much pluralism as the Indians want. A fairly accurate and positive treatment of Indian history and culture will spread through the schools, thus raising the general level of understanding and appreciation of Indian cultures by the rest of the population.

It seems that the decisions about the extent to which Indians maintain their traditional cultures and tribal identity, will be made by the Indians themselves, and these decisions will determine the content of school curricula, the composition of the teaching staff, and the degree of separation of Indian groups from the rest of the society. There will be rather strong economic forces operating to bring Indians more into the mainstream of American life, and to reduce the differences between Indian groups and other groups in the American society. □

³ Fuchs and Havighurst, *op. cit.*, pp. 212-13.

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