

To Help — Not To Homogenize Native American Children

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The cultural heritage and identity of minority group Americans must not be allowed to be eroded and destroyed. For if they are, the dominant culture will lose a beautiful, significant, and critically essential contribution—and nothing will remain sacred.

THE ONLY controlled educational systems in the country are those schools in most American Indian communities. The control is put into the hands of the administrators. Such an administrator makes the choice of textbooks, establishes curriculum, hires the people, and makes the final decisions.

The decision as to what Indian children *should* and what they *ought* to become is the exclusive right of their parents and their tribe. Reform and effective educational programs will only come when parent and tribe are vested with the power and means of controlling policies that affect their children. This position gets into deeper issues of one of the things that plagues our society. If we, as "Americans" and as "educators," wish seriously to place value upon and to commit ourselves to the concept of individuality, we must accept the right of people to be different.

We must accept the right of people and individuals to govern their own destinies—to construct, formulate, develop, and run their own institutions.

In doing so, the idea of homogenizing everyone into Dick and Jane must be abandoned. What is often intended is that everyone has to become middle class white—that is, to exemplify those behaviors and values that are assumed to be universally true and good—and the only alternative life style. Individuality and creativity may be supported on one hand, yet all behavioral manifestations of such individuality on the other hand are rejected. The official position of the Bureau is, as it is in our culture generally, that minority group children culturally deprived should be taught middle class values.

Dignity and the right of others to control their own destiny must be respected. This

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means transferring power—the control of information, money, decisions, and the formulation of policies which affect their lives—back to *Native Americans*. Individuality can only exist in a pluralistic society wherein differences are appreciated and protected.

Why Not Include Indian Culture?

It must be noted that the dominant powers at various periods in American history have been bent upon systematic exploitation and destruction of Native Americans.

The usual educational program does not include the culture of the American Indian. The curriculum does not take into account student needs and background. The community participates *not at all* in the planning of the curriculum or what is known as the *content of education*. Usually, textbooks selected have nothing on the Indian or present a distorted view of what the Indian is. Native Americans have been referred to in

textbooks with such terms as “stupid” and “lazy.” One Indian child, objecting to the fact that she was termed a “dirty savage” in her schoolbook, was labeled as “uncontrollable” by school officials and hustled off to a boarding school a thousand miles away.

Senator Robert Kennedy, while visiting a school with 80 percent Indian children, Shoshone, asked if the children’s heritage and history were included as part of the curriculum. The principal retorted that the Shoshone had no history. But, he did point out one book on Indians in the library. This book, which was entitled *Captives of the Delaware*, showed an Anglo being scalped by an Indian. In another incident, Chippewa children were asked to write a class composition entitled, “Why We Are Glad the Pilgrims Landed.”

Most teachers on Indian Reservations have not been adequately prepared to teach in an Indian community. Many institutions of higher education have failed to implement programs to prepare teachers for children



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who are culturally different. For example, teachers for most reservations are selected from a National Civil Service Roster, and job specifications do not require the teacher to be familiar with Native American traditions and educational expectations.

The Teacher Is the Curriculum

Minority children, the culturally different who are in schools, feel strangely helpless in the presence of the powerful authority figure of the teacher who demands conformity to the tenets of his or her value system. Schools, then, instead of motivating and encouraging students from poverty or other "subcultures" successfully inhibit them.

When a teacher subtly castigates an Indian child and labels him a failure by the teacher's standards, it does not take long for the child to adopt a poor self-concept. The teacher more than anything in the curriculum can influence a child's self-concept, motivation, and ultimate achievement.

In order for a teacher to become sensitive to an Indian child he or she must understand the unique culture of the child and not just that he or she is Indian. Teachers

should have basic information on tribal and village government, community service agencies, history, value system, religion, and education. Some aspects, such as the traditional attitudes toward education, religious beliefs, and family organization are potential sources of conflict for the teacher who is unfamiliar with them. These elements should become part of the curriculum as well as influence the teacher's attitude toward his or her students. It should be especially noted here that a common mistake is to learn about Indians as one cultural group, while actually each tribe has its own history and motivating forces.

It is indeed the teacher who is the curriculum. Yet it is his or her expertise in ordering the learning environment that becomes an extension of the teacher and ultimately becomes known as the classroom curriculum. "Only with a thorough awareness of the Indian child's total environment can a teacher speak to him where he is and take him to a deeper understanding of where he can go."

While there are attempts at reform of educational programs for Native Americans, both on and off the reservations, it is the exception rather than the rule when permanent change occurs. The major thrust is still characterized by the philosophy of assimilation, rather than one which emphasizes the retention of the Indian child's heritage, identity, and unique learning styles, while offering a choice and selection of skills needed to deal with elements of the dominant culture.

If the cultural heritage and identity of minority group Americans are allowed to be eroded and destroyed, not only will the dominant culture lose a beautiful, significant, and critically essential contribution, but a basic tenet of that society will be gone and nothing will remain sacred—"for whatever can be done to thee can be done to me."

The white society, and educators in particular, must examine how they have drifted away from the realization of the moral and humanistic strands embodied in the American and Western traditions while there is still a chance left for the American Dream. □

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