WHAT'S NEW—AND IN INDIAN EDUCATION

A GRIM portrait is painted in many current journal articles concerning the education of America's first peoples, Native Americans. The failure of the traditional system of education in this country to meet the needs of American Indian students is, indeed, well-documented. One has only to look at the continued alarming dropout rate of these students, their lack of achievement and failure to go on to higher education to understand something of the truth of this statement.

This dreadful waste of human resources continues despite many well-meaning efforts on the part of the federal government, state departments of education, and local school districts to reverse the trend. However, such efforts have not been completely lacking in impact and the educational setting for Native American pupils is improving. It is the purpose of this article, then, to point out some of the bright spots in what otherwise might seem to be a very dismal picture.

Perhaps the most significant advancement in Indian Education is the current attention being given to building curricula that are culturally relevant. This attention is due, at least in part, to the recognition of the relationship between pupil self-esteem and achievement and progress in the educational arena. A curriculum which exhibits lack of "fit" frequently results in apathy, confusion, and negative feelings toward school, teachers, and other school personnel as well as toward self. When the special or different needs of Native American pupils are ignored, the inference is one of lack of concern and acceptance on the part of those who teach and work with these students. A child who doesn't feel accepted, in turn will be reluctant to accept himself or herself and others.

In building a curriculum that is relevant for Indian students, Indian people themselves generally are involved at every stage. Indians are weary of being "explained" by non-Indians. They want to tell their own story. In order to assure authenticity and validity, then, most curriculum projects call for direct involvement of Native Americans during every phase. Attention is given to such elements as tribal history and government, language, religion, customs, and values. In order to build pride, the contributions of Native Americans to the nation and to the American way of life are included. Indian
Building Cultural Relevance

For example, one of the most significant projects in curriculum development has come out of North Dakota. This exemplary Indian Studies curriculum has been produced by an Indian organization, the American Indian Curricula Development Program. The immediate objective of the project was the development of a social studies curriculum and teacher training package that is relevant to the needs of Indian children in grades K-12. The curriculum includes text material, supplementary booklets, overhead transparencies, slide-tape programs, cassette tapes, and a comprehensive teacher's manual. A major focus of the program is to relate Indian socio-cultural values to realistic career exploration.

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on and adjacent to the reservations in North Dakota. The relevance provided by the project should encourage greater student interest in school, motivation to remain and achieve at a higher level, and build a sense of identity, pride, and self-esteem.

North Dakota does not stand alone in its efforts to build cultural relevance in the curriculum for Native American students. Other states which have made inroads include Alaska, Montana, Idaho, Washington, California, Arizona, and Nevada. Most of these projects have goals similar to the North Dakota program. In addition to helping Indian students learn about their culture and heritage, these programs may provide opportunities for non-Indian pupils to gain more accurate perceptions of Indian peoples and their contributions to the nation as well as to combat the stereotyped images perpetuated in the media.

The attainment of cultural relevance in Indian Studies materials used in schools is, however, more complex than one might expect. The involvement of Indians themselves is only a beginning. Several additional factors which relate to relevance in these materials will be examined.

A Core of Indian Values

Despite tribal differences, a core of Indian values can be identified which have come down from the past and which seem to dominate the thinking and behavior of many present-day Indians. Indian Studies curriculum projects either overtly or covertly attempt to weave this value system into the resulting materials. If Indian students are to understand themselves and their culture, they need an awareness of this value system which seems to form a bond of “Indianness” which transcends distances and differences in mores, tribal government, language, and the like, of the different tribal groups. Examples of components of this value system follow.

1. Harmony with nature. The Indian view of nature stresses reverence and harmony. This is not meant to imply that nature should not be used. In fact, early Indian people could not have survived if they had not been able to use their environment productively. However, Indians take no more than they can use and retain concern and reverence for the environment; they do what they can to live in balance with their surroundings. Non-Indian cultures often stress “control” over the environment and there is a strong thrust toward what has been called “harnessing the forces of nature.” The recent non-Indian concern about ecology is rather ironic when one considers that America’s first inhabitants were ecology-minded long before the arrival of European settlers.

2. Sharing. If it had not been for this deep-rooted value of sharing, it is likely that the early European settlers would never have survived to help build this great nation of ours. Although this value is altered somewhat because of modern life styles, generosity and sharing are still strong behaviors among present-day Indian people. Native Americans share not only the basic necessities of survival—food, clothing, and shelter—but also praise and shame. When an Indian does something to be proud of, the whole group shares in the praise he or she receives. On the other hand, if an Indian’s behavior should bring shame, it, too, is shared by the group and then forgotten. As a group, non-Indians generally do not have this orientation toward sharing.
3. Bravery. Bravery means facing a difficult situation without showing fear or running away. Bravery can take many forms. In days of the past, it required bravery for Indians to face their enemies, to obtain horses to be used in hunting, and to face a buffalo herd in order to make a kill and fill the family's needs. This value, too, is expressed in different ways in present-day living. It may take bravery for an Indian child to leave the family and go off to boarding school. It may take bravery to stay in school, to obtain and keep a job, to retain dignity in the face of adversity. Nevertheless, it is a strong core value which is important to the Indian and which the Indian student should understand.

4. Indian time. Indians look upon time as a continuum with no beginning and no end. It is important to live each day as it comes. Things are done as needed. There is no strong orientation toward "tomorrow" which characterizes so many non-Indians. Indians generally are not "clock watchers." Non-Indians often loathe what they consider a waste of time. Patience, too, is valued among Indians, whereas non-Indians tend to look with favor upon people who are "doers," who are action-oriented.

5. Freedom of the individual. This does not mean that individuals are free to do whatever they wish. It does mean that people have the freedom to rely on themselves and to make wise choices. They are free to follow the advice of others without being forced to do so. An individual who stands on his or her own and makes prudent decisions builds confidence and pride. Unfortunately, Indians of all ages may lack this pride because they do not understand the meaning of this value and have not been encouraged to become self-reliant. Personal freedom is a strong value among Native American people which many non-Indians do not recognize and teachers fail to reinforce in the school setting.

The values themselves are not new; indeed, they are ancient. But the attention these values are being afforded in the development of curriculum materials is novel and important to note. Additionally, core values often are placed in a present-day setting so that the student may see the application of these values in his or her own life.

History, told from the viewpoint of the Indian, is another component which can help effect a more meaningful curriculum for Indian pupils. Dee Brown's best seller, Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, perhaps has done more than any other single publication to focus attention of the non-Indian world upon the "Indian" view of the westward expansion movement. Many Indians conclude cynically that when the U.S. Cavalry won a victory over the Indians, it was recorded in history books as a great battle. However, when Indians won, the event was portrayed as a sordid "massacre." Until recently, Indian students were exposed to textbooks in social studies that told only the non-Indian side of the history of our country and which used such terms as "hostiles" in referring to Indians, portraying them frequently as bloodthirsty savages.

A publication by the Indian Historian Press entitled Textbooks and the American Indian can be a useful guide to all teachers in selecting materials that are unbiased and that avoid stereotypes of Indian people. Indians do not want history slanted their way, but they are making a plea for the truth. For example, Columbus did not "discover" America as many of us were taught in school. The Olmecs, Incas, Mayas, and Aztecs had developed advanced civilizations in North America long before the arrival of white people. The Bering Strait "land bridge" theory is being questioned by many anthropologists who feel that people could have come to this continent by other routes. These are only two examples of the vast amount of misinformation relating to Native Americans found in school texts.

In addition to history, data about ways in which early Indians met their needs for food, clothing, and shelter are components built into some curricula. The Indian was...
skillful in utilizing the environment to survive. For example, the ways in which the Plains Indians utilized the buffalo are well known. The homes which early Indians built were functional and constructed from materials found in abundance in their environment.

Additional components which can help build relevance into the curriculum are songs, dances, legends, understanding of ceremonials, social structure (such as the societies of the Plains Indians), medicinal practices, and so forth.

Since language is an inherent part of culture, many curriculum development projects include a study of the language(s) of the Indian group or groups involved to help students increase understanding of their heritage. Indian languages have been identified and have been grouped into distinct language families. Many of these languages still exist; they differ drastically from one another, are quite complex, with a grammatical system which rivals or exceeds that of English. The individual who attempts to learn one of these languages surely will find this an arduous task. The fact that many are tonal languages adds to making them difficult for native English speakers to learn.

Information about tribal governments, the political organizations which are charged with managing tribal affairs on reservations, may be included in the curriculum so that students understand something of the political system by which reservation Indians are governed. Many Indian students have little understanding of the reservation system, of organizations of the federal government that regulate aspects of Indian life such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and of how tribal government fits into the political structure of cities, counties, and states.

Implementing a Curriculum

In some curriculum projects, the life styles of reservation Indians are contrasted with those of Indians who either by choice or circumstance dwell in towns and cities. Urban Indians may have assimilated almost wholly into the mainstream of American society. Others may struggle to retain their identity as Indians and to raise their children with some understanding and appreciation of their heritage. It is easy to “get lost” in an urban setting and to lose one’s identity. Older students can gain some understanding of the problems which Indians face in attempting to live in two worlds—Indian and non-Indian.

A curriculum has to be implemented by people. Administrators, supervisors, and teachers are the ones who hold the key to the success or failure of any program, regardless of its merits on paper. Thus another very promising frontier in Indian education, in the opinion of the writers, appears to be the growing trend toward in-service education for non-Indian and Indian teachers, too, in order to sensitize them to the differences in culture, values, heritage, and life style of Native American students. It may be surprising for the reader to note that Indian teachers may be working with Indian pupils of a different background. For example, a Navajo teacher working with Sioux students may have little data concerning this tribal group as the culture and history of these two groups are markedly different.

For Indian pupils, many Indian people are pushing for the employment of Indian teachers only. Despite the arguments which can be made for this growing practice, particularly in the lower grades, it is unlikely that sufficient Indian teachers will be available in the near future for the supply to meet the demand. Therefore, it is imperative to build sensitivity into the school staff at every level—from superintendent to teacher aide—so that Native American students may receive the best and most relevant education possible. Many in-service projects have been implemented to bring this about.

Another innovation worthy of note is the increased involvement of Indian parents and other community persons in the educational process of their children. This involvement takes various forms. In some states, Indian advisory boards are formed at the local level in order to provide a direct link between the Indian community and the school district. These boards have significant input in assessing the special needs of Indian students.
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in the district and may help with the writing of proposals for federal monies to meet these needs. These boards may help monitor the Johnson-O’Malley funds which districts receive from the federal government as supplements to improve the education of Indian students. At the state level, Indian advisory boards may have an impact in determining how federal monies will be spent on a statewide basis, selecting textbooks which will be used, proposing curricula in Indian studies which need to be developed, and the like. The state of Nevada is an example of this.

In addition to the formation of Indian education advisory boards, more Indians are choosing to run for positions on local school boards, a practice almost unheard of until quite recently. Although all-Indian school boards are few in number, nevertheless, the number of Indian people serving on school boards is continuing to increase.

Some colleges and universities offer special programs which are geared to training Indians as teachers and as teacher aides. Teacher aides can perform many valuable services particularly when they are assigned to help non-Indian teachers. Often the aide may provide an invaluable link between the school and community. Frequently, the aides become the best goodwill ambassadors that the school has. They are able to interpret the school program to Indian parents in a way that is meaningful and that far exceeds the impact which the non-Indian teacher or administrator could have.

In addition, Indian parents and community members are being invited to come into schools as resource persons. Frequently, they have skills and/or experiences which provide valuable input. The person who can help the children make pottery, relate legends, teach an Indian social dance, demonstrate the weaving of baskets, teach something of the language, and so on, can help make the curriculum come alive as children gain important understandings of their heritage. Hopefully, as more and more Indian people begin to feel welcome in the schools, this trend will grow in momentum.

The increase of bilingual programs in schools where children enter with little or no knowledge of English is another optimistic trend in Indian education. In states where reservations and colonies are small, there may be a lesser need for bilingual programs. In fact, it is difficult to find Indians in Nevada who can speak the Paiute or Shoshone languages. On the other hand, many Navajo pupils come to school with limited or no facility in English, a fact not too surprising when one considers the vastness of their reservation which consists of over 25,000 square miles. Courses in conversational Navajo are offered at several institutions of higher learning. Many books are written in Navajo and pupils are taught to read and write Navajo as well as to speak it. Other tribes, too, are experiencing a "cultural revival" and bilingual programs are being offered in their schools as teachers who can speak the native language are located and employed.

Open Education Gives Promise

Changes in organizational patterns within schools represent a noteworthy improvement in Indian education, too. Open education seems to offer a promising alternative to traditional organization patterns within the school. In the open classroom, as opposed to the traditional one, greater freedom is encouraged and pupils are brought into the decision-making process. Flexibility of scheduling and a de-emphasis of time pressures lead to a more permissive, relaxed atmosphere. There is an increased amount

1 The reader is referred to the October 1974 issue of Educational Leadership for an article entitled "Open Education and Native American Values" by the authors of this article.
of sharing of materials, equipment and information, too, as pupils work in small and large groups to accomplish specific objectives. Competition between students is replaced by competition with one's self to learn, improve, and grow. Motivation seems to be keener with the result that often there are fewer "discipline" problems. Social and emotional growth is promoted as pupils learn to work successfully with others, to grow in independence and sense of responsibility. Open education may offer an alternative which will provide a better fit for the Indian student with the value set described earlier in this article.

Unfortunately, open education in schools for Indian pupils appears to be more of an exception than a rule. One noteworthy program in open education can be found in operation at the Rocky Boy Elementary School in Montana. In addition to employment of this innovation in organizational pattern, a program in bilingual education (Cree-English) is offered, thus making this school quite exemplary. However, there is a great need for research in school organizational patterns in Indian education before definite conclusions can be reached concerning what is "best" for Native American students. Presently, however, it can be stated that any change is worth a try since "traditional" education to a great extent has failed to reach and hold large numbers of Indian pupils.

One final trend in Indian education will be mentioned. This is the greater accountability currently being built into school programs for Indians. For too long, school districts have received supplemental monies for the education of Indian students with few, if any, "strings" attached. Recently, the picture has changed. At the national level, there is a movement toward careful evaluation and reporting of results relating to all school programs which are underwritten by the federal government. However, the demand for accountability not only is trickling down to the states and to local school districts from the federal level, but there is an upward push, too. This push is emanating from the parents of pupils within these programs, as well as other interested community persons. With pressures from above and below, finally school districts are having to account for expenditures of funds. Indian people are interested in the educational experiences which their children receive and want to see results. The monitoring of these programs with continuous evaluation and reporting procedures and concomitant feedback to school personnel and the community can result in revisions and an upgrading of the quality of educational experiences for Indian pupils.

In conclusion, then, the harbinger of gloom who would have us believe there is nothing good happening in Indian education should take note of the positive aspects currently to be found. Although the discussion here is far from exhaustive, there are at least six noteworthy trends. To summarize briefly these are:

1. Emphasis on building culturally relevant curriculum materials

2. Increasing in-service programs for school personnel to build awareness of the differing backgrounds and needs of Indian students

3. Greater involvement of Indian parents and community members in the educational setting

4. More bilingual programs, especially in the lower grades and in schools where pupils enter with limited or no facility in English

5. Changes in traditional school organizational patterns, particularly the move toward open education

6. Emphasis on accountability to improve the quality of education for Indian students at all levels.

What's new in Indian education? Exciting things are happening in education for Indians all over the country. Of course, we have a long way to go before all of the problems are resolved. Yet it is encouraging to note that we have come a long way and that many dreams which Indian parents have had for the education of their children finally are becoming a reality.