Indian Education
by Helen Attaquin, Wampanoag

In June, 1744, the Governor of the colony of Pennsylvania arranged a council of delegates from Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Maryland to meet with sachems of the Five Nations of the Iroquois Indians in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The meeting opened with the colonial representatives offering to send eight or ten young Indians, selected by the Five Nations, to Williamsburg, in order to give them a good education. Canassatego, the principal Iroquois chief, rose to speak for the Indians. He said that Indians had already had experience with the white man's schools and that their young men had returned to their tribes neither white men nor Indians. He said that if the whites would choose one or two dozen of their boys, the Indians would send them to Onondaga, where the great council of the Iroquois would take care of their education and would rear them in the best manner to make men of them.

Therefore, it is obvious that even in colonial times Indians have felt that there was something lacking in the white man's idea of education. This quality that is missing is the Indian's intuitive feeling, as contrasted with the white man's intellectual curiosity, about nature and life. The white man approaches life through his head, developing a materialistic outlook; whereas, the Indian approaches life through his heart. For example, white men would never say that the animals are their brothers, that the corn and the squash are the three sisters, or that the earth is their mother. Yet, the Indian says it and means it.

In becoming civilized, intellectual and scientific, the white man has become increasingly aware of himself. However, in order to see the world as it really is, one must sometimes be able to forget oneself, one's wants, one's biases, even one's intellectual pretensions. Only then can the world of intuition and inspiration speak directly to one, as it did, and does, to the Indian.

The Indian way of life (his method of observing the world and thinking) is different from the white man's way. It is vitally important that white men, especially teachers and educators of young people, understand this. If our youth could realize this difference, and if they could learn to develop intellectually (like the white man), and still develop intuitively (like the Indian), they would be enabled to balance and harmonize their own lives as well as the lives of others. In this manner, they would become complete people.

Although Native Americans number less than 900,000 (less than one-half of one percent of the entire population of the United States), their problems are legion. Outstanding among these problems is that of Indian education.

One report on the status of Indians states:

- In 1966, more than 16,000 Indian children of school age were not attending any school at all.
- The average educational level for all Indians under federal supervision is five school years.
- Dropout rates are twice the national average.
- Indian children score consistently lower than white children at every grade level.
level, in both verbal and non-verbal skills according to national tests, administered in 1965. The longer the Indian child stays in school, the further behind he gets.

These alarming results are caused by many factors, admittedly. Some of these are: language barriers, lack of Indian teachers and counselors, the use of culturally biased tests, the generally poor quality of teachers, and the lack of bilingual and bicultural programs. At present these factors are in the process of changing, especially in the bilingual and bicultural areas. The Navajo language is an excellent example.

Since it is a very subtle, very beautiful language. There are more than 20 ways to say "honor" and as many ways to say respect. But until recently the language has only been spoken. The ancient stories and ceremonies were passed from generation to generation for 1,500 years by word of mouth. But a culture, to continue to survive, must be more than written in the minds of people. It must be written on paper. It must have its own writers, its own literature.

Regardless of the central focus that a people's language and literature have, for more than a century, schools serving Navajo children imposed on them a different language, a different set of values—physically removing children from parents on reservation schools, stressing the value judgment that the old ways had to die if assimilation could take place. Because of these influences, no doubt, the lustre of the oral tradition suffered. To preserve their heritage it would be necessary to compete with written texts in English.

Ironically enough it was World War II that served to develop a pride among the Navajo for their linguistic mastery and subtleties. The most successful code used was the Navajo language; used in the Pacific theater, the Navajo code was never broken.

Ninety five percent of the children on the Rough Rock reservation were monolingual Navajo speakers at the first grade level. At all other reservations education programs started with English as the only language of instruction. At Rough Rock, the first Indian-controlled school, parents fought for the right to have a bi-lingual program where content material could be taught in Navajo. Weavers and silversmiths and moccasin-makers from the community served as models for the children. A model program of apprentice medicine men, singers, chanters, shamans was initiated as a joint effort between the U.S. Public Health Service and Navajos. The old ways and the new were taught together.

In January 1975, the new IBM Navajo typing element went on the market. In the last year the increase in the number of typewriters with a capability of typing in Navajo had gone from 12 to 150. A little ball with 88 characters on it. So simple, but now Navajo children are reading and writing about their land and their country in Navajo. Because of this type of advancement, I believe that there exists much hope for the future education of Indians. Herein, exists a unique opportunity for the Indian to revile religious awareness in their culture and education, and to emerge the victor, at last.


We gratefully acknowledge assistance provided by Cam Pfeiffer, president of 'AK'E'ELCH'1161, Inc. a Navajo literacy organization in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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