



Trends in Early Childhood Education for Native American Pupils

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**Photos: Bureau of Indian Affairs*

New trends are emerging today in programs of early childhood education for Native American pupils. Linking schooling closely to parents and community and providing rich and appropriate resources are beginning to pay off in terms of children's success and interest in education.

Many promising trends in early childhood education for American Indian children have surfaced during this decade. Some of these trends are characteristic of early childhood education generally. Others relate specifically to programs for Native Americans. All seem noteworthy and represent a breakthrough for pupils who, for a variety of reasons, have fared poorly in the educational institutions of this nation and whose prognosis for success in school has, in the past, been dismal indeed.

Perhaps the prime trend has been the inclusion of many more Indian pupils in early childhood programs than in the past. Part of this increase, no doubt, is due to the expansion of Head Start programs on and off reservations. In addition, the trend nationally is toward state-supported kindergartens for all pupils. Parents appear to be more receptive to enrolling their children in preschool programs. The programs may be more attractive, and parents may perceive something of the impact of the early years on future success in school and in society. For a variety of reasons, early childhood education for Native American pupils is on the increase. This trend in itself might not be too important. However, when it is linked with a discussion of certain promising practices that are to be found within many of these programs, the reader may perceive something of the really exciting things that are occurring for young Native Americans.



Role of the Parents

The Indian Education Act of 1972 (P.L. 92-318, Title IV) has done for Indian education what the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 has accomplished for the overall student population of this country (Demmert, 1976). Part B of this Act encourages the support of community-based early childhood programs and thus stimulates the involvement of Indian parents and their communities in the education of their young children. The participation of Indian parents in the educative process is one of the most promising trends on the horizon and is an impetus which has long been needed.

In addition, involvement of Indian parents in educational programs has been increased through Indian advisory boards that are formed at local and state levels so that input from parents may be channelled and utilized in building relevant programs (Foerster and Little Soldier, 1975). These boards play a vital role in assessing the special needs of Indian pupils and may help with the writing of proposals for federal monies to meet these needs under the provisions of the Johnson-O'Malley Act of 1932 or Title IV. The advisory boards may help select textbooks and develop curricula on the local or state level as well as serve to monitor programs once they are implemented.

One of the most exciting and potentially far-reaching trends in Indian education is the thrust toward parent-based early childhood edu-

cation for children under three (Demmert, 1976). Head Start and kindergarten programs may come too late to prevent the dropping out of school of Indian youngsters that begins at about the fourth grade when pupils move from a more child-centered curriculum to a subject-matter orientation. Children who begin school lacking the prerequisite experiences and skills needed for success tend to fall further behind the longer they stay in school.

Parents are the child's first and best teachers. Programs which enable parents to gain understanding of how to work with their young children and to promote optimal growth can make an important contribution. It is difficult to speculate about the possible impact of such programs on the future school achievement of pupils. However, these programs offer the potential of dramatically reducing the dropout rate of Indian pupils particularly at the elementary and junior high levels and greatly increasing the school achievement of these youngsters.

Curriculum Bolsters Self-Image

Another noteworthy trend is visible in the area of curriculum. Many Indian pupils have suffered from a very poor self-image. Often the school curriculum does little to correct this image. In fact, it may contribute to the problem. Curriculum projects that take into account the unique heritage of Indian pupils and that promote pride are under way in many parts of the country. Much of this curricular reform is the result of pressures from Indian people themselves to provide something better for their children than what they themselves experienced in school (Tsanusdi, 1976).

It should be noted that the Bureau of Indian Affairs kindergarten curriculum guide reflects a bilingual-bicultural approach (U.S. Department of the Interior, 1970). The kindergarten is viewed as the bridge between home and school. Attention is given to building upon the strengths that the child brings to school including the richness of culture, language, and history which are part of the Native American heritage. Cultural differences are viewed as just that—differences, not deficiencies.

Learning centers, which frequently abound in early childhood classrooms, currently may offer

a more culturally relevant setting for Indian pupils. For example, the home living center may include kitchen utensils and dishes that are familiar to the child. Dolls may look more like Indian infants than "palefaces." The dress-up corner can include bustles, headdresses, jewelry, and the like which the children are used to. Rather than puzzles, pictures, and games that reflect things unfamiliar to pupils, the visitor to the early childhood classroom may find rodeo lotto games, pictures of dwellings and scenery found on the reservation, and other materials, many of which are teacher-constructed and with which young children can identify immediately and feel comfortable. Cooking experiences may include fry bread, Indian tacos, and mutton stew.

Churchman, Herman, and Hall (1975) have reported the development of a culturally relevant preschool curriculum for Indian pupils living in the greater Los Angeles area. The curriculum was designed by the Tribal American Consulting Corporation (TACC) and based on at least two premises. The first of these was that children will learn best in a culturally relevant context. Thus learning materials were developed to demonstrate the richness of tribal history, values, and culture. The curriculum was to be implemented employing the traditional Indian communal interaction pattern wherein individuals work cooperatively and share the products of their labor.

The second premise that guided this curriculum development project was that preschool experiences should prepare the Indian child for success in school. Referring to the work of Bruner, Kagan, and White, the authors cited above stress the need for competence before the age of five in such basic skills as language, problem solving, coping, perception, and coordination to enable the child to interact positively with the environment. Thus the curriculum materials were designed to tap children's culture and heritage while developing basic skills and promoting growth of a positive self-concept.

Curriculum building efforts were quite complex due to the fact that many tribal groups are represented in the Los Angeles area. Nevertheless, the TACC cultural curriculum for Indian preschools appears to have made some excellent advances in meeting the needs of the culturally diverse Indian population in this area.



Great Strides Are Made

Additional noteworthy curriculum projects can also be cited. The Wisconsin Native American Language and Culture project was set up under Title IV of the Indian Education Act (Roth, 1976). The major thrust of the project was to preserve the languages of the five Wisconsin tribes (Chippewa, Oneida, Menominee, Potawatomi, and Winnebago) by establishing written systems for these languages, developing reference and teaching materials for them, and finally teaching these languages and cultures in the schools. Wisconsin Indians who are native speakers of these languages were hired and trained as language teachers and consultants. Linguists were employed to help develop instructional and reference materials. As a result, in Wisconsin Indian pupils beginning with Head Start may have the opportunity to become literate in their native language, to learn more about their heritage, and to develop a deep sense of prideful identity.

In North Dakota, the American Indian Curricula Development Program, a subsidiary group of the United Tribes of North Dakota Development Corporation, has been involved in a social studies curriculum and teacher training package that is culturally relevant for children in grades K-12 (Gray, 1973). The curriculum includes text material, supplementary booklets, overhead transparencies, slide-tape programs, cassette tapes, and a comprehensive teacher's manual. It is an attempt to provide relevance in curriculum for

the more than 18,000 Indians living on or near the four United Tribes reservations.

That there is a need for the project is not open to question. Not only has the average family income on these reservations been dreadfully low and unemployment extremely high, but additional problems such as high drop-out rate of pupils, below par academic achievement of those who remain in school, and an alarming teenage suicide rate have indicated the need for changes in the education of Indian students. It is hoped that the curriculum relevance provided by the project will encourage greater pupil interest in school, motivation to remain and achieve at a higher level, a more positive self-concept, pride, and a sense of identity.

North Dakota is not the only state which has made strides in serving the educational needs of Native Americans. Curriculum projects have surfaced in most states which have an identifiable Indian population such as Alaska, Montana, Idaho, Washington, California, Arizona, Nevada, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. Most of these projects have goals similar to those of the North Dakota program cited above. In addition to helping Indian pupils learn about their culture, heritage, and language, many of these programs provide opportunities for non-Indians to gain more accurate perceptions of Indian peoples and their important contributions to the nation as well as to combat the stereotyped images perpetuated in the media.

No discussion of curriculum would be complete without reference to the many projects under way on the Navajo reservation. The Rough Rock Demonstration School has developed a myriad of culturally relevant curriculum materials for Navajo pupils. In 1966, this school was established as a community controlled school, a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) contract school, and has served since then as a model for other schools on the reservation. The Navajo Nation, through its Division of Education, has promoted educational change on the reservation from early childhood education to adult education.

The Navajo Area Language Arts Project (NALAP) has helped with the problems of teaching English to the many Navajo children who enter school speaking Navajo as their prime or sole language (U.S. Department of the Interior, 1973). A Navajo Social Studies Curriculum proj-

ect has been completed that provides a culture-based social studies curriculum for beginners through eighth-graders. These materials are designed to demonstrate the many contributions the Indian has made to this nation, to provide insight into his or her relationship to other cultures, and to enable each pupil to find a rightful place in society.

Needs in Special Education

The increase in special services for exceptional Indian pupils is a trend that is worthy of some discussion too. In 1972, a survey of pupils enrolled in BIA schools indicated that a total of 19,540 students was in need of special educational services but that only 3,715 were receiving such services (U.S. Department of the Interior, 1973). Since that time, important gains have been made in attempting to meet these needs. For example, the Pine Ridge Agency in South Dakota (Aberdeen Area) was the first agency in the Bureau of Indian Affairs to have a full-time special education coordinator at the agency level and a special education teacher at each of the agency's eight schools. A special education instructional materials center located at the Porcupine School provides the agency area with materials to help meet the special needs of the agency's children.

The Navajo Nation has responded to the needs of its special children, too. Of the more than 60,000 Navajo pupils enrolled in school, it was estimated that 30 percent required some type of special education service (Murphy, 1974). Navajo parents, tribal leaders, community persons, and educators have exhibited increased awareness of and concern for the needs of special children. As a result, these needs are being partially met, although there remains much work to be done to provide services for all who could profit from them.

The St. Michaels Association for Special Education located at St. Michaels, Arizona, on the reservation opened in September 1970, and was the first school to offer comprehensive educational, social, and medical services for handicapped Navajo children beginning with age 1½ (Murphy, 1974). The Chinle Valley School for Exceptional Children at Chinle, Arizona, opened in August

1973 and was designed to serve trainable children ranging in age from five to fifteen years.

At the Greasewood Boarding School, also on the Navajo reservation, pupils in grades 1-8 participate in Resource Centers funded under Title I and designed to correct specific language disabilities and promote progress in academic skills (Ramey, Sileo, and Zongolowicz, 1975). The program at Greasewood has a three-fold thrust. The language development component fosters the acquisition of language skills including listening, oral and written language, articulation, reading skills development, and reading comprehension. The conceptual development component deals with number concepts, reasoning, classification skills, and general information. The developmental motor skills component encompasses the range of skills involved in gross motor development, sensorimotor integration, and perceptual motor skills. The program is individualized, objectives are stated behaviorally, and daily logs are maintained for each pupil.

The trend toward earlier diagnosis of needs of exceptional children is a healthy one. The continued growth of special programs for Indian pupils should result in halting the dreadful waste of human resources that has occurred in the past when such services were either nonexistent for these children or came too late to prevent the maladjustment of pupils, damage to self-esteem, and early retreat from the educational institution.

IGE and Open Education

Two additional trends will be discussed here. These two trends are interrelated. One is the move to provide greater individualization of instruction; the other is a thrust toward open education.

Individually Guided Education (IGE) is a refreshingly new approach to education that has come about as a result of research by the Wisconsin Research and Development Center for Cognitive Learning and other educational agencies (U.S. Department of the Interior, 1973). The Institute for the Development of Educational Activities (I|D|E|A|), established by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation in 1965, has been instrumental in the national expansion of this program.

IGE schools include the Acomita Day School on the Acoma reservation 60 miles west of Albu-



querque, New Mexico, and two other schools at Jemez and Zia in the Albuquerque area (U.S. Department of the Interior, 1973). Pupils have a great deal of physical freedom within these IGE schools. The schools are ungraded and cut across at least two age groups. Work is contracted for and each student draws an assignment from a "contract board." Pupils are responsible for completing their own work. Progress reports are prepared periodically and shared with parents in conferences.

In addition, open education appears to offer a viable alternative to traditional education for many Indian pupils (Foerster and Little Soldier, 1974). Schools for Native American pupils using this approach include the Concho Indian School located near El Reno, Oklahoma, the Rocky Boy Elementary School in Montana, and the Finlayson School in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. The latter school includes a preschool program for children ranging in age from 3½ years to 6 years. Pre-academic skills are fostered in an open setting which allows pupils to explore and manipulate materials and learn by discovery.

The open classroom setting may provide a better psychological fit for many Indian pupils. Traditional Indian values such as sharing and personal freedom are fostered in this type of classroom context (Foerster and Little Soldier, 1974). In addition, the greater flexibility in the

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use of time and the permissiveness characteristic of the open classroom may blend much more effectively with the child-rearing practices of many Native Americans. The informal education of the home should be the basis for planning the formal early learning experiences of pupils in school. The open setting may provide greater opportunities for the teacher of young Native American pupils to utilize the strengths these children bring to school with them.

For this discussion of promising trends in early childhood education for Indian pupils the authors have selected only certain highlights. Parents and their involvement were noted as were certain curriculum projects, programs for exceptional children, and experiments with individualization and open education. Whether these trends should persist and flourish or wither should be based upon data gathered through exacting research efforts. Until such data are available, however, educators must continue to move in directions that they intuitively feel are positive ones. Much has been accomplished in early childhood education "Native American style." But new challenges continually appear on the horizon to

be dealt with as effectively and efficiently as possible by knowledgeable and dedicated educators of these pupils. *[E]*

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