

Native Indian Teacher Education Program
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The Needs of the Native Indian Student in the Education system and in Teacher Education

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I welcome this opportunity to be with you today. It is my first visit to this university in the “banana belt.” I was asked to discuss with you the topic: “The needs of the Native Indian student in the educational system and in teacher education.” I decided to approach this question of needs through a discussion of “quality education through community involvement.” Quality education or meaningful education for Indian children is a need – a need which will not be attained unless there is a community involvement in education. Community involvement as expressed here, means the participation of parents/guardians, grandparents, aunts, uncles, students in the design and implementation of an education program.

Formal education for Indians has been part of our lives for several centuries. Has the education system provided for us been successful? The answer is “no.” Consider the failure experienced by many Indian students today and in the past. We have been exposed to many alternative designs of Indian education presented by well-intentioned church and government groups.

1. Was the education provided by the early missionaries the right education? (“civilize and christianize”)
2. Were industrial schools, boarding schools or residential schools the answer? (remove children from the influence of parents)
3. Was integration the successful route? (a few succeeded)
4. Did any or all of these succeed in education the masses of Indian people? (No!)

We can see today that neither of these forms of education has provided what is required for success of Indian people:

1. We still have a national dropout rate of over 90% before high school completion
2. Studies show that our children do not read as well as non-Indian children
3. Many of our children are age-grade decelerated
4. Parents feel alienated by the school – few go to the school
5. Teachers feel alienated by the community

With the emergence of the Indian leaders in the sixties and seventies came the concern for this failure. The need to provide a meaningful education for Indian children became a priority. What

resulted was a national position paper of Indian education entitled: “Indian control of Indian Education.” The two basic principles underlying this position are:

1. Parental responsibility and
2. Local control

Local control means community action. Not until 1972 was this direction identified and enunciated. It was a concept never tried before in the history of Indian education. This means that we Indians are seeking quality – success – in education through community involvement. Is it working? There is evidence that it is. Several Indian bands across Canada have taken complete control of their education program. For most, this is proving to be a positive experience.

I recently did a study in Manitoba in which I compared the educational achievement of Indian children in federal schools to those in provincial schools. This study was prompted by my curiosity to see what was happening in provincial schools. It is possible to find some stats on federal schools but little is known about what is happening to Indian children in provincial schools. With the concentration on integration in the 1960's , at least 60% of the Indian student population today attend provincial schools across Canada. I believe you in B.C. can receive the medal for the highest rate of integration. You can tell me if that was good, bad or just right.

My study wasn't highly scientific – but neither was Hawthorne's, he wrote two huge volumes based on a small sample of data from three Indian communities in B.C. (1964-1965). My hypothesis – bias – Indian students would not be doing as well in provincial schools as federal schools. This was disproved in my study. Performance was not good in either system – it was a matter of the relative degree of badness!

General conclusion: There is little observable difference between the performance of Indian students in federal and provincial schools. The comparative indicators I used in the study reveal the following results:

- a) Dropout rate by age/grade
 - 15-16 year olds, Grade 7 & 8 (some before grade 6)
- b) Age-grade placement
 - about 1/3 of students in the sample were age-grade decelerated (most in gr. 1-6)

- decline in 7-9 (worse in high school)
 - reading, first year, F.R. (decline begins)
- c) Course placement
- high school – majority in general course
 - O.E.C. disproportionately high number
- d) Graduation
- low; slightly better on-reserve
- e) Attendance
- generally low (60% - 80%)
 - as low as 30% for some months
- f) staff qualifications and experience
- g) views of parents and students
- similar – questionnaires – little involvement, cultural inclusion

General recommendations: Parents, band councils, band education authorities, school, staff, administrators (provincial & provincial) must establish local forums for discussion of education in an effort to improve the performance of Indian students. If not, the same results will probably exist in 10-20 years.

That is, we must strive to change the dismal picture of education. We must strive for quality education for our people – through this involvement of parents/guardians in the education process. In preparing my study, I visited each of the communities involved twice – once before I really got started to explain the purpose, format and implementation process, and again after the completion of the study to debrief them on the findings. This was a positive experience that demonstrated an eagerness of involvement, motivation for action (eg. Garden Hill – attendance, Sioux Valley – O.E.C., Cross Lake – I.C.I.E.).

Some specific recommendations made in the study which is to involve joint community action were:

1. Further studies – to probe the causes and experiment with solutions to dropouts, age-grade deceleration, attendance, course placement, graduation, etc.

2. Preparation of well-designed Native Studies programs (7-9) – critical time for many students
3. Forming curriculum committees on various subjects (elders)
4. Training for school board members – meaningful participation
5. Conducting workshops – for communication and training (parent, teacher, student)
6. Review effects of integration (eg. Manitoba – not working)

It appears our main task as Indian educators is to reach out into the community – to involve our people in meaningful participation in the education process. We must document the existing state of education in the communities in which we work – we must encourage community interest and action in seeking solutions to the problem areas.

What then, are the needs of Indian children in the education system?

- They need more involvement of Indian people throughout the system – as teachers, as administrators, as aides, as librarians, as school trustees, etc.
- They need a school program that will attach honour to their cultural customs, values and contributions
- They need an effective system to be identified very soon or many will continue to be lost

This brings me to the role that Indian teachers can play. Prior to the 1970's, there were very few Indians in teacher training programs. The position paper of 1972, I.C.I.E., stated that “the need for Indian teachers is critical and urgent.” It called for the establishment of programs such as N.I.T.E.P. Leaders felt that – I quote “Native teachers who have an intimate understanding of Indian traditions, psychology, way of life and language, are best able to create the learning environment suited to the habits and interests of the Indian child.”

Indian teachers are expected to provide quality education. Quantity numbers is important but quality is more important. It is believed that Indian teachers will provide the backbone of the change that is desired in education for Indian people. As teachers, as educators, as Indians:

- a) You will expect much from Indian children and, therefore, your expectations will be met – it is the “self-fulfilling” prophecy
- b) You will relate your teaching to Indian culture and values, for you have lived it

- c) You will understand that silence, non-competitiveness , humbleness, and observation are valued characteristics in Indian society and your teaching style will reflect this
- d) You know that praise given individually and privately will be more effective than public praise
- e) You will ensure that your students experience success because you will address their needs through your knowledge of their “community” – you will be a community teacher not a teacher in the community
- f) Finally, you will give what is most essential – respect and love

You will impact on education. The positive changes can already be witnessed from the presence of Indian teachers. As Indian people, as teachers, you – I – have the challenge to strive for a better future for our people. This means, we cannot be just teachers, ordinary teachers but we must be committed teachers – teachers with a cause. The cause being the total development of our communities – socially, economically, politically as well as educationally. Our measure of success can be found in answer to the question: “How much service have I rendered to my people?” (gospel of the redman)

What, then, are the needs of Indian students in teacher education? It may be easier said than done. The program must prepare you to meet the challenges that I just outlined. It must exemplify “quality” as this is our goal.

In closing, I thank you for your interest