

Program for the Education of Native Teachers (P.E.N.T)
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It was difficult to find an appropriate topic for an occasion such as this. This evening you want to celebrate an achievement which represents for most of you five years or more of serious effort. So you hardly want anyone to preach to you at this time or to spend time telling you what you already know or to try to give you advice. You want to get on with the celebrating and I don't blame you. However, I can't just let you off that easy. I must take a few moments to share a few comments, a few thoughts, and even a few questions with you.

You are being honoured this evening for completing a two year teacher certification course through the P.E.N.T. program. You have not completed an ordinary program but you have completed a very unique program. In P.E.N.T., you had the unique opportunity of both learning on the job in your home community among your own people as well as at a university campus. This presented certain advantages: 1) By learning or training on the job you were able to keep in touch with your community. You were reminded daily of the children's needs and that of the community as a whole. 2) By spending time on a university campus, you were exposed to the wider field of learning as well as your specific learning of educational theory and the methodology of teaching – you could not be brainwashed – or “whitewashed” – or could you? You knew what could be applied to your community and what could not. By remaining in your community, you were better able to keep your perspective. The balance of community based and university based training was good for those reasons.

Now – let us think for a moment about disadvantages. Are there disadvantages to a program such as P.E.N.T.? Of course we would like to think there aren't. I have one main concern that I will share with you. You have spent five years or more as an assistant, an aide, a paraprofessional. This means that you were “second in command” – “not in complete charge.” You have worked with many teachers, some of who were good and some of whom were not – maybe terrible. Remember them? By helping, assisting rather than being in charge, have you adopted the ways of the teachers with whom you worked? Have you lost or given up your original ideas of what and how Indian children should be taught? Of course, if the teachers you are imitating were good – i.e. dedicated and understanding of the children's needs and the community's needs – then you're okay. But how about the other kind of teacher – the one who gives little consideration to the particular needs of Indian children, who sees teaching as a 9-3:30 job and practically gets out the door before the children leave at 3:30; the one who never leaves the teachers' ghetto – the teacherage compound they live on. Many teachers do not integrate into

the Indian community. The only time some of them leave their teacherages is to go to the Bay, the post office, or to visit non-Indian families if there are any in the area.

What will you do as a teacher? Will you continue to assist, to follow rather than to lead? Have you already established a pattern in your community that you cannot break? If you have, is it a good pattern – one that will improve the education of children in your school? Are you providing a good model for the students? These are questions that bear serious thought before you enter those classrooms this fall as teachers.

The expectations that Indian people, educators, and in fact, society has of Indian (Native) teachers places a great challenge before you. You are expected to change the face of Native education, to improve it so that the dropout rate will be reduced and the bottleneck which previously exists in grades seven to nine among our fifteen and sixteen years old will be changed. This area is the most critical at the present time. It represents the building up of a problem which explodes at this level.

You are expected to reduce the age-grade deceleration rate. My recent study showed that 1/3 of Indian students in Federal and Provincial schools are behind the “normal” age for their grade. Some are behind by as much as five years. There are students who are seventeen in grade six. What is the situation in your school? How many are behind? Why are they behind? What can you as a teacher do about it?

You are expected to improve the attendance of children in your class – in your school the attendance survey I did showed that absenteeism is a general problem among Indian students in both Federal and Provincial schools, yearly attendance averaged between 60% and 80%. Attendance decreased as the year progressed (ie. it was better in September than in June). Attendance was poorest in grades seven and eight. Why is absenteeism a problem? Do Indian children do poorly in school because of absenteeism or are children absent because they are doing poorly in school – or are they unhappy in school? That’s a loaded question which needs much consideration.

Finally, you are expected to bridge the gap between the home and the school, between the parents and the teachers. The lack of parental involvement in their children’s education is evident in many communities. If few parents even go to the schools for parent-teacher interviews, concerts, sport days, then we are a long, long way from Indian control of Indian education. There are historic reasons for this lack of parental involvement. For years,

missionaries, government officials, non-Indian educators made Indian education their responsibility. They set the policies, hired the teachers, decided the curriculum and so on – all with parental inclusion. Today, Indian leaders recognize that Indians must begin to direct their own affairs. In education, this means we must strive toward two principles: parental responsibility and local control. Only when we have achieved these can we expect our education to take on meaning. Are the parents involved in the schools you work in? If not, as a teacher, what are you going to do about it? Are the teachers in your school part of the community? As a teacher, what can you do to assist them in becoming community members?

As teachers where will you stand on these issues? Will you lead or will you remain “second in command”? Can you cope with these expectations?

All of this sounds very demanding and it really will be. The task ahead is difficult if you really get involved. Years of effort by missionaries, government officials, non-Indian educators has failed to identify a meaningful education for Indians. It must happen in this decade – or we may be sunk! Native teachers will make the difference. Why? It is necessary to have Native teachers to shape the educational world as we want it to be. In the world as we want it to be, the teachers: will be of the particular nation (tribe) they are teaching; will be thoroughly knowledgeable about the past and present of the particular community in which they live; will be thoroughly knowledgeable about the past and present of the nation (tribe) they teach and of other nations (tribes) in this country, of immigrant peoples and peoples of other lands. In the education world as we want it to be, teachers will deal in ideas, emotions, cultural differences and will help children to develop intellectually and spiritually.

You, who today, received your teaching certificates, you are a great addition to the present number of Indian teachers. Only now, are our numbers increasing to a point where we can as a group of Indian teachers make an impact on the education system. This means we must probe the causes of failure among our children; we must experiment with solutions; we must do research into learning styles or whatever – but we must do something. To make an impact we have to be leaders in our schools; in our communities; and in our province. We have to set our sights and strive for that mark.

Let's hope that in ten years in 1990, the efforts of Indian teachers will be evident – that the sad statistics of today will have changed. You becoming a teacher this year is memorable not only because you have earned a teaching certificate, but it is also memorable because it is I.Y.C.

May your work as teachers ensure greater success for the children who will be the leaders of tomorrow. Thank you for your attention. I wish you success as a teacher!