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THE EDUCATION OF THE CANADIAN INDIANS -

ABORIGINAL PARALLELS?



A.J. Negline,
Central School,
Lake Cargelligo, N.S.W.

Mr Tony Negline was formerly Deputy Principal at Walgett Primary School and is now Principal at Lake Cargelligo Central School. During 1976 he travelled overseas as the Thomas T. Roberts Education Fellow to observe educational administration in Disadvantaged Schools. He holds the degrees of Bachelor of Commerce from the University of New South Wales, and Master of Educational Administration with honours from the University of New England. He is a Member of the Australian College of Education.

This paper is concerned with some aspects of the teaching of Canadian Indian children. The main interest is on two areas of observation. The first relates to Government policy on the education of Indians, and the second to educational practices in schools where Indians are taught.

GOVERNMENT POLICY

The main areas of Government policy for Indian Education are the improvement of the conditions on the reserves, job training, and the development of the Indian towards independence.

a) The Improvement of Conditions on Reserves

This policy relates broadly to the total life on the Reserves - to improvements in housing, nutrition and hygiene, the improvement in the physical living standards, and to the prevention of a breakdown in the social reactions of the people. The objective of the policy is to establish viable socio-cultural units on the reserves so that each individual has an awareness of both his cultural traditions and social responsibilities.

It is widely recognised that the educational implications of this policy are an essential component for its ultimate achievement. However, education alone cannot bring about the degree of progress needed. That is, whilst education enables an individual to gain some

awareness of himself and some understanding of his social relationships, it is also necessary that the individual finds *in his environment*, the opportunity to use in a permanent way the competencies gained through education, and through such opportunities to gain a degree of independence that enables him to provide for himself and his dependants.

b) Job Training

In terms of relevance to himself, the Indian will judge education according to what Indians do with their education. In attempting to do something, the Indian on the reserve has been restricted because of employment opportunities. Despite this, the policy is that Indians are entitled to the highest educational opportunities and the chance to enter any occupation.

Vocational awareness programs in schools attempt to provide some awareness of vocational competencies. These include an awareness of the job's social responsibilities. A significant underlying objective of the Government Job Training Policies is that the Indian child has not only to become aware of the relationships that make him a citizen of the reserve, but also, indeed, of the relationships that make him a citizen.

c) Independence

As social relationships have developed between the reserve community and the community at large the Indian has recognised the importance of the educational opportunities provided for him. The Indians expect their leaders to be capable of using the whiteman's language if merely to be able to express their claims effectively. They attempt to maintain their progress through education and, on the same basis, to gain further strength in negotiating and bargaining.

EDUCATION POLICY - OBSERVATIONS AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

This section of the paper discusses educational policy relating to the need for the continuity of education in isolated areas, the need for a degree of Indian culture in the schools and the potentiality of vocational awareness programs in schools for Indian students - particularly those who are disadvantaged.

a) A strategy for maintaining the continuity of educational policy for Indian children in isolated areas

Schools in geographically isolated areas can suffer greatly

from the lack of continuity of educational policy. High teacher turnover, limited pupil stimulus intake, a general lack of understanding of the needs of the Indian and, in reverse, the Indian's perceived lack of relevance in education, have in many instances created disjointed real educational opportunities. In an attempt to overcome this situation, the Principal of Alkali Lake Elementary School on the Alkali Indian Reserve in Central British Columbia, incorporated into his school administration a structured provision for parental involvement in the planning, implementation and assessment of school policies.

At Alkali Lake the parents assist new teachers to gain an understanding of the pupils - particularly those with learning difficulties. The parents are encouraged to work with the teachers in policy development so that they, in turn, may gain some knowledge of how the curriculum developments and how teaching strategies at the school attempt to meet the needs of its particular situation. From this knowledge, the parents, being the ones who 'remain' in that community when teachers move on, are in a position to provide a basis for the continuity of education simply because of their involvement in knowing just what is going on at the schools. In this way, the parents can provide a buffer against staff fluctuations.

b) Indian culture in schools

Attempts to incorporate Indian culture in schools with Indian students appear to be superficial. Carvings, beadwork and weaving are observable indications of craft-type activities in schools. There are few indications where Indian 'culture' gets anywhere close enough to highlighting, for example, the significance of the land question to the Indians and how this lies at the heart of their spiritual beliefs. There seems to be a general misconception as to the real basis of Indian culture.

Some attempts to overcome this misconception are being studied at places like the Indian Cultural College in the University of Saskatoon. There, under the directions of Indian educationalists, research into the development of material is being done that aims to cater adequately for the situation in schools where, if an Indian student is failing to grasp necessary concepts and skills, then there can be provision for the teaching situation to change so that use can be made of native language and native methods of learning to assist the student.

The College program is involved in the training of Indian Teachers' Aides as well as the development of teaching resources. Reading

materials, written in Indian dialects, are produced and made available to schools. Much of the subject matter in the reading material is gathered from workshop sessions of the elders of Indian tribes. At a typical workshop, the peace-pipe is smoked and the elders tell stories (legends). These stories are taped and later edited and written up to form basic reading books for use in schools.

Vocational Awareness Programs

There is a wide movement in schools in Canada for the development of vocational awareness programs for the senior students. The objective of the *awareness* programs, as opposed to the objectives for a *training* program, is to provide students with the opportunities to work at a number of jobs whilst still at school. Arrangements are made for students to be absent from school lessons for a week or a fortnight to allow them to work 'on the job' under normal hours and conditions.

In the case of Indian children - particularly the disadvantaged (and disadvantaged whites) the opportunity provides for more than the vocational emphasis. Indeed, such a program can enable the student to associate with other adult models within the community. Under normal circumstances, many such students socially relate to such adult models as their parents, or to fairly middle-class type school teachers. Through the vocational awareness program, however, opportunities are provided for the student not only to gauge an awareness of varying vocational areas, but also to experience associations with another adult model. Given a number of such opportunities, Indian students may widen their social expectations and modify their attitudes toward the *community* into which they will become adult citizens.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have set out some impressions of education as it relates to Indian students in Canada. Historically and presently there is a strong parallel between the American and Canadian Indian and the Australian Aboriginal. As a result of this parallel and in terms of the educational developments currently taking place in Indian education, there are undoubtedly implications for the education of Aboriginals. The purpose of this paper has been to provide observations upon which implications for Aboriginal education might be drawn.

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