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Indian Education Revisited: A Personal Experience

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I began my formal schooling in a Bureau of Indian Affairs school in Sitka, Alaska in 1940 as a kindergarten student. I can distinctly remember learning the English alphabet, learning to count to 100, and having to take Cod Liver Oil. I can also remember the last day of school that first year. We had a "field day" -- a day in which each of us, as students in the school, participated in several track events. I tried the broad jump and the high jump and did not do well in either.

It was an enjoyable year of new experiences. My uncle Embert was a teacher in the system. He had graduated from college with a teaching degree, had an Alaska teaching certificate, and was working at half the regular Bureau of Indian Affairs teaching salary because he was a local Tlingit. I remember seeing him in the school and hearing him talk to the other teachers about me and about the quality of my schoolwork. Because of his presence I was very comfortable in the school. Another memory that has remained over the years is that of having to walk home from my school past the Territorial (public) school which the other kids my age attended in Sitka. (Alaska was still a Territory during those days and did not have a State operated system.) I did not know any of the students and wondered what their school and the kids were like, for I only associated with other Tlingits my age.

We moved, and my next school was a Territorial school that was attended by both Native Alaskan and other students in Petersburg, Alaska. It was a new experience because I now had friends who were Tlingit as well as non-Tlingit from the local community. I did okay in school, but I remember that I had trouble with my spelling. My understanding of mathematics and my English classes were about average. There was a young Tlingit girl from my home village who helped me with my language arts writing and dissecting or diagramming sentences. I remember having to work hard on these subjects until I fully understood them. That took a few years – until the third grade. From Petersburg I moved to Craig (a mixed Tlingit, Haida, and non-Native community that depended on the fishing industry for their primary economic activity) where I graduated from the eighth grade. From Craig I moved back to Sitka where I attended a Presbyterian boarding school, Sheldon Jackson High School. This school, serving Native Alaskans, was founded in 1878 and was responsible for educating my grandfather, his brothers, and my uncles. After two years at Sheldon Jackson I attended a private boarding school in Seattle, Washington from which I graduated in 1953.

Upon graduating from high school I decided to attend Seattle Pacific College, a small private Free Methodist college that was known for its teacher education program. It also had a basketball team that I thought I might be able to play for. I graduated with a B.A. in Education with a Social Studies Major and Physical Education Minor. After teaching for five years I decided to work on a masters degree. I moved to Fairbanks, Alaska to attend the University of Alaska, Fairbanks where I worked on, and received my masters degree in Educational Administration in 1968. From there I moved back to

my place of birth as the new Chief Administrator and part time teacher for the Klawock Public School. (Alaska had become a state in 1958 and was now responsible for the public school system.) The school had about 65 Tlingit students and two non-Tlingit students. The next year we added a kindergarten program that served both Klawock and Craig, a small town located about seven miles away from Klawock by water. I had a young nephew attending that year as a beginning kindergarten student and, on his first day of school, he saw me in my office as he walked down the hall to his new teacher and classroom. As he passed my door he stopped, stepped back, waved to me, and said "Hi Billy." As far as he was concerned, the school was his because his uncle ran the school.

After two years of serving as the Chief Administrator (serving as both a superintendent and principal) and as the teacher for the seventh and eighth grades, I decided to begin working on my doctorate. In 1970 I received an application for, and applied to the new Harvard University program for American Indians. I completed my doctorate in 1973 and began working for the U.S. Department of Education as a special assistant to a Deputy Commissioner responsible for elementary and secondary education.

In March of 1970, during my last year as teacher and administrator for the Klawock Public School, I was invited to attend the "First Convocation of American Indian Scholars." Organized by Rupert Costo and Janette Henry, founders of the American Indian Historical Society in San Francisco, California, the Convocation was held at Princeton University. This was my first exposure to other American Indian educators and it was the birthplace for the idea of creating the National Indian Education

Association, an interesting event in itself and worth reviewing to help insure historical accuracy for this part of the story of Indian education. Invitees to the Convocation had to have an advanced degree of at least a masters level or be recognized as a traditional medicine person or hold some other special status in a tribe. Over 200 people met and discussed the issues facing us as Indian educators and issues concerning the education of Indian children. It was an exciting opportunity for most of us attending to meet other Indian educators and discuss ideas and issues that were important to us as individuals and as indigenous peoples of the United States.

During this convocation I had an opportunity to meet a number of individuals who were looking for a way to continue our conversations nationally about ways to improve the education of Native children and continue the discourse that had been started at Princeton. I remember getting acquainted with a number of the participants during that first day of the convocation. I had met several of them through my National Education Association activity and, as we talked and renewed acquaintances, we decided to get together that evening. We were all teachers or administrators working with Indian children and we were all members of one of the many tribes that still exist in the United States. The group included Sparlin Norwood and Hershhal (Ace) Shamant of Oklahoma, Marigold Linton of California, Rosemary Ackley Christensen and Lee Antell of Minnesota, John Winchester of Michigan, Liz Whiteman of Montana, possibly Dillon Platero from the Navajo and one or two others. We talked about how great it was to have the chance to meet together as professionals in the Indian community, to discuss common interests, and talk about the education of Indian students. We felt that it would be important to explore what we might do to become more effective teachers, better school administrators, and to

create a forum to explore practical experiences that might provide a path for improving schools serving Native America.

We met that evening, as we had agreed to do, and discussed what we might do as a group to create a forum for an annual discourse on education. Rosemary indicated that the Minnesota Indian Education Department, headed by Will Antell, had held a national Indian education conference in the fall of 1969, and that the continuation of such a conference would provide a great forum for getting together.

At the meeting that evening we agreed to form a national organization. Sparland Norwood and I suggested a National Indian Education Association. (We were both very involved with the National Education Association at the time and thought that an organization specifically for Indian education would be a great model to follow.) After some discussion the group agreed to form such an organization. We all agreed to participate in the formation of a *National Indian Education Association* (NIEA) and to use the second national Indian education conference planned for Minneapolis, Minnesota in the fall of 1970 as a forum for getting together on an annual basis. Rosemary was primarily responsible for planning the first conference and was already into planning the second.

Rosemary Ackley Christensen was assigned the task of incorporating the group and developing a charter. She recruited the services of Elgi Raymond, Robert Powless and others to help her create the charter and to incorporate in the state of Minnesota. She worked on a proposed Board of Directors, a slate of officers to vote on, and planned the first meeting of the group. She worked closely with the original members of the discussion group from Princeton and with the team that she organized in Minnesota. The members of

that group were all young, full of hope, excited, energetic, and, for some, ten pounds lighter than today.

That organization, *The National Indian Education Association*, was incorporated in the summer of 1970. It has survived the original incorporators, deficit spending, and occasional political turmoil. The original purposes of the organization are as important today as they were then. They include the following: (1) to bring Indian educators together to explore ways to improve schools and the schooling of Native children; (2) to promote the maintenance and continued development of Native languages and cultures; and (3) to develop and implement strategies for influencing local, state, and federal policy and policy makers.

Aside from bringing educators of Native children together for the past 29 years and providing a forum for sharing and developing ideas, one of the most important activities of the NIEA to date was its role in influencing the content and passage of the Indian Education Act of 1972, now called Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1994. That piece of legislation, originally responding to a national report called *Indian Education: A National Tragedy, A National Challenge*, provided the American Indian and Alaska Native community an exciting opportunity to develop models for improving the quality of schools Indian children attended, and ways to improve academic performance. It helped raise the success rates of Native high school students and college graduates. It also included a program designed to strengthen literacy and job related skills among Indian adults.

Will Antell became the first President of the National Indian Education Association and was instrumental in promoting an NIEA role in the development of the legislation. When Senators Walter Mondale and Edward Kennedy began developing proposed Indian

education legislation as a response to *Indian Education: A National Tragedy, A National Challenge*, they realized they needed some political support from the Indian community in order to prepare the way with Indian tribes. They asked Will Antell, a personal friend of Walter Mondale's, to serve as a full time consultant for the development of the legislation and to work directly with members of their staff. Will agreed to do that part time, but only if they would hire Bill Demmert. I was a student at Harvard University at the time, working on my doctorate, and figured I did not have time to work for the Senators as an advisor on the legislation. As things happen, I was eventually persuaded to do it, and I made arrangements with my professors and advisor to spend the next quarter working on the legislation. The Senators indicated that the legislation might not include everything I wanted, but it would not include anything I opposed. I imagine they promised Will Antell the same. The legislation became law, and I became the first U.S. Deputy Commissioner of Education under the new legislation referred to as the Indian Education Act of 1972, Title IV of Public Law 92-318.

The legislation was opposed by the Nixon administration and it took the efforts of Jerry Buckanaga (working through the legal system as part of a Chippewa Indian Tribe law suit against the President of the United States) to force the administration to release the monies and appoint the National Advisory Council for Indian Education (NACIE) created by the new legislation. The monies were released, the Council appointed, and the monies awarded to public schools and Indian tribes. The legislation is up for reauthorization in 2000.

It is time to stop for a moment and remember Jim Wilson, Ph.D., once the director of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). As the Director of OEO he had a lot of

discretion in funding programs for American Indians and Alaska Natives and decided to contact a number of major universities to offer them an opportunity to create educational programs that offered a masters degree in educational administration. Harvard University, Pennsylvania State University, the University of Minnesota, and Arizona State University all agreed to create such programs. These programs educated the leaders who emerged with the implementation of the new Indian Education Act of 1972.

The Indian Education Act of 1972 (Public Law 92-318) created an excitement among Indian Educators that resulted in major changes in perspective and actual practice. The new legislation provided an opportunity for Indian educators to find positions in teaching and to work on programs for Indian children. It changed the role of parents in public schools from one of passive acceptance of programs to one of active engagement in developing, monitoring, and evaluating programs. It gave Indian educators a chance to try their individual theories about how to best teach Native children and to create a body of knowledge that now provides a blueprint to follow. It offered an opportunity to support travel and stimulated the creation or change in other legislation and organizations interested in Indian education (e.g., National Indian School Board Association, Johnson O'Malley Parent Committees, Indian College legislation, and the revision of BIA education.) It set the stage for recognizing the importance of Native languages and cultures in the educational process.

The October 1991 U.S. Department of Education report, *Indian Nations At Risk: An Educational Strategy for Action*, provided a unique setting for me, as the co-chairman of the task force and as the principle writer, to assess nearly 20 years of Title IV (now Title IX) activity and progress in the education of Native American children. It gave me time to

reflect on my own education and the different schools I attended as a Native Alaskan. (Although I am also part Oglalla from my mother's side, I was born and raised in Alaska and am psychologically a Tlingit.)

The Bureau of Indian Affairs schools of my father's and mother's era were designed to remove youth from their local communities and teach them a new language and way of life by forcing them to speak only English and to live in a boarding school environment where they learned new skills and a new culture. They were to be Christianized and provided the skills that would allow them to assimilate into the larger emerging "American way of life and culture." My father was a fluent Tlingit speaker, and he continued to use and develop that language into adulthood as a medium of exchange with his brothers and parents and with other members and elders of the community. His generation used their first language, Tlingit, as a base for learning English, their second language. The continued use and development of their first language allowed them to learn a comparable standard in their second language (which they also continued to use and develop outside their Tlingit community). As members of the greater Tlingit community, and as a family, my grandparents and parents decided to concentrate on the development of English for my generation. Because both my grandfather and parents continued to develop their Native language, and because they developed a high level of standard and professional English, they were able to create an environment that allowed me to develop my English skills as a first language and to support the continued development of that language through my formal years of schooling. This was a tremendous advantage for me over my peers who did not maintain and continue the development of their Native language or develop a new first language such as English. I say this for I now recognize language

development as one of the most important, if not the most critical intelligences or skills required for successful academic learning in a formal setting.

When I became a teacher in 1960, many of the schools serving American Indians and Alaska Natives were failing the Native communities and the students they were struggling to teach. The students were of a different world, a world where Native values, language, and culture were not a part of everyday life, and of a world where the larger society did not value those things that were indigenous. (They had forgotten by then the tremendous contributions of Native America to the world's food chain, political ideals, and economic systems.) The Native students attending the schools at this time were not given the courtesies all people require--the courtesy of learning about their own people and about the Indian's contributions to society and the larger world. In addition, the cultural, social, political, and economic changes that were taking place were rapid and traumatic. The Native Americans had lost most of their lands, most of their resources, and were caught up in the rapidity of change. The schools were not prepared to teach students growing and maturing in this rapidly evolving environment.

The generation of my children, and the generation of their children, should do much better as our own communities and families stabilize and adjust to the social, cultural, political, and economic changes that occurred between my grandfather's time and mine. That is, they will do better if we prepare them to do better. How do we do that? I have some thoughts.

First, as parents we must assume the first and most important responsibility of creating an environment that stimulates the development of a youngster's many intelligences. That environment must be safe, stable, loving, and interactive. We must

talk to our children, provide for a variety of kinesthetic activities, give them opportunities to explore and interact with their peers, and give them many opportunities to succeed. In some tribal cultures these were responsibilities of the clan, of uncles, aunts, grandparents, and other members of the community who had special skills. Carrying out these responsibilities gave them a primary role in the educational process and provided a sense of ownership and a meaningful role of service to the family, clan, tribe, and greater community--a role that has been lost over the last few generations.

If the continuation of one's identity as an American Indian, Native Alaskan, or Native Hawaiian is important, continued support and use of Native languages and cultural priorities must be practiced and understood in the context of the modern world. The schools, the communities we live in, and the family must provide long-term support and opportunities to apply what is learned. It may also be necessary for some of that learning to take place in a tribal cultural and linguistic context.

The focus on youngsters' many intelligences must take into account that each of us have preferences (often referred to as natural talents) and these preferences are an excellent place to start. We must also remember that it is necessary to build on our other skills and intelligences that are an integrated part of success in the modern world, and which also provide a sense of balance and harmony in our own lives as individuals.

One of the most important skills or intelligences we all have, to some degree, is language. From my perspective it is among the most important to develop for it is a base that supports the development of other intelligences that we possess. We know that language development starts at birth. We also know that our level of competence is significantly influenced by the time we are three years of age; and that our ability to hear,

or accurately reproduce sounds that we have not heard, begins to disappear after the first 12 months of life. This information is significant for those of us interested in Native language development.

In retrospect, there are several events that have influenced my personal views about the progress and development of “Indian Education,” and my own professional development. These events include the following:

1. My personal discovery of the Meriam Report of 1928 and a recognition that there were many great ideas about what schools serving Native students must include if we are to become more successful students and teachers.
2. The 1969 U.S. Senate Report, *Indian Education: A National Tragedy, A National Challenge*, which provided a comprehensive view of the status of Indian education.
3. My work with the U.S. Senate on the Indian Education Act of 1972, Title IV of Public Law 92-318 (a response to the 1969 Senate report) and serving as the first U.S. Deputy Commissioner of Education created under that legislation
4. The creation of the National Indian Education Association as a forum for creating an organization that focused on improving the quality of schools and schooling for Native American children.
5. Co-chairing and serving as the primary writer for the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force, and the report *Indian Nations At Risk: An Educational Strategy for Action*, U.S. Department of Education, October 1991.
6. Obtaining my doctorate from Harvard University in 1973, and the subsequent opportunities that resulted from that experience.

7. Participation in the development of President Clinton's Executive Order of August 6, 1998.

These events, and the resulting growth of knowledge obtained over the life of these activities, tell me that we have come a long way and that the future is bright. The kinds of school that I attended--Bureau of Indian Affairs, Private Church Schools, and Public Schools--are still attended by Indian children. One new kind of school has been created--the tribal school funded through the Bureau of Indian Affairs as a grant or contract school. My early schooling did not provide for the development of my tribal language, nor did the school provide a curriculum that supported the historical role of the Tlingit or other Native Alaskans in the history of Alaska or the United States. There was little support for strengthening the cultural mores of the Tlingit people. Surprisingly I survived all of this and found a profession that allowed me to serve my immediate as well as larger Native American community.

There have been significant changes in the purposes of schools serving Native children, and in the curriculum of a select number of those schools. The Native language, the traditional mores and cultural priorities, the importance of tribal identity and lineage have all become higher priorities as we build a contemporary culture and context of the school that supports our Native identities. Not all schools, not all parents, and not all tribal members support these changes, but the support is growing. One of the reasons for this growth is recognition that academics cannot be pursued in isolation of the social, economic and cultural factors that make us who we are. There is growing recognition that our identity as Indian, an understanding of our past, our role in the modern world, our

contributions to society, and service to our communities all affect our academic pursuits as students.

What do I see down the road for the next generation to address, and what do I see down the road as the future? The role of schools in promoting and stabilizing the Native students language and cultural base will continue to be debated and discussed, but with growing support for those things that continue to be important to the Native communities served. I see a closing of all Bureau of Indian Affairs schools and a continued growth of tribal grant and public schools in Native communities. I see public schools recognizing that they must change in order to meet the needs of a diverse and emerging pluralistic student body where the needs of the many are met – not just the needs of a few. I see a more accurate presentation of the “making of America,” where the contributions of the many are recognized and not ignored. I see pre-school programs and schools pay increased attention to a youngsters many intelligences, supporting those that each student has a preference for and promoting opportunities to expand those that need continued development. I see the development of a person’s skills and intellect as a critical priority that all parents will focus on.

I also anticipate the training and selection of teachers who know and understand pedagogy, teachers who know and understand cognitive development and the stages children encounter in that development, teachers who understand the principles and nuances of working with diverse communities, teachers who know and understand technology and the data base available on the internet (to be used as a resource as well as teaching and learning tools), and teachers who are well educated, know their subject

matter and have other knowledge and understandings required in the modern technological world we live in.

Finally, I see a system of support for the education of American Indians, Alaskan Natives, and Hawaiian Natives that is consolidated, secure, and well funded as part of a fiduciary responsibility - that includes education- and that has been assumed and carried out by the U.S. Federal Government for Native America

Historically, starting with the recommendations of the Meriam Report and concluding with President Clinton's Executive Order of August 6, 1998, we have developed an understanding of what it takes to successfully prepare Native students for their new roles as tribal members, as citizens of the United States, and members of the broader world. The new millennium will allow us the opportunity to build on the knowledge we have gained and we will continue to learn as we mature in our role as the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

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