

Purpose of Educating Native Children Fails

"What does education mean?" asked an Eskimo woman from the village of Nunapitchuk on the Kuskokwim. Margaret Nick framed the dilemma for Senator Edward Kennedy and his subcommittee hearings on Native education in Fairbanks in March of 1969.

"I can't predict how my children should be educated," she said. Just as her grandparents didn't know what faced their children.

"But one thing I know is, if my children are proud, if my children have identity, if my children know who they are, they'll be able to encounter anything in life. I think this is what education means."

If the purpose of education is to fit Eskimos or Indians into the mainstream of American life, it has failed. This is a conclusion reached by John Collier, one of the researchers who examined Indian and Eskimo education in Alaska as part of a National Study of Indian Education.

In essence, this is the conclusion of the entire study, conducted in 39 schools across the

United States. Indian children show normal or above normal intelligence, yet perform consistently below average in American society.

The fact that studies of this

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type are still being conducted signals a widespread feeling that Indian education has failed.

The Havighurst Report, a summary of the conclusions and recommendations reached by the National Study on Indian Education, was published last month with several recommendations which have appeared and reappeared in prior reports. The study was funded by the U.S. Office of Education after being proposed by the 1967 Research Conference on Indian Education.

Part of the gap in achievement between Indian and white children can be explained by the lower socio-economic groups Indians tend to fall into—they are some of the country's most needy citizens.

The incalculable factor is the "barrier"—the problem of straddling two widely different cultures which Indian children must overcome to succeed in the white world.

Bicultural education, bilingual education, programs in Indian heritage, are all suggestions which have been thought of before and implemented in several places.

In Alaska, bilingual education started last year in the Bethel area. High schools and colleges offer Native culture courses, language courses and other recent innovations in educational programs.

"A successful education need not be incompatible with the retention of Indian identity, pride and self-respect," says the report written by Robert J. Havighurst of the University of Chicago. Professor Havighurst directed the study of Indian education which involved six universities and dozens of researchers.

The study recommends a greater emphasis on career development, both college prep and vocational training. A serious effort, it says, should be made to recruit teachers, Indian and non-Indians who can work effectively in Indian schools and communities.

Young successful teachers should be encouraged to stay, with salaries competitive with other types of teaching. Teachers should receive special training in how to work within the Indian culture—how to relate with students and their parents. College-trained Indian teachers should be recruited to work in BIA schools.

A further recommendation calls for special programs for urban Indians, financed by Johnson O'Malley appropriations.

How do these recommendations apply to Alaska?

"The answers are probably the same for Alaskan education," says Ray Barnhardt of the University of Alaska, "but for different reasons. Acculturation in Alaska is probably about 20 years behind the lower 48—in the amount of English spoken, moving into the cities, etc. It gives the state an opportunity for new programs which can avoid many of the mistakes made in the lower 48 during the past two decades."

Professor Barnhardt coordinates the innovative Alaskan Teacher Corps program—first attempt to train Alaskan Native teachers in the bush. Last year, he served as part of the research team which examined schools and communities in Bethel and Angoon as part of the National Study on Indian education.

A film study of Eskimo education, conducted by John Collier, turned up some interesting observations on what goes on in classrooms—observations open to the criticism of any person who views the filmed record. Collier is the son of former Commissioner of Indian Affairs

under President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Eskimo students, Collier finds, are most comfortable in the Eskimo environment—in a Kwethluk (small village in the Kuskokwim) rather than in a large city like Anchorage. He compared classes in villages and in Anchorage. He found the most enthusiastic classes in the small villages and in Bethel.

Native teachers, with minimum training, teach Head Start in the small villages—with great success. Traditional kindergartens may tend to smother the Eskimo child, despite high teacher qualifications. Eskimo children tend to react badly to experiences in the predominantly white Anchorage classrooms.

Schools in the Arctic, Collier finds, educate the Native to leave Alaska—to reach goals only available in the lower 48. At the same time, enterprising whites are finding unlimited opportunities in the Arctic bush. Shouldn't the Natives of these areas find the same opportunities?

Their schools teach a white curriculum, through white teachers, with little emphasis on the world of the Arctic—the world the child must understand and learn from. They ignore the world around them to concentrate on a "wider culture" most of the children may never see.

Collier's recommendations parallel those of the National report, for different reasons. He goes even further. He recommends more Native teachers, a phasing out of white teachers to replace them with creative Natives. Community people, he feels, should be brought into the schools. Elders should teach the traditions and crafts of the Arctic, rather than be shut out of the schools.

A school, he finds, should be part of the community—not off on a hill immersed in a BIA or other complex. It should teach the skills of the Arctic, the hunting, trapping and fishing as well as the 3 R's.

Schools in the Arctic, as on Indian reservations, teach the Indian and Eskimo nothing of himself—his people, life, history, environment. They turn the children into adults who are vaguely ashamed of their own tradition, yet held apart from the white culture by these same traditions.

What can succeed? Students at St. Mary's school, a Roman Catholic boarding school, win trophies in Eskimo dances. Collier presents them as some of the most self-assured young Eskimos in the Arctic—educated young people with a strong foothold in their Native traditions.

The Havighurst report will be attacked. It glosses over many psychological factors, says one researcher. A chapter on "mental stability" emphasizes that Indian suicide rates are only slightly above white rates.

"He buries the fact that the highest suicide rate is for young men, 15 to 45," explains educational psychologist Dr. Judith Kleinfeld. "The suicide rate for young Indian men is 3 to 6 times as high as for whites. These are the most productive age groups."

The study's conclusion that the vast majority of Indian young people are basically well adjusted—at home with both the Indian and white way of life may gloss over factors of personality disturbance.

Possibly, the Havighurst summary leans too hard on the factors of socio-economic group, less heavily on the implications of Indian culture on a "white" education.

Yet, its recommendations for

greater community development, more attention to urban Indians and more emphasis on Indian language and tradition may enforce changes already proposed for the curriculums which will be presented to Indian and Eskimo children in the future.