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Navajo Education and the Future

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Editor's Note: In his 1967 book, *Indian Communities in Action*, Dr. Bob Roessel spoke of the afflicted history and current state of Indian education and of the new and promising experiment in Navajo education at Rough Rock Demonstration School. Now, after the passage of more than 30 years, it is enlightening to compare these earlier thoughts and observations with a current perspective on Navajo education presented by Dr. Roessel in the essay below.

Education as the Indian knows it on the reservation can best be characterized as the 'either-or' type. One is either an Indian or a white man, and, the way we weigh things, the good is always the non-Indian way and the bad is always the Indian. We teach Indian children nothing about their past and nothing about themselves. We tell them their hogans are dirty, and that they are superstitious and primitive. We try to impose our values and to teach them they should eat green, leafy vegetables and sleep on a bed and brush their teeth.

The Indian child listens and looks at himself and sees that he doesn't measure up. In his own eyes he is a failure. We have educated him but have destroyed his soul in the process. Education can be a shattering experience when one is taught nothing but negative things about himself for 12 years.

It is a tragedy of Indian education, and of our education as well, that neither Indian nor white children learn about the Indian contribution to America's growth. In the 1800 pages of the standard U.S. history text used at Arizona State University, only six have the word "Indian" on them and four of these deal with wars. That is the picture we give college students.

It has been a deliberate policy in Indian education to try to make white men out of Indians. But of late Indians have begun to question this policy and to ask whether it is necessary for them to lose their heritage in order for them to become citizens of the United States. And so the "both-and" approach to Indian education was born.

Rough Rock is the first school to have the tools and resources to test this new approach to see whether it can be effective. We want to instill in our youngsters a sense of pride in being Indian. We want to show them that they can be Indian and American at the

same time, that they can take the best from each way of life and combine it into something viable.(Roessel, 1967, p. 205-206)

I have been directly involved in Indian education since 1951. At that time, I entered the Bureau of Indian Affairs as a teacher at the Crownpoint Boarding School. Since that time, I have been involved with Indian education and more particularly with Navajo education. We started the first contract/grant school in the United States with the Rough Rock Demonstration School. We also started the first college located on the Indian reservation controlled by an Indian tribe.

In those early years, we fought for Indian control over Indian education and for the inclusion of Indian studies into the regular school curriculum. The Navajos were unified in their desire to obtain these two goals: Indian control and Indian studies.

During this early period beginning in the 1950's, there were major policies developed in Washington that had a profound effect on Indian education. First, there was Termination which adversely effected tribes that had more education and were considered ready for termination of special services given Indian tribes by the federal government. This policy did not directly have a major impact on the Navajo reservation, except for the relocation program which was an example of a project developed during this period.

The second major policy occurred in the 1960's with the so called War on Poverty. As I look back over nearly 50 years of being involved in Indian education, nothing has had so positive an impact on Indian people as the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO.) The OEO was established to conduct this "War on Poverty." Unfortunately, it never amounted to a war; it hardly amounted to a skirmish. It ended

before it almost began. Nevertheless, no federal program that I am aware of had a more positive impact on Indian people than did OEO. The reason for this lay in the fact that it provided direct access for Indian tribes to the federal government without having to go through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA.) OEO broke the shackles that bound Indian people for over a hundred years. OEO provided direct funding between Indian tribes and that organization. Today, there are literally dozen of federal programs that Indian tribes can access directly without having to go through the BIA.

Unfortunately, many Indian people today don't recognize the positive contributions the War on Poverty had on their lives. It was during this time that Indian control over Indian education became a reality, as Indian people throughout the United States demanded such control. In addition, Indian schools throughout the United States added to their curriculum elements of Indian culture, history, and language. Those were bright days for Indian education.

Today, the situation is far less positive. We continue to experience attacks on Indian sovereignty and their right to govern themselves. These attacks are largely by non-Indians and represent a real threat to Indian people. But the biggest concern I have about Indian education is the lack of unity among Indian educators, Indian people, in terms of what constitutes a good education. There are Navajos who strongly support bilingual / bicultural education and at the same time there are those who do not. This means that there are battles today involving Navajos against Navajos and this is never good. Certainly, in the United States there is room and need for disagreement, but there are certain things that are fundamental and demand and require support. In my estimation, the importance and significance of Indian students knowing who they are

and being proud of who they are is fundamental. This then involves bilingual and bicultural education.

As I look ahead, I see the Navajo Nation developing a functional Department of Education that will have all of the responsibilities of the State Department without financial considerations. It is important that the Navajo Nation does not fall victim to the ploy that would say: "Yes, you can control your own education but you must pay for it." In the State Constitutions or Enabling Acts for the states of Arizona, New Mexico and Utah, there is provision that a free public education shall be provided to every child between certain ages. In addition, the federal government has a similar responsibility as spelled out in the Treaty of 1868. As a result, it would be totally wrong for the Navajo Nation to accept responsibility for paying for the education of the Navajo students.

This does not mean, however, that the Navajo Nation should not pay a portion of the education for those subjects that they consider essential. In my opinion, subjects related to Navajo history, language, and culture should be supported in part by Tribal funding. "You put your money where your mouth is." I strongly believe the Navajo Nation must accept a far greater responsibility in funding and encouraging these kinds of programs than they do at present.

It is important that Navajos and Indian tribes in general determine what are the essential elements of their cultures and ways of life that they do not want to lose; what are those elements that they would like to retain but which are not essential; and finally, what are those elements that they don't care if they lose. Only when these decisions are made can Navajos and other tribes develop appropriate programs to help Navajo and Indian students know who they are and be proud of who they are.

I see in the future on the Navajo reservation a single system of schools which will replace the three overlapping and competing systems that currently exist. These currently are public, BIA, and contract/grant schools.

I also feel that the future may well allow the Navajo Nation to become the 51st state. This is an idea that has been floating around the reservation for many years, but no one has ever taken it seriously. In my estimation, as state governments increasingly object to funding reservation programs, the day may well come when states would be willing to allow the Navajo reservation to become a separate state. As we know, this would be possible only with the permission of those affected states. There are serious problems to be confronted in converting a federal trust reservation into a state. These problems include issues of property rights, taxation, and voting across jurisdiction. I do not believe these problems are insurmountable.

I have seen major changes in Navajo and Indian education. Today, far more students are educated but there are many problems that still exist. Among these problems are: 1) a lack of adequate funds; 2) the lack of dedicated and able teachers; 3) disagreements among Indian people themselves as to what they want the students to learn and to know; 4) Tribal control interfering with local control.

The last item, tribal control interfering with local control, is a major and growing problem on the Navajo reservation. As the Nation assumes more control over education for the reservation, there is to be expected a normal level of disagreement between local and tribal authorities. It is important to remember that the governance of schools has always been a local function. Surely, the Tribe/State has certain responsibilities in setting standards, certification, graduation requirements, etc. But the basic fact remains

that "education" is a local function and we at Rough Rock will always fight to protect the right of our School Board to make those decisions which properly belong to the local level.

Finally, I see a renaissance in Indian Affairs in terms of a revitalization of Indian cultures and languages. I see Indian Nations throughout the United States becoming stronger, more able, and more vocal. I see Indian education becoming a weapon for preserving and strengthening Indian identity. My expectations and hopes are based on the premises that every Indian person wants to remain identifiable as an Indian. Education is the only means to be able to accomplish this important task. We must work together to provide support for Indian education! We must help each other because "Ask not for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for thee."

Dr. Robert Roessel, educator and advocate for Navajo and American Indian education is the founder of Rough Rock Demonstration School and Navajo Community College. He served each of these institutions in the capacity of Executive Director and President/Chancellor for many years. Through the Center for Indian Education at Arizona State University, which he established directed, Dr. Roessel initiated publication of the *Journal of American Indian Education*. He has held administrative positions with school districts and with the Education Department on the Navajo Nation and has served on numerous federal commissions, task forces, and panels on Indian affairs. He currently serves as the Executive Director of Rough Rock Community School.

References

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