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REFLECTING ON THE PAST: SOME IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF INDIAN EDUCATION TO CONSIDER AS WE LOOK TOWARD THE FUTURE

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Recently I was at an Indian education research conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico where an Indian educator made the point that the problems in Indian education have been around a long time and we seem to do nothing to solve them. He held up a worn copy of the Meriam Report to dramatize his point that we are still talking about problems that were identified in 1928. There is a degree of truth to his claim, but it is also true that things have changed and some progress is being made in contemporary Indian education.

What I intend to do in this essay is reflect on the past, using my own life experience in the education of American Indians and Alaska Natives as a guide for my comments. I focus on a few areas in Indian education that I think are significant and conclude with some thoughts about challenges for the future.

While my life does not go back to 1928 when the Meriam Report was issued, I was born at a time when the recommendations of the Meriam Report were being implemented in schools. I often revisit the Meriam Report to get a sense of where we have been in Indian education and to reflect on where we might be going. One of my

favorite quotes on the education of American Indian students is from this early study: “The most fundamental need in Indian education is a change in the point of view” (p. 346). When it comes to the education of American Indians and Alaska Natives, it seems we *still* need not only an attitudinal change on the part of the general public, but also more efficient and creative approaches by educators. The Meriam Report’s discussion about the need for additional money to support “a better educational program” in Indian education also seems as salient today as it was back in 1928:

The real choice before the government is between doing a mediocre job thereby piling up for the future serious problems of poverty, disease, and crime, and spending more money for an acceptable social and educational program that will make the Indian cease to be a special case in a comparatively short time. (pp. 347-348)

The report goes on to say “cheapness in education is expensive” (p. 348). I have long been an advocate for increased funding for Indian education, especially during my tenure as an Indian education administrator in Washington, D.C. Money *does* make a difference in education. It has been difficult to obtain additional funds through politicians in Congress that do not value Indian education or want to limit federal involvement in public education. I was quick to see that the budget appropriators actually control practice in Indian education by funding programs according to their agendas and not necessarily according to what legislation authorizes. Funding for tribal departments of education is a perfect example of these unfunded mandates. Early childhood education, tribal colleges, basic support for BIA education, facilities repair and new school construction are all examples of under-funded efforts. Adequate funding has long been and continues to be an issue at all levels of Indian education.

I was born into schooling and education. My father, John, a member of the Comanche Tribe, was an elementary school teacher and principal. His first language was Comanche. My mother, Juanita, a member of the Cherokee Tribe of Oklahoma, was a school cook. Both had attended boarding schools, worked at boarding and day schools, and eventually retired while at Cañoncito Day School (now To`Hajiilee-He) near Albuquerque, New Mexico. They were educators all their lives, which means I was introduced to education early in life – I often felt more like a teacher's aide than a student in my dad's schools. Education was so important to my parents that when I graduated from high school the choice was not whether I would go to college, but where I would go. I followed my brothers to Oklahoma State University where I earned a degree in secondary education with emphasis in math and social studies.

My first official job in education was teaching eighth grade math in the Albuquerque Public Schools. I did not have a single American Indian student in any of my classes. My main challenge was discipline in the classroom, not teaching the "new math"—understood by only a few of the students. After a couple of years I accepted a job teaching fourth grade and later junior high social studies at Tuba City Boarding School on the Navajo Reservation. What a difference! The Navajo students were so respectful of me as both an adult and teacher. I did not have any discipline problems. As I think back, I attribute the respect to the students living the Navajo culture and speaking the language. It was such a pleasure to teach them that I thought teaching was all I ever wanted to do.

Then one day in the spring of 1970 I received a telegram from Pennsylvania State University asking if I were interested in participating in a new American Indian

Leadership Program—a graduate program in educational administration. I accepted and eventually received a master's degree and a Ph.D. in educational administration. My life changed—graduate degrees opened up opportunities I had not thought possible. I soon became the Assistant to the President and then the Vice President at Navajo Community College (now Diné College). In 1976, I became the Director of the Center for Indian Education at Arizona State University. My experiences at Pennsylvania State University, Navajo Community College, ASU, and as President of the National Indian Education Association broadened my knowledge about Indian education. I found myself becoming more and more involved in local, state, and national issues, which included such areas as Indian parent involvement, tribal and community control of education, adequate funding, relevant curriculum, teacher preparation, and the use of language and culture.

I also learned the ways of a faculty member at a major higher education institution and the challenges of administering an Indian education program on campus. The Center for Indian Education at ASU continues to have great potential in making a difference in Indian education. Conducting and disseminating research through the *Journal of American Indian Education* is a definite strength at ASU.

Pennsylvania State University and later the W.K. Kellogg Foundation exposed me to the importance of leadership in our society, including Indian education. In 1978, I joined Gerald Gipp for two years as Deputy Director in the Office of Indian Education under President Carter. After returning to ASU, I witnessed the lack of permanent leadership at the national level in both the Office of Indian Education (OIE), U.S. Department of Education and in the Office of Indian Education Programs (OIEP), Bureau of Indian

Affairs under President Reagan. In 1990 I applied for and was selected to become the Director of OIE. Two years later I became the Director of OIEP (BIA Education) and remained there for three years. I am now a Professor of Education and Director of the American Indian Leadership Program at Pennsylvania State University.

During my 30 plus years in education, involvement has often been complex, given the roles and responsibilities of Indian education at the local, state, federal, and tribal levels. The complexity of Indian education is further compounded by the often misunderstood legal concepts of treaty rights, sovereignty, and government-to-government relationships that exist among Indian tribes and the federal government. Given all this, I chose to discuss four areas of Indian education that I think are important: (a) tribal control of education, (b) focus and priority, (c) language and culture, and (d) research.

Four Areas Critical to American Indian Education

Tribal Control of Education

The first point concerns contemporary Tribal/Indian control of education. The Meriam Report not only called for a new attitude and approach to Indian education, but also recommended that boarding schools be replaced with day schools located in Indian communities. Day schools would mean that students could be at home in the evenings and that their parents were more apt to be more involved in their education. Cañoncito Day School was such a place. Although it was clear that the BIA was in control, my parents functioned as community leaders with the school being the hub of the community. Cañoncito Day School was, I later learned, a community, integrated or full service school. (I now teach a graduate course in integrated schooling at Pennsylvania

State.) The mail was delivered to Cañoncito Day school; the only community phone was located there; and people came to the school for health assistance or for a ride to town—it seemed community members were constantly in and out of the school. As I reflect back, I think these schools were the beginning of parent and community involvement that would lead toward not only more parental involvement but also more tribal and community control of education.

Thus, I think that the tribal control movement is the most significant event to occur in Indian education over the past 30-40 years. A system of education controlled by tribes continues to be developed at every level of schooling—from early childhood to graduate school. The tribal colleges are the most successful story of tribal control. Starting with Navajo Community College in 1968, the movement now includes 33 colleges and universities that belong to the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC). They are institutions that are truly meeting local tribal needs. They have also earned national distinction by achieving land grant status, serving as subject of an Executive Order supporting them, and being granted considerable funding under the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Higher Education Initiative. One just has to read an issue of *Tribal College: Journal of American Indian Higher Education* to realize the differences the colleges and universities are making in the lives of tribal people. In addition to tribal control, their success can be attributed to strong individual leadership and their ability to unify and work together cohesively through AIHEC. An important lesson to be learned for us in Indian education is that the force of unity is critical to the growth and improvement in Indian education. Mainstream institutions also have a lot to learn from

tribal colleges and universities as they struggle with student recruitment, retention, methods of training Indian students to be effective teachers.

Tribal control at the K-12 level has been more difficult to achieve. Most of the current tribal schools were formerly BIA schools where tribes used federal legislation to first contract and later apply for grant operation of schools. Working with the BIA bureaucracy was cumbersome, the process was difficult, and resources were limited. The result has been a slow movement toward tribal control of elementary and secondary schools. In 1966, Rough Rock Demonstration School on the Navajo Reservation became the first tribally controlled school in Indian country. During my last year (1994-95 school year) as Director of BIA Education (OIEP), the threshold was crossed when there were more tribally controlled schools (93) than BIA-operated Schools (92). Today there are 119 tribally controlled schools supported by the BIA. Tribal gaming has helped by providing additional resources to support schools, to build and repair facilities, and to create new schools and programs that do not totally depend on the federal government for support. The Indian Community School in Milwaukee is an example of an ideal tribally controlled school that does not accept state or federal funds, creating flexibility to determine its own approach to education.

During the past four decades we have seen numerous studies, like the Kennedy Report, where recommendations centered on more parental involvement and tribal control as a way to improve the quality of Indian Education and to address the failure of public and BIA education. Tribal control means positive use of tribal languages and cultures in schools; relevant curriculum; increased parental involvement; and a larger number of Indian teachers, administrators, and counselors. Inherent in the assumption

of tribal control is that Indian students will be more successful in tribal schools than in public or BIA schools. I think we are at a point to test that assumption. There is some evidence, mostly anecdotal, that students are doing well. The key is to determine *how* success is to be measured in tribal schools. It is imperative that tribes and tribal schools determine success *on their terms* based on *their own purpose* of education. No single academic achievement test score can be used to judge student success in such schools.

Of course tribal control in public schools is the most difficult to achieve because education in these schools is controlled by states. Johnson-O'Malley, Title IX, Impact Aid, school desegregation efforts, and charter schools have helped to increase parental and tribal involvement. Most help comes from tribes like the Rosebud Sioux that have active tribal departments of education with educational codes that can influence public education on their reservations or communities.

Focus and Priority

It seems that the education of American Indians and Alaska Natives is not a priority with anyone except Indian educators. There has been a lot of interest and talk about how important Indian Education is, especially today, but in reality it has received little attention at all levels—including local, state, national, and even tribal levels. My experience is that the education of American Indians and Alaska Natives is low in priority and we have to fight to create and maintain a strong presence in schools, organizations, and governments. A partial explanation at state and national levels is that Indian students are few in number compared to the general population. This is also true

in schools where Indian students are in the minority. Fewer numbers, in a political arena like education, mean less attention with limited program and fiscal action.

Another factor has to do with the long-standing confusion as to who is responsible to educate Indians. It is clear that Indian students and their parents are state citizens, entitled to a public education in the states where they reside. It is also clear that tribes have a legal relationship with the federal government that is based on treaties, legislation, and court decisions. The result is, at times, unclear responsibility, especially when the federal government has a national BIA school system and provides funds to states through sources like Johnson O'Malley, Title IX, Impact aid and other programs.

Importance and priority status is also related to the prevailing approach to education and the political orientation of the country. BIA, public schools, and private schools have and continue to use education to assimilate Indian students into the mainstream society in our country. When the intent of the school is to integrate and assimilate, it is difficult to achieve priority status for meaningful educational approaches that build on tribal languages and cultures. Bilingual and bicultural approaches are still lacking in classrooms for Native students, especially in public schools. Most often, tribal schools are providing this kind of education.

It has also been difficult to get tribes to make education a priority with their people. Most often, education competes with tribal priorities that are real and linked to self-determination and self-sufficiency. Economic development, natural resources, and water rights are issues that demand a lot of time and resources—as they should. Also, at times it is difficult for us to see the relationship between education and other tribal priorities. We educators think education is the key and should be at the center of things.

Certainly, education is related to economic development and other tribal issues, but we are accustomed to think in linear terms and not across programs—this is a function of how budgets and programs are developed and implemented by government agencies.

Language and Culture

During the past 30 years educators and others have struggled with how to best deal with tribal languages and cultures in schools. Fortunately, we have moved away from a blatant deficit-assimilation approach of destroying languages and cultures in education toward a position of language tolerance and possible acceptance and positive use of languages under the policy of tribal self-determination. Commissioned studies like the 1969 Kennedy Report and the 1991 Indian Nations At Risk Report recommended that we use and promote tribal languages and cultures in schools. Legislation like the Indian Education Act of 1972 (Title IX today) mandates that schools develop programs to meet the culturally related academic needs of Indian students. The Native American Languages Act was passed in 1990, primarily as a policy statement to promote native languages.

Yet, the struggle remains. Tribes are concerned about the loss of their languages. With such loss comes less participation in traditional tribal cultures. There has been limited success with national bilingual education programs because of the emphasis on learning English. Likewise, public education has not endorsed tribal languages, especially in situations where Indian students are few in numbers or in urban situations where students represent many different tribes. Most often, tribes want to maintain or revitalize a language—in other words, teach the language to tribal members who are primarily English speakers. The most successful tribal language efforts are found in

tribal schools, tribal colleges, and universities or with tribes who operate language programs.

Tribal culture is also a concern. We know that tribal culture does influence how students learn, especially for those students who know the tribal language and live the culture. Deyhle and Swisher (1997) reported that “research based on cultural strengths and culture integrity has yielded significant sustainable results for some schools and communities” (p. 182). However, I do not think we have learned how to put this research into practice, or have determined the best ways to prepare teachers or to teach students. Again, the best examples are with tribal schools, tribal colleges and universities, and tribal programs – since their educational philosophies and approaches are based on the beliefs and ways of their people. Public education is trying, primarily through Johnson O’Malley and Title IX program assistance, but success has been extremely limited because of the lack resources, lack of qualified personnel, supplemental efforts, and situations where Indian students are either minority in number or represent different tribes. State certification requirements, state educational standards, and assessment and accountability systems most often do not take into consideration tribal cultures.

In spite of the difficulties, there has been some progress. More curricula based on tribal languages and cultures have been developed than ever before. This has been an unheralded effort because much of it has been developed and used locally at school and tribal levels, consequently not shared with wider audiences. Also, the National Science Foundation is supporting systemic reform efforts in science, math and technology that are integrating tribal languages and cultures in the curriculum. The

Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools (1998) is an example of how language and culture is influencing school reform.

Research

Research has been a most interesting area over the past 30 years. I began to take research seriously as a graduate student at Pennsylvania State University. The American Indian Leadership Program introduced me to many studies in Indian education, among them the Meriam Report (1928), Bryde (1965), Brophy and Aberle (1966), the Kennedy Report (1969), and Fuchs and Havighurst (1972). I was especially intrigued by the Brewton Berry (1968) review of literature that was part of the Kennedy Report because it listed so many references to Indian education research—including my dad's master's thesis on "Comanche Indian Customs with Educational Implications" (Tippeconnic, 1942). Of course, I was quick to read and share my dad's research.

Around the same time, Vine Deloria in *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969) pointed out that most of the research was conducted by non-Indians who were probably anthropologists. Deyhle and Swisher (1997) reported in their review of literature over the past 30 years that most research was found in educational anthropology and sociology and represented "a legacy of deficit thought" and "guided by assimilation ideology." An Indian perspective was clearly missing.

With the policy of tribal self-determination came more control of Indian education by tribes, not only in schools but control of the research as well. A recent article by Lomawaima (2000) addressed the "reframing" of Indian education research over the past four decades. She contends there is a change in the balance of power in Indian country with tribes exercising more control, oversight, and responsibility in research.

The development and implementation of tribal research protocols by tribes is encouraging and will probably result in research that gives something back to tribal communities and improves schooling for students.

As Karen Swisher and I discuss (Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999) there are more Indian people conducting and involved in educational research today at all levels. It is also encouraging to see more Indian scholars at colleges and universities and to see more young Indian scholars interested in and conducting research.

Challenges for the Future

There are many challenges as we think about the future of Indian education. One challenge is to create and sustain a strong presence in Indian education—to make the education of American Indians and Alaska Natives a priority at all levels. Since Indian Education is so political, unity among Indian educators and tribal leadership is essential—we need tribal leadership that talks, promotes, and acts on Indian Education issues constantly and persistently. We also need to garner more support from the general public.

As I already mentioned, a key challenge is to clearly demonstrate success in Indian education programs and schools. This is especially so in tribal schools where success should be defined according to their own terms. We need to clearly show that using tribal languages and cultures in schools are strengths that enhance the learning of science, math, history and even English. Policy-makers and budget appropriators want hard evidence that education approaches are successful. Since the majority of American Indian students attend public schools, this challenge of demonstrating success also extends to them. I think the key to public school success is two-fold: first,

to hire competent teachers who know how to teach Indian students; and, second, to increase parental and tribal involvement.

The use of tribal languages and cultures continues to be a major challenge. The challenge is especially acute in urban schools where students may have limited exposure to tribal cultures and languages and where multi-tribes are represented in the student body. I think in the long term the language and culture challenge will answer the fundamental question of how we define “Indianness” and culture within and across tribal boundaries or how we answer it for Indian students who have had limited or no experience with tribal languages or cultures.

Part of the challenge in research is to keep the momentum going to gain control of the research process and to have more American Indians and Alaska Natives conducting research. In addition, we need to ask the right research questions and answer them using a combination of methods that include non-western approaches to conducting research. This will be difficult given the political nature of Indian Education and the reluctance of the educational research community to consider different approaches to research.

In conclusion, it is true that a lot of the issues in Indian education have been around for a long time. Like the gentleman at the research conference stated, "We are still talking about problems that were identified by the Meriam Report in 1928." However, I have noted some change and progress over the past 30 years in Indian education. The major development has been more Indian involvement and control of education—that is significant, and is the reason why I am optimistic that we will see increased change and

control in the future. Our native intellectualism and perseverance will develop ways for us to not only survive but also thrive as we enter the next 30 years.

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Notes

1. See "Tribal Control of American Indian Education: Observations Since the 1960s with Implications for the Future" in *Next Steps; Research and Practice to Advance Indian Education* by Karen Cayton Swisher and John W. Tippeconnic III. The chapter includes a history of tribal control of education.

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