

# Indian Education: Ferment



Bureau of Indian Affairs

Between Blackfoot generations, education is a two-way street.

**A century-old pattern of education fades while Indian awareness grows, but the central issue remains unsolved.**

by Patricia McBroom

Contrary to popular notion, the Indian is no Vanishing American. His birth rate is among the highest in the nation and his numbers on the reservations have increased rapidly since the 1950's. Half the Indian population now is 17 years of age or younger, in contrast to the population at large, where the median age lies somewhere between 25 and 28.

All of which makes the question—What kind of education for Indians?—more pressing than ever. Though the Federal Government has been educating Indian children for 100 years, the question has never been answered to anyone's satisfaction.

**Assimilation**, apparently, is not the answer. By all indications, Indians do not want to leave the reservation and join the larger society. Fear that the Government will terminate reservations shadows all Indian dealings with the Federal Government, with some reason, since Congress periodically passes through "termination" phases in which the elimination of reservations is pursued. This is apparently not a termination Congress; both Congress and the Bureau of Indian Affairs seem more sensitive than ever before to Indian desires and needs.

Congress, for example, dropped the idea this year of moving Indian education from the Bureau to the Office of Education—partly because Indian reaction was so strong.

So, isolated by choice, half a million Indian people maintain lives and values

that are probably more unlike those of the larger society than any other American ethnic group. Their education offers knotty problems.

The first solution, initiated at the end of the 19th century and only now being phased out, was to put children in Federal boarding schools, often hundreds of miles from the reservation. There they received a white-oriented education on the assumption that Indians should be "absorbed into the national life"—willingly or otherwise. Among other things, the system split Indian families and left many children handicapped educationally.

A Brookings Institution report in the 20's, pointing out the scandal of Indian education, helped turn the tide and states were urged to take over as much as possible. This they did; today more than 60 percent of reservation children attend public schools.

For the others—roughly 50,000 children—the Bureau has been trying since 1960 to build new community schools on reservations.

**But neither solution** will reach the bad fit between Indians and mainstream education.

Dr. William Kelly, director of the University of Arizona's Bureau of Ethnic Research, describes it this way: "When a child enters school at the age of six, he has control of his marbles. By the sixth grade, he doesn't. Between the fourth and seventh grades, he takes a nose dive."

The condition—called the cross-over

phenomenon—is universal throughout Indian schools in the United States and Canada, says Dr. Kelly, and its roots lie in the cultural disparities between Indian and Anglo life.

Dr. Robert Roessel, who runs a highly-regarded demonstration school on the Navajo reservation in Arizona, compares Indian and Christian values. Whites preach sharing, respect for age, concern for others, he says. The Indian lives them without competitive economic drives.

The bilingual and bicultural cross currents faced by Indian children are not unique among ethnic groups, Dr. Kelly says; they are more serious. "These kids are in real trouble."

It is trouble created by whites, says Dr. Sol Tax, dean of University Extension at the University of Chicago. "We're the ones trying to pound round pegs into square holes. We've said 'Why don't you get civilized?' The Indian has said, 'If that's civilized, I'll take barbarism.'"

Dr. Tax and Dr. Roessel are among those who firmly believe education should be given over to Indian control.

Dr. Roessel believes his school at Rough Rock, which is largely run by Indian parents, demonstrates that people with little or no formal education can exercise meaningful control over such matters as budget and curriculum. Supported by money from both the Bureau and the War on Poverty, the Rough Rock school offers 270 children a dual education—the normal curriculum plus instruction in Indian history, language and culture.

"I could name hundreds of tribal chiefs who want this," says Dr. Roessel. "The Indian people are becoming more articulate; the climate is right for a real change." However, he is not optimistic that the Government will give the kind of control he envisions. And he is right, at least for now.

**The Bureau is moving** toward more local control, aiming eventually at a contract arrangement with Indians in which they would run their own schools. But no date has been set.

"Obviously, no one will start tomorrow turning schools over to the Indians," says Dr. Kelly. And if that were done, it does not necessarily follow that the educational problems would be solved. "Indians would still have to prepare kids for life in America. They must have an education that allows them to leave the reservation."

However, says Dr. Kelly, it is not at all clear whether children can be educated for both societies, when values are incongruous. That is one of the problems the Office of Education expects to handle in a projected national study of Indian education.