



INDIAN EDUCATION FOR WHAT?

ROSALIE AND MURRAY WAX

Many western reformers have viewed formal education as a benevolent instrument of social change and social uplift -- the principal and ideal technique for developing the underdeveloped, or in the language of A. L. Kroeber and Gordon Hewes, a technique whereby people may enter the civilized Ecumene.¹ To reformers of scholarly mind, education has embodied many virtues, being peaceable, gradual and integral with their own occupations and interests -- therefore vastly to be preferred to such other modalities of entry into the Ecumene as the violent military explosions of external proletarians or "barbarians." Being themselves educators, social scientists have often found this view congenial. On the other hand, when functioning as scientists trying to discover why education fails to move some peoples into full status within the Ecumene, they have tumbled upon the fact that education does not look the same from the bottom as from the top. When, for example, Antiochus Epiphanes attempted to draw the Jews into the civilized world of his day, he found that the Maccabees did not share his definition of development. To the people who are to be uplifted, education as a concrete institution -- a school system -- bears quite a different aspect than it does when viewed abstractly from the peaks of Ecumenical leadership and scholarship. Especially when children are the primary educational targets, the school is much more than a nebulous locus where knowledge is transmitted; it is the arena of an intense social drama. The social, political and economic cleavages and conflicts characteristic of the cross-cultural situation are reflected into the school and transform the classroom into something quite different than the reformer conceived of it as being.

In like manner, many of those who are involved in Indian affairs think of education as something good for Indians: helping to transform them into persons who are more acceptable within our national society, better qualified for employment, less prone to become charges upon social welfare agencies, and less prone to the proletarian criminality of public drunkenness and disorder, rowdiness and thievery. We would surmise that this ideology is widely prevalent in the federal schools for Indians, in the BIA generally, as well as in the national Indian interest organizations. By referring to it as an ideology, we do not intend criticism but analysis. Teachers, generally, tend to believe and to preach that education and lower-

middle-class morality are the keys to a future of economic opportunity and social success. Nevertheless, for minority ethnic groups the struggle may be more devious. It is worth reminding ourselves of some of the vicissitudes of the Japanese-Americans, who were as energetically oriented toward education and achievement as it is possible to be and who were the stereotypical embodiment of the Protestant virtues of thrift, diligence and industry. Yet, on the west coast of the U.S., it was precisely these characteristics that were singled out by their competitors and enemies as justifying discriminatory and repressive action. "They work so hard you can't compete with them," was a complaint frequently voiced by white farmers.

The contrast with Indian affairs may fruitfully be pushed even farther. During World War II, the Japanese-Americans were confined to relocation centers, institutions which have been compared to concentration camps but which perhaps are better compared with the Indian reservations of a half-century ago. (The comparison is evident even from the recruitment of administrative personnel: many had been members of the Indian service and some were to become high officials in that service after the war.) Within some of the relocation centers, the Japanese-Americans did not adopt the passive posture so often bemoaned by whites observing Indians within their reservations, but instead organized themselves to influence the conduct of the administration. The irony is that the administrators, who had been selected by circumstances to regulate the lives of these able and energetic people, thought of and justified their task as being the educational one of inducting them into Americanism and democracy; the further irony is that they perceived the inmates' attempts at organization and self-government as dangerous threats, as was perhaps inevitable given the heavy and dictatorial responsibility from the federal government.²

We do not mention this in order to condemn the role of particular federal bureaucratic organizations in dealing with ethnic minorities such as Indians and Japanese-Americans, but rather to remind our audience of the accidents that affect the destiny of any such minority. Among the most significant of these accidents has been access to the ballot and sufficient local concentration to affect the election of congressmen -- and school boards. Here settlement patterns have favored the ethnic Jewish and Catholic enclaves of our metropolitan areas and have worked against the rurally dispersed Japanese and Indians. Federal policies of dispersal in the urban relocating of both the latter groups have likewise limited their ability to become effective political blocs.

The foregoing prologue may serve to remind us that it is possible to overemphasize the role of education as compared to political and military power in determining either the relationship between a particular ethnic culture and the civilized Ecumene, or between a particular ethnic society and the national society. We may also be reminded that education cannot

be regarded as an abstract and individual activity but must be seen as a concrete social system, itself shaped by political and social forces.

Turning now more specifically to the Oglala Community High School of the Pine Ridge Reservation and to the problem of dropping out (the focus of our most recent study), we find once again that the view of the Sioux diverges very widely from the rational views of the national leaders of Indian affairs. Moreover, the motivations or forces that direct some of the young people into the high school are rarely those that would be approved by scholastic reformers.

Many officials of the BIA tend to see high school drop-out in terms of opposing social forces: the administrators and teachers try to attract the young people into a scholastic environment in order to prepare them for entrance into the greater national society; meanwhile, the conservative Indian elders try to pull the young people back into the empty and unprogressive reservation culture. This perspective is very like that of most other American educators who believe that the rate of high school drop-out in disprivileged areas can be reduced only by drawing the young folk from their present environments and subjecting them to the stimulating and broadening influences of general American education. Once broadened and motivated, it is expected that these young people will obtain a respectable and well paid employment and eventually play a modest role in support of the more civilized levels of our national society. On the other hand, if the pull of the old environment is too strong, they will return to their odd jobs, pool halls, relief rolls and the numbers game.

Our investigation of the Oglala Community High School indicates that this widely held -- and superficially reasonable -- conceptualization of the social dynamics involved in high school drop-out is, for Pine Ridge, at least, oversimple and inaccurate.

It is true that the Pine Ridge administrators urge the Indian parents to send their children to the high school and that they try to keep enrolled students in the classrooms. On the other hand, very few of the country Indian adolescents go to school because of the scholastic or academic advantages it offers. (By country Indians we mean the children of the more conservative folk who live out on the reservation and send their children to the country day schools.) Most of those who enroll do so because their friends of day school years are enrolling, for to be separated from their friends is, as one of them put it, "torture." Young men have an additional reason -- their passionate desire to play basketball and participate in sports. Indeed, a number of boys stated that the only thing that kept them from dropping out was their enjoyment of basketball. Young women are particularly attracted to the high school by its promise of novel and exciting social experiences (boys, dances, movies) and by the proximity of the agency town of Pine Ridge and of the taverns and juke boxes of White Clay -- an off-reservation hamlet that serves as the local Babylon. While many of these young people

will tell an interviewer that they go to school "to learn" and will add that their elders have instructed them that if they don't finish high school "they will have a hard time and won't get a job," very few express interest in any scholastic achievement except "learning to talk English." This interest in learning to talk English may be related to the fact that many day school graduates, though they may have some facility in reading and writing English, have not yet learned to speak it with any fluency. Among these young people are some who have tried to get jobs in towns near the reservation and who have, apparently, themselves discovered the extent of their handicap.

While most of the high school teachers try to arouse the intellectual interest of their students, their success is meager. Forty-two per cent of the young people who entered high school from the district we studied intensively, dropped out in the ninth and tenth grades. (Twenty-two per cent of the young people from this district left school after completing the eighth grade.) The more conscientious teachers point out correctly that many of the day school graduates are not prepared to undertake high school work at the ninth grade level. On the other hand, our investigations indicate that relatively few students drop out of high school as a direct result of poor academic performance. Instead, long before they can appreciate how handicapped they are, more than half of the boys are propelled out of school by a head-on collision with the authorities. Many of the country Indian youths seem to define the school authorities as enemies or outsiders and react toward them with the impulsive and uncalculating recklessness which, for them, is proper masculine behavior. They steal oranges or candy from the mess hall, play hookey, steal a Bureau car and ride about the country with pals until the gas gives out, go to White Clay and get drunk, or break an "\$85.00 government property mirror." For these offenses they are either expelled or restricted to the dormitories -- that is, forbidden to attend movies or athletic events, or to go to town. Many of these youths seem unable to endure sitting in class all day and in the dormitories all night and they are likely to say, as one put it, "To hell with this noise," and go home. Significantly, many of these young men told us, "I just quit school, but I never did want to quit."

In contrast to the boys, most of the girls do not openly defy the authorities. Instead, they drop out of high school because they are unable to tolerate their social disadvantages. These girls seem to perceive relatively early in their school careers that the children of the Bureau employees and other moderately well-off "Mixedbloods"³ have far better clothes and are "away ahead of them" in matters of teen-age sophistication, scholastic achievement, fluency in the English language and general knowledge of how to beat the system. They feel poor, dowdy and dumb, or, as they put it, "embarrassed . . . out of place . . . like freaks." Should they attempt to play an active role in extra-curricular activities (clubs, commit-

tees and dances) they are likely to meet strong and sometimes even violent opposition from the experienced and knowledgeable young folk who have been attending the Oglala Community day and boarding schools since they were five and six years old. If they are shy, over age and come from poor families of little influence, they will either drop out or turn much of their energy into the world of hookey playing, "running around and raising Cain." There are a few who seem to use the school only as a place to eat and, occasionally, sleep. Just as many of the young people enrolled in school to be with their friends, many now drop out with their friends. "My friend said: 'If you're not going to be around then I'm the only one who'll get punished, so if you're going I might as well go too.' . . . I felt kinda sorry for him, because if he'd stay'd in there he'd of been a good basketball player."

Before proceeding we would like to emphasize that the above remarks are not intended to single out either the Bureau of Indian Affairs or the Pine Ridge country Indians for criticism. The practices and policies of most high schools attended by underprivileged urban children are probably more like those of OCHS than they are unlike. Similarly, many of the adolescents who drop out of these urban schools are probably more like the young Sioux -- in passion, energy, loyalty to peers, attitudes toward the authorities and poor elementary school preparation -- than they are unlike. If there is something unhealthy in this situation, it is a widespread sickness.

To return to the topic of social dynamics. Our observations suggest that the country Indian is not so much pulled out of high school by his conservative elders as he is ejected or rejected by the authorities and by a high school social system that favors the more advantaged and more cautious students.

An additional question is raised by the fact that a small number of country Indians somehow seem able to run this gauntlet and obtain a high school diploma. A few even go to college -- more this last year than ever before. How did they manage to do it?

We obtained life histories from a number of these young men and women and found that the majority had been given a great deal of social, psychological and financial support by their extended kin group. Apparently, some country Indian families have become convinced that their corporate well-being and prestige within the local community depends on getting at least some of their children through high school (and college, if possible) and thus into the better paying tribal and Bureau jobs. Young Sioux who have this formidable body of elders blocking their retreat do not find it easy to leave school. As some folk put it: "All the force of his parents is behind him." Or as one such graduate of the Oglala Community High School told us, "Everyone in my family are proud to see others and myself graduate. My parents are pushing me upward every day for a higher education. . . . I don't go to school because the government says so. I go to school to want to learn." In some cases, this parental and kin pressure is so strong that

it puts outright dullards through college. While they are in school, these "successful" pupils do not necessarily withdraw from the boisterous and forbidden recreations of the peer groups. But they do, we suspect, tend to "shape up" to the extent that they evaluate risks and stay out of the more rash and foredoomed adventures. As one of them put it: "We do like [as] white people." Besides, should they get into serious trouble, their kin will raise a fuss with the school authorities sufficient to keep them in school. In addition to this intense familial support, four young people mention the aid and encouragement given them by a particular Indian high school teacher. Another major force keeping young men in school until graduation is proficiency in sports and especially in basketball. The few young women who graduate often hope that their diploma will lead to an off-reservation secretarial or nursing school and the opportunity to get a good husband.

Another smaller but still significant number of young Indians graduate from high school because they are alienated from their kin and from the reservation peer groups. These are usually orphans or children who have been grossly neglected by their parents, and have managed to attach themselves to a particular teacher or to a group of boarding school peers. It is noteworthy that those of these young people to whom we talked did not seem to take much pride in their individualistic achievements. When asked how they got through school they launched into bitter and repetitive denunciations of their folks who (they said) had neglected them to drink and run around and had not helped them through school in any way. In a white student who is expected to take pride in lonely individualistic accomplishment, such behavior would appear odd and childish. But these alienated and educated young Sioux might be lamenting the fact that their accomplishment signified little because it was truly individualistic. That their parents and relatives had not helped them through school seemed to be a cause for shame.

Whether the young Sioux drop out or remain in high school, they seem to do this largely in their own way and according to their own or their elder's definition of the situation. In this respect they resemble many tribal or peripheral peoples who, when exposed to Ecumenical knowledge and theories of education, select what appeals to them and formulate it in their own terms. In brief, the Sioux, in their own small way, are using education very much as did the Jews, the Cherokee, the Northmen and, in our own day, the tribal peoples of Africa. While we participants in western civilization tend to define education and the motive for attending school in terms of individualistic success, it may be useful to remember that most other peoples have defined and still define education in quite different terms: the religious search for divine truth, the political and nationalistic strivings to develop an indigenous elite, the identification with a revolutionary or nationalistic movement. The student seeking the kingdom of God or the socialist or nationalist utopia will -- like the young Sioux "with all his family behind him" remain in school despite repeated individualistic failures. (Con-

versely, the student who accepts the ideology of individual success, and then, like the country Sioux, is subjected to repeated failures and humiliations, will not remain in school very long.) However, for the Sioux to start their own educational movement, reservation culture and reservation politics would have to have a much different cast. The rise of pan-Indian nationalism may be predisposing toward this kind of development; it is too early to tell.

University of Kansas

Footnotes:

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¹ Gordon W. Hewes, "The Ecumene as a Civilizational Multiplier System," The Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers, No. 25 (Berkeley, California, 1961), 73-110. A. L. Kroeber, "The Ancient Oikoumene as a Historic Culture Aggregate," The Nature of Culture (Chicago, 1952), 379-395.

² Rosalie H. Wax, "The Destruction of a Democratic Impulse," Human Organization, XII, 1 (Spring, 1953), 11-21. See also Mrs. Wax's unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, "The Development of Authoritarianism" (University of Chicago, 1950).

³ Murry L. Wax, Rosalie H. Wax and Robert V. Dumont, Jr., Formal Education in an American Indian Community, Monograph #1 of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (Northeastern University, Boston, 1964).