

Native Indian Teachers: A Key to Progress

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Indian teachers are critical to the realization of quality education for the Indian population for a number of reasons, despite a lack of reports of investigations of their effectiveness. Native Indian teachers would, it is argued, be effective not only in teaching such concepts as Indian identity, traditions, language, and psychology, but also in teaching all subjects at all levels. In addition, it appears likely that home-school communication and parental or community involvement in the schools would increase if Native Indian staff were a significant presence in the educational system. Effective communication is the key to success.

Introduction

This article argues that Native teachers are a key to progress in the education of Indians. It is likely to provoke a wide range of reactions. The academics will seek scientific evidence, while the majority of Native Indian people will perceive this suggestion as a given. Others will argue about the definition of Indian, of teachers, or of progress. There are those who will oppose outright the suggestion that Indian teachers rather than any teacher is a key to progress in Indian education.

The premise advanced in this article is that Indian teachers are critical to the realization of quality education for the Indian population. *Indian* is defined as a person of Aboriginal ancestry whose culture is based on a personal relationship with his or her people and the environment. *Teachers* are those who are trained to impart knowledge in educational institutions. *Progress* is the point at which Indian people experience fulfillment in achieving personal goals, as well as the point at which overall advancement is evident in a given school, community, or other institution.

Evidence of Progress

The academics who seek scientific evidence for the premise will be disappointed. There is a dearth of literature relating to the impact Indian teachers are having. The reason for this is basic. Prior to the 1970s, few Indian people in Canada were in the teaching force. A survey conducted in British Columbia in 1974 (More & Wallis, 1981) indicated that while Indian people represented 5% of the population, only 0.1% of teachers were Indian (i.e., 26 teachers out of a population of 26,000). Based on the proportion of Indians in the population of teachers, there should have been 1,300 Indian teachers in BC in 1974. Similar statistics exist in other provinces.

Today the picture has changed dramatically. A recent national survey of Indian Teacher Education Programs (Lawrence, 1985) indicates that there are approximately 400 Indian/Inuit teachers with degrees and an

additional 546 with teacher certification. These numbers represent those who attained their standing through Indian Teacher Education Programs throughout Canada. Including those who attained degrees or certification outside of these programs, it is reasonable to estimate that there are 1,200 Indian teachers in Canada. The corresponding figures for BC are approximately 100 graduate teachers and 20 holding teaching certificates without a degree. These numbers of teachers are still far from meeting the need identified in 1974.

Though the experience of having Indian people in the teaching force is relatively recent, the Indian experience with education is not. It is through the interest and concern of those who have addressed the question of education of Indians that the view of Indian teachers as a key to progress is supported.

First, the Indian people of Canada (like other emerging nations of the world) recognize education as a panacea for a better life. Prior to the arrival of the Europeans to this country, the Indian people provided their own form of education, which was based on the need of that day. From the 17th century to the present day, the Indian people have participated in an education system designed and directed by missionaries and public servants. The failure of this educational process has been well documented. Despite these years of disappointment and frustration with education, Indian people continue to believe that education is necessary not only for our survival, but for a meaningful future.

Indian Control of Indian Education

In 1972 the Indian people of Canada articulated a policy in education that would place the responsibility for education of Indians with Indians. The policy, known as Indian Control of Indian Education states:

Our aim is to make education relevant to the philosophy and needs of Indian people. We want education to give our children a strong sense of identity with confidence in their personal worth and ability. We believe in education:

- as a preparation for total living;
- as a means of free choice of where to live and work;
- as a means of enabling us to participate in our own social, economic, political and educational advancement (National Indian Brotherhood. (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, p. 3)

The policy further states:

Native teachers and counsellors who have an intimate understanding of Indian traditions, psychology, way of life and language are best able to create the learning environment suited to the habits and interests of the Indian child. (p. 18)

In reference to the training of Indians as teachers, the policy states:

It is evident that the Federal Government must take the initiative in providing opportunities for Indian people to train as teachers and counsellors. Efforts in this direction require experimental approaches and flexible structures to accommodate the Native person who has talent and interest but lacks minimum academic qualifications. Provincial

involvement is also needed in this venture to introduce special teacher and counsellor training programs, which will allow Native people to advance their academic standing at the same time as they are receiving professional training. Because of the importance to the Indian community, these training programs must be developed in collaboration with the Indian people and their representatives in the national and provincial organizations. The national and provincial organizations have a major role to play in evolving and implementing the training programs and in encouraging Native young people to enter the education field. (p. 18)

It was in response to this statement that many Indian Teacher Education Programs were established in Canada. Approximately 20 such programs have been in existence, with the majority still in operation at the present time. They span the country, with more than one program in some provinces. For example, Manitoba programs have included the Program for Education of Native Teachers (PENT), Brandon University Northern Teacher Education Program (BUNTEP), and the Winnipeg Centre Project. While each program has its own unique structure, basically they are all designed to provide certification and/or degrees for Indian people; they are part of the faculties of education of various universities; they adapt regular programs to provide relevance to Indian students; and they provide support services in terms of tutoring and counselling. The majority of those who enter these programs are mature students, many of whom have had experience working as teaching assistants, aides, or home-school coordinators.

The numbers who have graduated in the last decade attest to the success of the programs in general. While there is no doubt that the quality of the programs varies, there is also no doubt that these programs will continue to be required until such time as faculties of education can provide the relevance to Indian education that is needed.

The Need for Indian Teachers

Several studies, theses, reports, and surveys have been done that have implications for the need for Indian teachers. An evaluation study entitled *Education of Indians in Federal and Provincial Schools in Manitoba* (Kirkness, 1978) based on data from 1972-1977 provides one example. In a questionnaire, the response to the statement "There should be some Indian teachers in all schools attended by Indians" indicated that 80% of the students in federal schools and 71% in provincial schools said Yes. In response to the same statement, 94.1% of the parents of children in federal schools and 95% of the parents of children in provincial schools responded Yes. Responses to questions about the importance of Indian languages being taught in school, as well as the inclusion of legends and stories about Indian life, revealed similar results. In regard to the statement "Teachers should visit the homes of children," 54% of students in federal schools and 21% of students in provincial schools responded affirmatively. As for parents, 88.2% and 62.8% respectively wanted teachers to visit homes. Most frequent responses to the question "What do you feel are the three

most important requirements in a school program to make it meaningful to your children?" included the following: Parents of children in federal schools stated: (1) communication between teacher and child; (2) communication between parents and teachers; and (3) qualified Native teachers. The parents of children in provincial schools stated: (1) Indian language; (2) Indian history and culture; and (3) Indian arts, crafts, singing, dancing.

Lenton (1979), in a similar study with grade 6-9 students, as well as discontinued students in Manitoba, found that 96-100% of both groups thought that there should be Indian teachers in their schools. In addition, 91-95% of the students felt that white teachers did not like Indian people. This is also acknowledged by the teaching staff interviewed in a recent study in British Columbia (More, 1984). Teachers felt that there is a broad range of teacher attitudes ranging from very negative to very supportive. The teachers interviewed by More also felt that the greatest weakness was the inability of the education system to adapt to the needs and backgrounds of Indian students. In this same study one community gave its highest priority goals in education as:

1. Learning academic skills, particularly reading and writing;
2. Developing personal skills and knowledge including self-confidence, self-sufficiency and responsibility.

A second community gave its priority goals as:

1. Developing a pool of trained, capable Indian people for the community;
2. Developing personal qualities.

Yet a third community listed:

1. Preparation for jobs;
2. Developing the Native potential to improve the community.

More (1984), the principal researcher, recommended to schools that:

1. They develop more two-way communication with the Indian communities;
2. There be more professional development in Indian education for teachers in the following areas: curriculum adaptation; effective teaching; developing effective working relationships with Indian communities; learning styles; cross-cultural communication (especially nonverbal); improving reading, writing and language skills; and the cultural background of local Indian people;
3. There is continued review of culturally related learning styles in order to determine the value of implementing appropriate teaching strategies.

More (1984) stated that there is considerable research evidence to suggest a relationship between learning style and cultural differences of Indian students. He cites modality differences as those most frequently identified. Visual and spatial skills were often given as strengths, with both strengths and weaknesses in auditory skills. The same ability in perceptual skills

and greater ability in visual memory was found among the Temne and the Inuit (Eskimo) children by Berry (1966).

Judith Kleinfeld (1971) of the University of Alaska has reported the results of a study to determine "Effective teachers of Indian and Eskimo children." She classified teachers of Indian and Eskimo (Inuit) students into four kinds of teacher that should be viewed as ideal types (Figure 1). She describes Type I—the *Traditionalist*—as a teacher who concentrates on the academic subjects and ignores the interpersonal dimension of the classroom, whereas a Type II—the *Sophisticate*—is a teacher who is highly educated and well travelled, with an excellent background in anthropology and is concerned about the welfare of the village children. Type III—the *Sentimentalist* teacher—is described as being extremely warm and kind, but finds it difficult to make demands upon any students. Type IV—the *Supportive Gadfly*—is a teacher whose teaching style is demanding and elicits a high level of intellectual participation with village children. These teachers spent a substantial amount of time establishing positive interpersonal relationships. The Type IV teacher tended to be highly successful with both urban and village students in both integrated and all-Native classrooms.

Concluding Statement

The literature cited thus serves to illustrate that Indian teachers are critical to achieving success in the education provided to Indian people. Throughout the literature we witness the concepts of Indian identity, traditions, psychology, culture, language, and history as being important in the education of Indians. It is appropriate to suggest that Indian teachers would be the most effective in transmitting these concepts. Parents and students have stated their desire to have more Indian teachers in their schools. Related to this is the importance placed not only on relevant curricula, but also on effective communication. A closer relationship is desired between teachers and students as well as between teachers and parents. Home visits by teachers would be welcome. It is apparent that

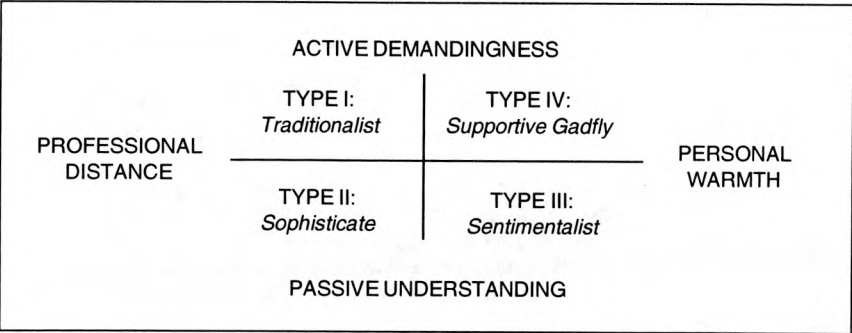


Figure 1. A typology of teachers of Indian and Eskimo students.

Indian teachers who are products of similar experiences and environments will relate with greater ease to Indian parents and students.

Concerns are expressed about negative attitudes of teachers toward Indian children and the need to develop self-confidence among Indian children. Persons with a positive attitude can only develop the latter. Indian teachers, by virtue of their common ancestry with the students, will respect the children and act as role models. The Native communities have expressed a desire for the preparation of their people for jobs that would result in improving their communities. It would appear that Indian teachers who know and understand community needs would be in a position to promote these goals. Further, there is considerable discussion about learning styles being related to culture. If this is so, it is reasonable to assume that the Indian teacher and the Indian student should readily match in teaching and learning styles.

Finally, the review of the type of teacher who has been most successful with Indian students is described as being one who is actively demanding, yet friendly and warm. Being demanding can be described as having high expectations of students. Indian teachers are more likely to believe in the potential of Indian children and therefore have high expectations of them. As for being friendly and warm, these attributes generally accompany high expectations in Indian teachers.

The connections made in this article tend to support the premise that Indian teachers are a key to progress in Indian education. However, such a conclusion can be disputed on the grounds that not all Indian teachers are alike, nor do they all fit the ideal described. While this is true, it is more difficult to dispute the fact that Indian teachers generally are better able to provide the components of a quality education or equal educational opportunity for Indians as described in the literature.

Most Indian teachers recognize the importance of this responsibility. They realize the challenge that confronts them. Their challenge is to be role models for their students, change agents in Indian education, and culture-brokers in society. They are the key to progress. To substantiate this claim, it is time for a scientific study of this question. Such studies must be based on the Indian interpretation of education.

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