

The University of Arizona

American Indian Studies

Social Sciences 324

May 11, 1983

Dear Ms. Nash,

I want to thank you very much for your helpful comments about my talk at Cherokee last month. After reflecting on some of the things that you told me I can see that I did not make myself as clear as I should have. So let me recapitulate my argument for you.

To begin with, I said that the modern school is an uncongenial and strange if not alarming environment for those children who live as part of kin groups and close-knit communities, particularly for most American Indian children. Their home life contrasts quite sharply with the school in this regard. It takes most such children quite a while, if ever, to become accustomed to the learning environment of school.

Those characteristics of the school learning environment which contrast most markedly with their home situation are as follows: 1) impersonal - the characteristics of a personal relationship is that it is

- a) holistic, that is, the person in all their aspects is related to;
- b) unique, there is no one quite like the person you are related to;
- c) particular, one takes into account the particular circumstances of the other;
- d) familiar, one knows the other well;
- e) definitive, the other tells you who you are; and
- f) emotive, the relation takes place in a context of love or dislike and content is emotively communicated. Only a kin or friendship relationship is personal in the above sense.

Of course, impersonality is just the opposite. It is:

- a) partial, one does not have to relate to a waitress as a total person to get a meal;
- b) categorical, a customer is a category, not a unique being;
- c) general, one waitress as a waitress is very like another;
- d) unfamiliar, one does not even have to know the Waitress' name to order a meal;
- e) non-definitive, a waitress tells you very little about who you are as a person;
- f) rational and purposeful, a customer wants the meal and the waitress' only job is to wait on him or her.

Needless to say, the school (and the economic and legal systems as well) weakens the personal ties of families. Children are away from parents at school most of the week and siblings are usually separated from one another in modern schools.

Much of modern life is based on impersonality-reciprocal role functions like the teacher-student relationship. When such relations begin to become personal the system breaks down. Most teachers try hard to avoid “favoritism” toward a student they like, or one who is a relative, or the child of a family friend. This does not mean that one cannot be sensitive, perceptive, kind, friendly, considerate, etc. in impersonal relations, but that does not alter the fact that they are impersonal relationships.

I think my other characteristics speak for themselves.

- 2) The isolated individual is the learning unit, not the kin or peer group.
- 3) Individuals compete with classmates for reward from the system.
- 4) Learning is regimented. The student does not learn at his own time and pace. I’ve very fact that there are classes at fixed times Mitigates against this process.
- 5) Learning is not done “on the job,” such as one following one’s uncle when he goes fishing. Learning is abstract.

I am sure that most Indian teachers, as well as sensitive white teachers, do what they can to help an Indian child cope with such an unfamiliar situation. ; however, it remains a fact that the school learning environment is created by the very organization of the school as an institution and is largely outside the control individuals.

Many Indian students, therefore, enter school with a “handicap,” as compared to most white, middle class students who are already used to an environment at home which is more like the school environment. Many Indian children, thus, start at a “disadvantage (~e)” and remain at a disadvantage, relative to white middle-class students.

I have not done any educational research since the late sixties, but it is clear that the characteristics I have outlined above have accentuated over the years in the school systems—larger schools, larger classes, more emphasis on educational techniques in education colleges, more centralization of the school as a bureaucracy, etc. That there is a high drop-out rate among Indians, city blacks, and country whites, etc. does not surprise me. I’m sure that the rate would be much higher if the turn-of-law were not better enforced these days, the fact that welfare departments keep an eye on the children of the clients, and a general sentiment among Indian parents today that children should “get an education” (be certified by the educational institutions) so that they can get a good job later in life—

By and large, to be “successful” as an adult in modern American life one must know how to assume a role function in a large, bureaucratic organization—government, factory, etc. Some scholars state that one of the major functions of the modern school is to socialize children so that they can operate in such a milieu as adults. It may be that Indian children have to cease being the kind of people they are and learn another way of being if they are to enter the middle class as adults. If that is true, perhaps schools are as successful in this regard as they can be, given the “material” with which they must work.

Another problem in learning in school which is specific to most Indian children, at least those raised in more traditional Indian families, is that Indians are taught to learn ecstasically- where one does a lot of pre-conscious learning and then perceives the whole or the pattern almost like a revelation. This is in contrast to step-by-step, part sequence, non-contextual learning which is typical of Euro-American culture and which is the mode of the American school.

As I am sure you are aware, the main point in my presentation was not oriented toward individual learning difficulties. My main point was that all general American institutions, school as an example, tend to ignore the aspirations of Indian groups as peoples, small national groups, and all that that implies- their desire to survive as unique social groups, their aspiration to retain some distinctive cultural traits, their relationship to the land which is different than any other-group in America, etc.

I am sorry to say that it seems to me as a scientist that the future of the eastern Cherokees as a distinct people is in grave doubt. If factors like language loss, cultural loss, intermarriage with whites, etc. continue as they are now, then there will probably be no eastern Cherokee as a people, around in a hundred years. They will simply be darker-than-average, southern, country Americans with an interesting heritage.

I am enclosing an article which I intend (I to have translated into Cherokee and sent a nod to friends in the Carolina.

Please, pass this along to the teachers who attended my presentation at Cherokee.

Sincerely,

Robert K. Thomas, Professor
American Indian studies

RKT/lnm