

SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE
NAVAJO PROGRAM

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In view of current discussions of the place of Indian culture in present-day life it seems important at the outset to state that those of us who are working with Indian people today believe that there are significant things in Indian life that ought to be maintained and developed -- things that have been utterly lost for most Indian tribes and will be lost for all unless definite efforts are made to save them. This is particularly true of the Southwest and the Navajo.

Integrity of Navajo Life

In planning work in the Navajo community this past year we have set up the following brief statement of principles:

"It is assumed that in all efforts stimulated or carried on by the Government or other outside interests in behalf of Indians the purpose is to be helpful while interfering as little as possible with existing modes of life. Navajo ways of doing things are to be assumed to be right except as they are found, by the experience of members of the tribe or others unselfishly interested in their welfare, to be detrimental to the Navajos or harmful to the rights of others.

"Any intervention on the part of Government and other agencies is not only to be premised on this right of the Navajos to live their own lives with a minimum of outside interference, but it is considered to be the duty of the Government to assist them in safeguarding this independence, to protect and encourage it by equipping the Navajos with whatever will strengthen them in their place in the scheme of things, to supplement what they have with whatever may be found to be useful and good, building on the existing good in every case rather than tearing down, and helping the Navajo people to retain an understanding and appreciation of their own culture and their own resources that most other Indian groups have lost or are rapidly losing.

"It is further assumed that isolation of any permanent sort is impossible for the Navajos; that they have always been an adaptable people and will doubtless continue to be so; that they are already affected in countless ways by outside contacts, and that these will increase despite any efforts that may be made; and that it therefore becomes the duty of the Government and friends of the Indians to offset the objectionable elements in these contacts by encouraging and strengthening those things that Navajos have that are known to be valuable for them and for society as a whole."

An Economic Crisis

In any social and educational program for Navajos we must begin with the economic need. No other approach could be justified. We have the evidence of competent authorities that unless the soil erosion problem is solved for the Navajos, their land simply will not support them more than a few years longer. This is an immediate and urgent situation. To postulate a so-called educational program or any other kind of a program in defiance of it would simply mean that we would have a program and no Indians!

An Educational Program

But it is also an educational situation -- not in the mere school sense, but fundamentally educational and developmental, and whatever our immediate solutions may be, the ultimate program is education in the largest and most complete sense of the word. Merely doing the things for the Navajos would have little value, even if it were feasible. The Navajo people have to be helped to understand what their situation is and how they can control it; they must learn the facts about erosion control, range management and the rest, and they must above all learn the practices that will give them mastery over it. This is essentially an educational process, by whatever name it may be called.

Not Mere "Schools"

We have the money for the construction of community day school plants, but we are not setting up mere "schools." Even the fact that some 8,000 or 9,000 of the 14,000 Navajo children of school age are not in school is not going to compel us to set ordinary schools going. As a matter of fact, in a few instances, we are actually reducing the numbers of Navajo children in school by abolishing some boarding school facilities without any immediate corresponding offset in terms of community day school education for children. This is because we are convinced that any program of conventional schooling for children -- or even a rather superior type of schooling that we might provide -- would miss some of the most important needs of the Navajo country and the Navajo people today. Of course, we shall have to be careful in this particular part of our program not to destroy completely the confidence built up in some Indian families in favor of boarding school education for young children even though we know it is not the sound and wholesome thing to have. We are obliged to make the adjustment in such a way that Indians themselves will see the wisdom and practicality of a new type of educational program.

Soil erosion even conditions the actual construction of these community centers. We undertook originally to plan a scheme of central and local community schools made possible in part by a modern transportation system. I am still convinced -- and I know Commissioner Collier is -- that the work Richard Tisinger did on this central school project was one of the most resourceful and brilliant pieces of educational planning that has been done in or out of the Indian Service in recent years. But here

we have had to check and re-check to make sure that even the location of these centers and schools does not interfere with the fundamental task of controlling soil erosion. Several locations have had to be abandoned even after the building program was inaugurated because the soil erosion experts thought even small aggregations of people at a given locality might intensify the already drastic soil erosion situation or endanger a possible program of land rehabilitation.

We are frankly experimenting at every point. We told the Navajos in council last October that these community day schools would have to be different from any ordinary schools that existed. We said to them:

"They will be large enough in most instances to have shops, a health clinic with a doctor and nurse, home economics rooms, space for gardens and trees and agricultural work, a dining room. They will be for adults as well as for children; real communities, Navajo community schools.

"As to what shall be taught in these schools, you could and should have a great deal about your own Navajo economic life. This soil erosion control, better grazing, those things should center in the school. Your children should be able to learn more rapidly than you and I have learned about the damages that have been done by failure to care for the soil. You should have Navajo literature and history. Your children should know your history and the relation of that history to the rest of the world. They should help you in the preservation of your arts and crafts. The schools should be real Navajo schools, and we shall do our best to help you make them that kind of schools.

"These schools will be day schools. I think when we say that we should understand, however, that they are to be just as good schools as the best schools we can have. They are to be day schools because so far as I can find out Indian parents, like parents anywhere in the world, want their little children in their own homes, and they are entitled to have them. We should not have to take your children hundreds of miles away to go to school. They should be near and should be in their own homes.

"We think it particularly important that the adult members of the community, the older Indians themselves, take an active interest in the schools. We hope you will have in every one of these schools a real parents' organization; that you will feel free to use the school. A school is only in the long run the people, the children and the community. You will make the school. If you will take the opportunity that we think you now have you cannot only furnish a remarkable educational provision for your children and in turn control the whole community life, but you can set an example very much needed to other parts of the United States and the world."

Community Activity First

We have become more and more convinced of the economic necessity in connection with these community centers and schools -- that the first and fundamental task the Navajos themselves face is to become masters of their economic salvation by learning what their difficulty is, how to control it, and how to keep it controlled permanently. We are calling these enterprises community centers rather than schools. The first people to be brought into the centers will be adults and older youth and, as fast as children themselves come in, the first job will be to start them in becoming soil erosion conscious. Already one or two workers are carrying the soil message directly to the Navajos. As a matter of fact the most important single educational work in the Navajos area is not being conducted by those of us in education at all but by the soil erosion service. The 300 to 500 Navajos who have been doing the work at Mexican Springs Soil Erosion Experiment Station, building every conceivable variety of dam from the largest and most intricate to those that a few Navajo people themselves throw together with grass in an afternoon, are focal points from which not only enlightenment on soil erosion but mastery of the technique of the fundamental reason for it are to be carried to every Navajo family. Mr. Woehlke in his paper has told you how the Navajo leaders themselves have taken drastic steps in the right direction. This itself has been a significant process of education -- from the soil erosion experts, through the Navajo workers at the experiment station, back to the chapter houses, and wherever Navajos tend their sheep and carry on their every-day lives. Whatever educational forces are set going will have to be built on this emergency beginning.

Navajo Leadership.

Once the economic program is under way and the fundamentals of it are beginning to be understood, it will be our task to see that other parts of a real educational program are brought in. We are trying to organize self-help in Navajo communities. We are trying to find young Navajos of as good training as possible who can bring to their own people the things that are urgently necessary. Some of you have heard of the Institute that is to be worked out in the field of health education this summer, through the cooperation of the Health and Education divisions. 100 Navajo young women from a number of our Southwest schools are to have an intensive month at Santa Fe in training to be home aids who will assist the field nurses in various Navajo communities. We are hopeful that possibly 25 of the 100 can be employed this coming year in as many Navajo communities. Wherever there are intelligent and reasonably well trained Navajo young men and young women, we are putting them into the communities not only to advance the health program that is needed but to introduce a number of other important things as well. Those of us who have not been stirred to action on trachoma for example and all that goes with it should hear Miss Sally Lucas Jean tell what she found in the Navajo country and explain what she knows

can be done. I am convinced that unless we make the control of health and specifically the elimination of trachoma one of the most urgent and immediate projects we run the risk of a deserved national disgrace. As Miss Jean has convincingly shown in many other situations elsewhere in the world the educational program -- children, adolescents, adults, everybody -- can in a comparatively short time make this not a temporary clean-up but a genuine transformation.

Bilingualism

These schools are to be bilingual. Every practical and cultural consideration in the Navajo country urges this. Soil erosion assistance will have to be given through Navajo. In collaboration with anthropologists we are beginning this summer a plan whereby a number of competent Navajo young people will learn to record the Navajo language. We are hoping that our non-Navajo workers in the Navajo area will attempt to learn some Navajo, not with any expectation that a large number of them will become proficient in it but in the belief that any attempt to master the speech of an Indian group will at least be that much in the direction of understanding something of its cultural background. Even more fundamentally, we have in the Navajo area one of the few opportunities remaining in Indian North America to make sure that a significant cultural survival in legend ritual and literature is maintained as the contribution of one group to the enrichment of their own lives and unquestionably to the enrichment of the lives of all of us.

These new centers and the whole educational program are to be staffed from the beginning, as far as possible, by Navajos. This means exactly what it says. In general we will not start communities until we have Navajo young people able to carry on at least some of the important elements. Our instructions are that white supervisors are to be reduced to an absolute minimum; the Indians are to be allowed to work out their own programs with as little interference as possible in all places where we are able to inaugurate the new communities.

You have heard little of the ordinary school subjects in all of this. Some of us believe so strongly in an educational program that starts from community needs that we would like to be able to trust any school to start in the hope that it might respond to community needs. In the present instance, however, we have a wholesome fear of getting something like a regular school system established. For that reason we are deliberately and drastically beginning with an attempt to meet community needs regardless of whether other educational people call it education or not, convinced that we can do a few of the things that have a right to survive out of the existing American school. We know that if the regular school once gets entrenched, no real community program will eventuate. We have hopes that if we start all over again, or nearly all over again, with a recognition of an immediate and future economic, social, health and cultural need, we may be able to establish at least for one important Indian group the kind of education very much needed for the rest of America and the world.

Obviously, such a program can not be the function of any one division or group of the Indian Service. Genuine cooperation of all the Indian Bureau fields and the Indians themselves is demanded.