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## COMMUNICATION OF EDUCATION INNOVATIONS TO NATIVE AMERICANS

Everett D. Edington

The world today is full of new ideas to bring about change in our society. The field of education is no exception, as educators, too, have jumped on the bandwagon of change. For the educational practitioner, though, it may be extremely frustrating to try to determine which innovations are of value. This frustration is especially keen for educators who work with American Indian children. Of the hundreds of new ideas available, few have been evaluated at all, and even fewer have been evaluated and used with Native Americans. An extremely important part of communicating educational innovations to any group is that the educator is able to sift and decide which innovations are appropriate for his use and for the use of the children for which he has responsibility.

There is a great value in diffusion theory, which we in education can use to help us introduce new knowledge more quickly into the classroom. In the past, many innovations took at least thirty years to become adopted in the majority of the classrooms. Even adoption of the new-mathematics program took six to eight years in the majority of classrooms across the nation. Most of the early diffusion theory came from people in agriculture and the extension service working to persuade farmers to adopt new practices. Recently, writers in education have looked at the special problems of education in our public schools in relation to the theoretical framework for developing a communications system of delivering information to the schools. If we are to move education ahead for Native Americans at a much faster rate than in the past, it is extremely important that the people responsible for the education of Indian children see that the gap between the development of new knowledge and its use is narrowed. Moreover, they should demand that only those ideas that have been

properly tested and developed for Native Americans be used with these children.

Research has shown that in education, as well as in agriculture and other fields, different levels of adopters of innovations exist. Most authors generally recognize the first level of adopters as the *innovators* themselves. Next come the *early adopters*, many of whom are leaders in education at the local level, people who would rather see new techniques tested and tried before put to use than to jump on every bandwagon. The next level is the *early majority*, followed by the *late adopters* and *laggards*. The latter two groups frequently let very successful practices pass by before they are willing to accept them.

Diffusion research has pointed out the important role of the *linker* in the diffusion of an innovation. In the regular educational structure these people may be found in state departments of education, regional service centers (in states that have regional service centers), some county offices of education (in states where such offices have been developed to serve this purpose). In many cases, central office personnel act as linkers. Universities could also act as linkers, although they do not often see themselves in this role. In Native American education, many other linkers are utilized. The BIA serves as a vital link between the knowledge developers and users. Tribal education officers are an extremely important linker where they exist. Many state departments of education have directors of Indian education whose primary responsibility is to see that adequate programs are developed for Indian children within that state. Each of these people links the developer to the educational practitioner, to ensure that worthwhile innovations are put to use in educating the Indian child.

### Characteristics of Native American Social Structure and Their Effect upon Diffusion

Certain characteristics of Indian social structure make communicating education innovations to Native Americans somewhat different from the task of communicating to other populations within the nation. Educators should take advantage of this social structure in getting the information to the users. One of the most important of these is tribal structure. A large majority of Indians in the nation belong to a recognized tribe

and, thus, to a system of government that governs these Indians not only on the reservations but in some cases wherever they may be. Many tribes have offices of education for the tribe. The majority of tribes have elected officials who can be used effectively in getting information on education to the people. If these officials are not used properly, however, they can be a detriment in such a process. If bypassed, they may not act as a linker but as a roadblock to the communication of new educational ideas.

Historically, the Bureau of Indian Affairs had the major responsibility for educating Indian children. This situation is changing, but the BIA still is extremely influential and has large numbers of Indian children in its jurisdiction. A large bureaucracy like the BIA is very difficult to change. However, it has often been used effectively in getting the information to where it is needed.

We are seeing many more Indian children going to public schools with Anglos as well as to schools that are predominantly for their own ethnic group. These public schools are somewhat unique in their structure, compared to other public schools, and this needs to be recognized in any diffusion mechanism.

Another major characteristic is what many people call "Indianness." Some say this is an extreme reluctance to accept change and a willingness to live as Indians have lived in the past, without wanting to develop a better way of life. I strongly question this explanation. I see it more as a skepticism about accepting any change for change's sake and wanting to know whether a change will be beneficial for the education of their children before it is accepted. Once proven, a change is then widely accepted into the educational system. There is some value in this characteristic, even though it may frustrate many impatient "do-gooders," who give up and leave before programs may be adopted. The attitude of wanting to accept only those things which have been proven leads the Indians to accept those things which may be successful. This characteristic is a necessity with people such as the American Indians, who have different characteristics and needs from the general population.

### **Educational Information Systems**

Formal and informal systems alike have been developed over the past few years to provide educational information to the users,

the educational practitioners, working directly with Indian children. Early in its eight-year-old operation, for example, the ERIC program anticipated the necessity of developing a system that would locate, and prepare for dissemination, information directly related to the education of the Indian child. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education in Small Schools assumed this responsibility and over the years has acquired this information, abstracted it, and placed it in the ERIC System. In addition, the Clearinghouse developed a number of information-analysis products and bibliographies, and, recognizing that the printed word is not always the best means of transmitting information, a series of filmstrips and tapes aimed at the parents of Indian children. These series fall into two main categories: the first explains to the parent the types of programs and the structure of the school; and the second explains how to prepare their preschool youngster for entry into the school program.

Another major organization is the National Indian Education Association, whose growth has mushroomed in the last three or four years. It is one of the better-organized professional associations in education and holds an outstanding national convention each year. This group sees as one of its important functions the role of a linker between the developer and the child. This role could be even further developed to provide much better service than in the past.

Many state departments of education employ a Director of Indian Studies, the majority of whom are Indian people. This director coordinates the programs related to the Indian child within the state department of education.

The information system of the Bureau of Indian Affairs has a very intricate network to communicate educational innovations to the practitioner. Over the past few years, some excellent journals and newspapers have appeared that are widely read throughout the Indian communities and are extremely useful as communications. Some of the more outstanding, with national coverage, are the *Journal of Indian Education*, the *Indian Historian*, the *Journal of the American Indian Cultural Center—UCLA*,\* and the *Northian* from Canada. A great many local papers are read quite

\*Superseded in July 1974 by the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* from UCLA.—Ed.

widely, and such publications as the *Navajo Times*, the *Native Nevadan*, the *Jicarilla Chieftain*, and the *Choctaw Community News* reach many Indian households across the nation. These publications are being used very effectively to communicate news and information about the education of the Indian child. The Indian educators could take even greater advantage of these publications in seeing that information concerning educational change is brought to the Indian communities.

### **Conclusion**

The communication of education innovations to educators is a complicated process. This process may be even more complicated

in the communication of educational innovations to the Native American child. The tactics and procedures that succeed with the general population may not always succeed with Native Americans. However, the time lag with the Native American need not be so great, provided that the linker and educator take advantage of the existing structures of Indian society. If proper educational change is to take place, it should fit the specific needs of the Indian child. Most Native American educators need to be aware of the proper channels of communication and of diffusion theory in order for adequate educational programs to continue to be developed for the Native American child.