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STEPHEN E. MARKS,
Counseling Department,
Faculty of Education,
University of British Columbia.

RICHARD M. GREEN,
*University of Saskatchewan.**

INDIANS AND COUNSELING

In working with the Indian youth today, the counselor is faced with a multitude of problems. He must examine the appropriateness of the present educational institutions for accommodating the Indian culture, the appropriateness of his traditional role in this setting and the dilemma of developing and acting upon different approaches to the counseling function.

The existence of a subculture in an educational system operating under the dictates of a dominant culture inevitably involves the problem of cross-cultural conflicts. The conflict revolves primarily around the values held by the 'dominant' and 'subordinate' groups and the dissonance between them. In terms of values and tradition, and primarily through its schools, a culture insists upon turning out a certain kind of social product. In schools, as societal institutions, children are trained to fit the culture as it exists. Schools can manage to deal with the masses of children only by reducing them to a common definition, by homogenizing them culturally.

What of the Indian student in particular? He comes from a segment of our society not attuned to the schools and their values. In most Canadian schools the Indian student has been undergoing a process of assimilation, but the process is disguised under the policy of integration. For the Indian youth, the process of assimilation is a process of alienation in the way he feels with regard to his own culture and also to the non-Indian culture. Many Indian youths have expressed a sense of powerlessness in the direction of their lives, a powerlessness evident in a failure to achieve, a lack of motivation, low levels of aspiration and an inability to assess his own potential. A lack of effort results from the anticipated lack of achievement and confirms the sense of powerlessness. The result is stagnation and a strong sense of alienation.

Caught between the Indian and non-Indian world as well as between generations, the Indian child is faced with an overwhelming task: to assemble for himself an identity in situations of the utmost confusion. The Indian student suffers from a problem of identity. The young Indian child arrives at school with a cultural orientation, a set of values and a structured personality. He has an identity as an individual and as a member of a specific cultural group. His cultural orientation and values will have prepared him to value certain things and not others, to perceive things in certain ways and to internalize goals for specific reasons shared with his community. To the extent that the school population holds different cultural orientations and values, his expectations and perceptions will differ from those of the others

*Richard Green is currently a graduate student in the Department of Indian & Northern Education in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan.

and a situation of conflict will be created. To the extent that the child learns that his way is not only different but is wrong, his identity and his security are attacked and he is confronted with a crucial problem.

This process of self-estrangement seems to start early for the Indian child and culminates in the period around the fifth grade. After a generally nurturant infancy and a relatively secure and emotionally warm early childhood, the Indian child starts school. Here he learns that he is 'different' and that this difference accounts for the negative reactions of others toward him. His characteristic behaviour does not meet school expectations. He is punished or ridiculed for his failure to behave as others expect him to behave. Because he is dependent upon others for his rewards he begins to build a concept of the ideal student which he cannot possibly meet but which he can perceive other children meeting. He untimately learns that he cannot attain the ideal status for reasons he does not comprehend. He begins to doubt the value of being an Indian and clings to the ideal image of the non-Indian student. The gap between the ideal self and the real self leaves him with a sense of self-alienation as well as a strong feeling of alienation from the larger society.

By the time he reaches the secondary level, the Indian student has little confidence in his own ability to make decisions affecting his future. He has had little familiarity with the range of alternatives and tends to limit his decisions to acceptance or rejection of suggestions made by teachers and counselors. There is little of himself or his culture that is valued within the classroom situation and the rewards he so earnestly seeks are seldom achieved. Failure follows upon failure until motivation, self-image, aspirations, and achievement alter accordingly.

One objective of our education system is for integration. It is a system designed to give the Indian student schooling for potential competence in our society, not for the updating or modernization of his own, nor for a blending of the two cultures. Education by integration negates the Indian's society and negates the value he places on the traditions of his society.

Educational influences today tend to create talking societies. In Indian communities silence is golden, when success in the hunt can be destroyed by a word or a twig crackling. Silence was a virtue when food, clothing, and even shelter depended upon maintaining it.

Education today equips us to tolerate, to battle for and against and to contemplate, sometimes with painfully deliberate rationalization, the world of cities and high-rise apartment living. In short, a world without yesterday, but with a big, promising and thoroughly mechanized tomorrow. But the Indian people are still inclined to regard tradition as teacher and educator. And only their newly educated in our schools are losing their once proud esteem for the elders and the knowledge they imparted by word of mouth and example. It is traditional for the Indian to love nature. It is traditional for the Indian to look to the past and the present, to disregard the future as though tomorrow were a dream.

Ambition or fear; which emotion wins when the young Indian hears or senses the big boom of industrialization? Both feelings are mixed and unusual courage is required when a boy or man decides to leave a forest reserve to explore our commercialized world of industry.

Before any attempt can be made either to understand the conflict in the

hearts of Indians as they pull up their roots and seek a place in our society or to assist them in finding that place, the dazzling but appalling contrast between the Indian's small world of the reserve in nature's setting and our commercialized centres must be considered.

Twentieth century man in Canada, non-Indian, manipulates, destroys, and reconstructs his environment constantly, increasing his separation from nature. Education instils the desire to gain a marketable skill, to acquire private property and to accumulate capital. With equal intensity, the exact opposite has been instilled in the mind and morality of Indian society—the sharing concept. It is a die-hard concept still evident among Indians. Commercialization and sharing: the two are in conflict. The Indians have no bridge between the two.

This then is the situation with which counselors are confronted. The task of changing our schools to complement rather than negate the Indian culture is the ideal solution but its implementation is impossible or at best unrealistic. Then how is some meaning to be salvaged for the Indian student from a "traditional educational experience"? It is easier to focus on changing parts of a system rather than the total system and in this instance the counselor might very well be that vehicle for change.

The counselor, when dealing with problems such as a sense of powerlessness, a lack of motivation, a low level of aspiration, a feeling of alienation and a lack of identity would begin by attempting to establish a relationship with the student. This relationship would be characterized by confiidence, understanding and mutual trust. The counselor establishes it by talking to the student about his problems. However this particular approach, for the Indian student, is doomed to failure. A reliance on a verbal exchange as the essence of the counseling process will be of little value with individuals who are generally not verbal. With the Indian student, verbalization was an experience which was neither frequent nor encouraged in his development. The Indian is, by and large, non-verbal, and when verbal, is abbreviative.

If the assumption that trust and rapport are essential in an effective counseling relationship is accepted, then options to a purely talking model must be found. It might be useful to look at what a counselor could do in addition to what he could say.

If the Indian youth is to feel understood by the counselor and trust him, the counselor would have to demonstrate his interest and concern through direct involvement in the activities which were important to the Indian students. These could include athletics and community projects. But probably an even more effective way for the counselor to show his interest would be simply to spend time with the students outside of school, to demonstrate an interest in them as individuals, in their cultural history, and in the intricacies of their present community life.

Once the counselor becomes a common fixture in the community, the programs he might propose would have much more credibility. He would have demonstrated his concern through his actions and would be trusted by the students. This condition would then make it possible for him to establish programs such as peer discussion groups or counseling groups involving entire families. These groups would have the opportunity of dealing with real problems with the counselor *also* having first-hand experience with the same situations.

If the Indian community had a positive experience with the counselor in these meetings, the probability that the counselor could successfully involve the Indian students in school programs would greatly increase. At this point at least one part of the formal school system, the counselor, would have gained some degree of credibility and acceptance in the Indian students' eyes.

The counselor would also have the opportunity of promoting communication and interaction within the families of his students. In addition to helping them work on difficulties in their relationships, he would serve as a liaison between families and his school and help to develop a complementary relationship between the two.

Achieving the changes discussed above would not be easy for the counselor. He must accept and be prepared to deal with substantial differences between his attitudes, expectations, and general life styles and those of his clients'. In fact he would almost have to acquire a new life style if he wished to be successful in really working with the Indian students. He would be forced to abandon the protection which the role of counselor provided for him in the school; he would continually be on the line in the community as a person, and successfully assuming this new role would involve the willingness to take considerable risks.

The foregoing discussion raises several crucial questions. The first concerns the selection of counselors who are able to work effectively with the Indian student. Maybe this is a role all counselors cannot fulfil? The second concerns finances available for this type of service? It's blatantly obvious that one counselor could not be responsible for more than 15-25 students if he were to function in accordance with the proposed model. Does the commitment exist to support these types of programs? It is apparent that the old counseling models are lacking in their ability to provide helpful experiences for the Indian students. The counselor must assume a more action oriented role if he is to be successful with them. Even if some counselors are not working with a minority group they might also want to try this new model, and be prepared for the consequences that it just might work.

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