

# THE HIGH ACHIEVING SIOUX INDIAN CHILD: SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM THE FLOWER OF TWO SOILS PROJECT

WILLIAM H. SACK, M.D., MORTON BEISER, M.D.,  
GREG CLARKE, Ph.D., ROY REDSHIRT

*Abstract: This paper focuses on thirty Oglala Sioux children from the 2nd and 4th grades and attempts to identify a variety of emotional, cognitive, and cultural factors that differentiate high academic achievement from low academic achievement. The small sample was taken from within a large, ongoing prospective study, The Flower of Two Soils, of approximately one thousand children at four reservation sites in the United States and Canada. High achieving children score better than their low achieving classmates on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised (WISC-R), but not on the Draw-A-Person test. They tend to come from intact, two parent families with a solid employment history, a strong social network, frequent contact with the school, and acculturation tendencies toward the majority culture. The children show an identification with overall educational aims. These tentative findings await confirmation from the full project.*

This paper reports preliminary analyses of year one data collected at the South Dakota Oglala Sioux Reservation on 30 second and fourth grade children as part of a large National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)-funded epidemiologic survey of Indian children entitled *The Flower of Two Soils*.<sup>1</sup> The study came about as a result of previous work with American Indian youth.

Beiser and Attneave (1982) surveyed national data from the Indian Health Service in 1974 and compared that data to 1969 National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) data. At all ages except five to nine, Indian children were at a higher risk for entering mental health treatment than were non-Indian children (see Figure 1), with a strikingly high treated prevalence for Indian female adolescents. While this data has a number of methodological uncertainties, it strongly suggests what clinicians experience: a high rate of emotional difficulties in Indian children. Coupled with results from earlier research conducted by John Bryde on the Sioux reservation in the 1960's, additional concerns become apparent.

Bryde (1968) administered the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) to 105 8th grade students on a Sioux reservation and found significant differences between Indian and non-Indian children on 26 of 28 key variables. Feelings of depression, alienation, withdrawal, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement were particularly high in this group of students.

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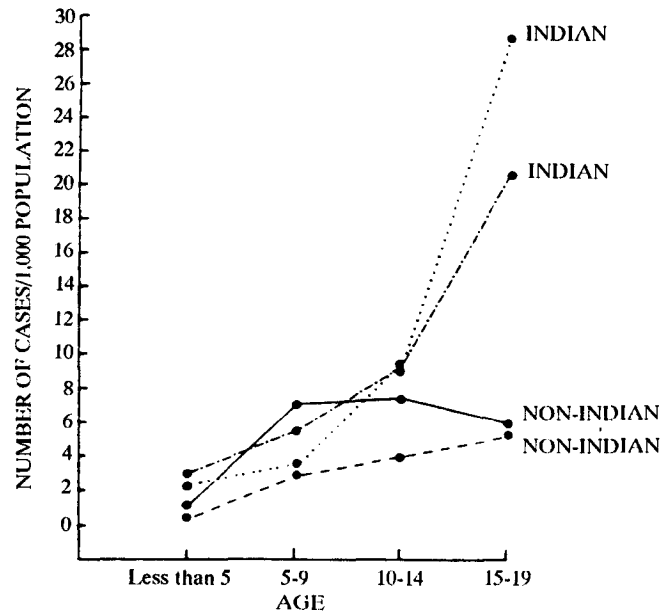


Figure 1  
Prevalence Rates for Outpatient Psychiatric Treatment of Indian  
and Non-Indian Children

Bryde (1966) also studied academic achievement in grade school students and introduced the concept of academic "crossover". The data which he used to make this interpretation of crossover is summarized in Table 1. While younger Indian students begin the 4th grade slightly ahead of the overall norm, by the 8th grade they have fallen about a half year behind. A series of questions then arise as to whether deteriorating academic performance is due to emotional problems. If so, what is the sequence? Do emotional problems result in academic decline, or is academic decline responsible for an increasing incidence of emotional problems? Finally, is academic crossover still a valid concept twenty years later? These are some of the questions that led to the undertaking of the present study.

Table 1  
California Test Scores of 38 Federal Indian Schools  
in North and South Dakota

Means: Grade	Overall Norm	Indian Average	Number
4	4.1	4.3	636
5	5.1	5.2	627
6	6.1	5.8	667
7	7.1	6.9	618
8	8.1	7.7	624

There is no lack of concern about the education of American Indian children. In 1928, the Brookings Institute performed an extensive analysis of the education of Indian children, commonly called the Meriam Report.<sup>2</sup> A later report, produced by a Senate special sub-committee on Indian education, known as the Kennedy report, i.e. "Indian Education - A National Tragedy - A National Challenge" (1969)<sup>3</sup>, arrived at many of the same grim conclusions as the Meriam Report. Currently, at the Pine Ridge Oglala Community School, 50% of students between the 9th and 10th grade drop out. Only 25% of the freshman class will graduate. The overall student dropout rate and the overall adult unemployment rate are both about 85% in Pine Ridge.

This study seeks to understand the complex psychosocial interrelationships with academic performance in Indian children. Armed with more information, we may better be able to suggest preventive interventions in this high-risk population. However, these preliminary analyses emphasize not psychopathology, nor academic failure, but academic success. This focus grew out of a comment by one of our Indian colleagues at a planning conference last year who said: "Everyone knows the Indian child has problems, but we'd like to know what makes for success in school, as well as what causes failure". This comment caused us to identify and examine a small group of successful Sioux students.

Our discussion begins by briefly describing the overall study, then turns to the preliminary analyses conducted with the emphasis noted above. We next consider the differences in functioning and implications for clinicians as well as educators.

## Methods

### Research Design

Two-hundred children at four different schools in the Pine Ridge Reservation are being followed over a three-year period. A group of 100

similar aged students in adjacent towns (Martin and Kadoka, South Dakota) bordering this reservation are also being followed. Two hundred children on the Navajo reservation another 200 children on the Island Lakes Reserve in Northern Manitoba, and a smaller contingent on the Queen Charlotte Islands, British Columbia are being studied in the same fashion; hence the title of the study, "Flower of Two Soils."

In addition to receiving standardized achievement tests, each child receives an annual WISC-R and Draw-A-Person test, as measures of cognitive ability. Tests of emotional functioning include student self-report measures, as well as parent and teacher ratings. To validate these screening measurements, each child in the first year of the study was interviewed with the Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children (DISC-interview), a structured psychiatric epidemiological protocol designed to render DSM-III diagnoses (Costello, Edlebroock, Kalas, Kessler, & Klaric, 1982) Each child's parent received the DISC-P, the same interview protocol adapted particularly for parents.

Assessments of biological, developmental, and social family background factors were obtained through a comprehensive two hour interview of the child's parent or guardian. Topics such as pre-natal, birth history, physical illness, family mobility, employment, and education were covered. Finally, assessments of ethnic identity were elicited through a recently constructed traditionality scale, administered to the parent or guardian, and a *Picture Identification Test*, completed by the child.

This general design employs the convergence technique described by Bell (1953) which makes it possible to construct a five year developmental trajectory utilizing repeated observations over 3 years in 2 separate cohorts. Thus we have been following a group of 100 2nd graders and 100 4th graders in each of the sites, totaling 600 Indian and 300 non-Indian children.

### Preliminary Analyses

This paper reports the results of data from only 30 of the 200 children at the Sioux site during the first year, that is when they were 2nd and 4th graders. Originally, 18 children in each group were to be studied, but missing data resulted in looking at 17 high achieving 2nd and 4th graders, and 13 low achieving students in the same grades, based on the Stanford Achievement test score results. The students were selected by one of the authors (W.H.S.) from the school's computer printout sheets. These students were in essence the highest of the high achievers and the lowest of the low achievers from a large sample. The purpose was to define a small group of high functioning students and to compare them to low functioning students on a variety of dependent measures in order to throw into relief some of the possible factors which contribute to these different levels of functioning. These two groups contain roughly equal numbers of males and females. Such preliminary analyses allow us to begin

sharpening our analytic procedures for the eventual major study of the entire sample over time and across sites. The statistical analyses were undertaken with the  $X^2$  test for categorical variables and the unpaired test for continuous variables. For categorical variables when cell sizes were 15 or less, we used the Fisher's exact t test.

## Results

### Achievement Test Scores

The percentile ratings of the high and low achievement groups are summarized in Table 2. The students comprising these two groups were picked by one of the authors (W.H.S.) from the lists of results of the school-conducted achievement test ratings. They represent the highest and lowest students at each of the two grade levels. One can see that the high achievement group compares impressively well when contrasted with normative data from the majority culture. The drop in percentile scores from the 2nd to the 4th grade is hard to interpret, since they represent two different cohorts of students. The low achieving cohort remains relatively stable in the two grades. There do not appear to be any differences in gender between the high and low achieving groups.

Table 2  
Cognitive Findings

	High Achieving Students		Low Achieving Students			
	2nd Grade	4th Grade	2nd Grade	4th Grade		
SRA Percentile Scores in Achievement						
Reading	83p.	66p.	06p.	04p.		
Math	86p.	58p.	15p.	12p.		
Language Arts	73p.	67p.	08p.	09p.		
WISC-R (both grades)						
Verbal I.Q.	98		76		t	1 tail p
Performance I.Q.	107		99		5.26	.000
Total I.Q.	102		101		2.02	.029
Draw-A-Person	104		101		5.19	.000
					.35	N.S.

Table 2 (Continued)  
Cognitive Findings

	High Achieving Students		Low Achieving Students		
	2nd Grade	4th Grade	2nd Grade	4th Grade	
Right/Left Cerebral Dominance (Number of children)					
Left (right-handed)		16		6	
Right (left-handed)		0		2	$\chi^2 = 8.84$
Mixed		1		5	$df = 2, p. = <.02$

### Cognitive Measures

Table 2 depicts WISC-R scores and Draw-A-Person IQ scores. As is usually true with Indian children in general, the performance scores are higher than the verbal scores. Notice that in the high achieving group the difference is close to a 10 point spread, whereas in the lower achieving group, it is over 20 points. Higher achieving students score higher on the WISC-R test to a significant degree; but the interesting finding is that there is no difference on Draw-A-Person IQ scores between the high and low functioning groups. We were impressed with many of these children's drawing skills. Figure 2 is an impressive Draw-A-Person sketch from one of the students in the low functioning group; offered as a representative example of the skill that these children possess.



age 9 yrs, 9 mos.  
WISC-R verbal: 82  
performance: 105

Draw-A-Person: 121

Figure 2

cerebral dominance in developmental neurology. We decided to collect this data when one of the Pine Ridge school teachers told us during our pilot testing in 1983 that she was impressed by such high numbers of left-handed Indian children. This finding in our small sample of more right or mixed cerebral dominance in the low-achieving group is intriguing. It will need validation in our larger sample, and if validated will be difficult to interpret in regards to educational success. Nevertheless, it may suggest a cognitive basis for reading difficulties in some Indian children.

#### Family Background Factors

The study collected a variety of family variables in a number of areas important to child growth and development.

#### Family Education

Table 3 shows that the high achieving group mothers had roughly two years more formal education than the low achieving group. For the fathers, our incomplete data shows roughly one year of educational difference, a finding that was not quite significant, but suggestive. Note that mothers in the high achieving group average a bit more education than their spouses.

#### Family Employment

Visual inspection of Table 3 alone underscores the striking importance of family employment. In the high achieving group all but one of the families have a parent holding down a job, but in 70% of the families both parents were working. One should recall that this is a community in which there is approximately 85% unemployment. In contrast, both parents were working in the family of only one low achieving student. Six of the 13 families were on welfare. We did not conduct a formal analyses of SES on this data, but it is clear that these two groups come from different socioeconomic strata within the community.

#### Family Structure

High achieving students more often belong to two-parent families, while low achieving students often belong to single parent families, usually single mothers (see Table 3). This does not mean that step-parents were excluded in the two parent families. Two of the six single parent families in the low achieving group were headed by grandparents.

Several other family variables were examined. Family size (mean = 5), number of siblings in family, and number of rooms in the home do not differ in the two group. Table 3 indicates that parents of the high achieving groups list more extra family members as important to their child than the

low functioning group. This may be an artifact of the interview, if better rapport was established with the high functioning child's parent. If this finding is later confirmed in the larger study, it suggests a greater social network for the high achieving child, and relatively greater social isolation for the low achieving child.

Table 3  
Psychosocial, Emotional, and Cultural Findings

	High Achieving Students	Low Achieving Students		
Education of Mother (years of formal education)	13.12	11.58	t	1 tail p.
Education of Father (years of formal education)	12.4	11.3	1.92	.033
Employment of Parents Employed	70%	8%		
Families on Welfare	8%	45%		
Family Structure (number of families)				
Both Parents Living at Home with Child	12	3	$\chi^2 = 5.43$	
Not at Home	5	10	df = 1, p. < .02	
Mother Raising Child Alone	2	6	$\chi^2 = 4.46$	
Not Alone	15	7	df = 1, p. = .045	
Extra Family Members Mentioned as Important to Child	4.0	1.54	t = 2.65	1 tail. p = .007
Teacher Global Ratings (4 point scale; mean score)				
Overall Intelligence	3.18	1.38	6.19	.000
English Skills	2.94	1.54	5.44	.006
Social Skills	2.76	1.62	3.50	.000
Overall Behavior	.59	1.62	2.67	.006
Emotional Problems	.53	1.92	4.40	.000
Language spoken at home (number of children)				
Mostly English	14	5	$\chi^2 = 6.68$	
English and Sioux	3	6	df = 2, p .05	
Berry Statements				
Traditional	2.35	5.3	3.098	.003
Assimilation	6.15	7.18	2.255	.018
Acculturation	3.3	5.44	3.544	.004



Table 3 (Continued)  
 Psychosocial, Emotional, and Cultural Findings

	High Achieving Students	Low Achieving Students		
Traditionality Checklist Scores	47.6	66.6	2.498	.011
Measures of Emotional Adjustment (DISC symptom scores: mean number)				
Separation Anxiety	13.5	18.5	1.32	.09(N.S.)
Phobias	17.2	32.8	2.16	.022

### Family and School

We examined only several of the many variables regarding parents' activities with and attitudes toward the school. Parents of high achieving students, on the average, tend to visit school more often (Chi square = 1.49,  $p = .074$ , one tail test). However, more important is the fact that the parents of 5 of the 13 low achieving students had made no visits in the previous school year, while none of the parents in the high achieving group failed to visit school at least twice. A uniform feeling among parents of both groups is the wish for a greater emphasis on traditional Indian history, customs, and activities in the current school curriculum.

### Teacher Ratings

Only teacher global ratings on this small sample are currently available. Each teacher completed a 110 item questionnaire on each study subject in his/her class. Items pertaining to anxiety, attentional problems, conduct problems, cooperativeness, and sociability were all involved. At the end of this item checklist, teachers were asked to make global ratings in several areas which are summarized in Table 3. There are significant differences in all of the teacher's global ratings. Not only are the high achievers seen as more intelligent, but as displaying higher language and social skills as well. The lower achievers are seen as exhibiting significant behavior and emotional problems. Just what those problems are will be revealed in the analyses of the item checklists. Teachers clearly had no trouble distinguishing between these two groups of students.

### Traditionality Measures

We now come to the difficult area of assessing traditionality. We adopted a number of methods, not all of which will be presented here. The language issue is first considered. Table 3 shows which language that

family members speak to each other at home. Families of high achieving students almost always speak English, while the families of low achieving students frequently speak more Sioux. This difference suggests a potentially differential exposure to English in these two groups.

Let us next consider parent reactions to five cultural statements taken from Berry's (1978) work and illustrated in Figure 3. The questions are "forced choice." Respondents pick the one with which they most and/or least agree. The statements are arranged so that the first one is traditional, the second represents an intermediate position, called assimilation, and the third is a majority cultural alignment, acculturation.

Figure 3  
"Berry Statements"

A.	Old people know the best remedies	0 1 2
B.	Old peoples' remedies and doctors' remedies are both useful.	0 1 2
C.	If you are sick, only nurses and doctors can help you. most _____ least _____	0 1 2
A.	Children should quit school as soon as they can, so they can help in the family.	0 1 2
B.	Children should stay in school long enough to learn to speak English but no longer.	0 1 2
C.	Children should stay in school as long as they can to get good jobs. most _____ least _____	0 1 2
A.	White people should keep away from Indian communities.	0 1 2
B.	It is good to have some whites in Indian communities, but there are enough now.	0 1 2
C.	It is best to let anyone who wants to live in Indian communities. most _____ least _____	0 1 2
A.	Indian parents should teach their children to keep strictly to the old values of their grandparents.	0 1 2
B.	Indian parents should teach their children to both keep the old values and be able to live in the white community as well.	0 1 2
C.	Indian parents should teach their children to be just like other Americans/Canadians. most _____ least _____	0 1 2

Figure 3 (Continued)  
"Berry Statements"

A.	It is better for Indians to stay on their reservation/reserves, than to come to the city.	0	1	2
B.	Indians should be able to live happily either on a reservation/reserve or in a city.	0	1	2
C.	Indians should move off the reservation/reserve to the city to get ahead in this world.	0	1	2
	most _____			
	least _____			

Table 3 depicts the results of these questions for the two student groups. Parents of low functioning students scored significantly higher on the tradition statements; while the high achieving students' parents scored higher on the accommodation and acculturation statements.

Another measure of interest involves a traditionality questionnaire which comprises 85 items developed by a Pine Ridge community panel. These items ask about traditional Sioux practices and beliefs, the first page of which is shown in Figure 4 to illustrate its content. Scoring is accomplished by assigning 2 = a lot like me, 1 = somewhat-like-me, and 0 = unlike-me to each item.

Figure 4  
Sample Page From Traditionality Questionnaire  
Traditionalism: Sioux

**TRADITIONAL PRACTICES**

Would you answer the following as being mainly "A lot like me," "Somewhat like me," or "Unlike me."

	Unlike me (0)	Somewhat like me (1)	A lot like me (2)
1.	When I haven't had fry bread for a while, I miss it.		
2.	I use sweetgrass, sage, or cedar a lot to make a sweet smell in the house.		
3.	I buy jams and preserves at the store instead of bothering to preserve foods myself for the winter.		
4.	Personally, I'd rather have a dinner of (dried corn) washtunkala taniga, timpsila and fry bread than turkey, potatoes and apple pie.		

Figure 4 (Continued)  
 Sample Page From Traditionality Questionnaire  
 Traditionalism: Sioux

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**TRADITIONAL PRACTICES**

Would you answer the following as being mainly "A lot like me," "Somewhat like me," or "Unlike me."

	Unlike me (0)	Somewhat like me (1)	A lot like me (2)
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			
9.			
10.			
11.			
12.			
13.			

Table 3 shows that the low achieving students' parents scored significantly higher (more traditional) than did the high achieving students' parents on this questionnaire. These results must be interpreted cautiously. There is, however, internal consistency among the three measures of traditionality: language use, the Berry statements, and our own traditionality questionnaire. Children from the more traditional families appear to enter school somewhat more hampered in their use of English language. Consequently, we hope to uncover some of the variables that mediate traditionality and academic achievement.

Notice that the mean score on the traditionality questionnaire for the high achieving students is 47. This implies considerable identification with beliefs and practices of the Sioux Indian traditions among the families of this group as well. One should not conclude that traditional beliefs are antithetical to academic success.

Emotional Symptoms as Obtained from the Diagnostic Interview  
 Schedule for Children (DISC)

As mentioned previously, the DISC was administered to all students during the first year of data collection. The results of the DISC diagnoses are not yet available. We examine here two areas from the

DISC, specifically the subsections on separation anxiety and phobias. We choose these because these students expressed a good number of fears and anxiety during the interview process. We do not yet know whether these concerns merit a formal diagnosis, but in lieu of that, the total symptom scores in these two subsections were compiled. Table 3 shows that the high achievement group had significantly fewer phobic symptoms than the lower achievement group. Symptoms of separation anxiety, while somewhat higher in the latter group, were not significantly more frequent than in the former group. While it would have been interesting to examine depressive symptoms and caseness, this is a more complicated subsection to disentangle within the DISC format. We did review an open-ended question in the DISC protocol: i.e., "What is it that you worry about the most?" Students from both groups mentioned car wrecks, or fear of a grandparent dying as the more prevalent worries. There do not seem to be great differences here. Only students from the low achieving group spontaneously mentioned alcohol. One student said, "Dad might get drunk and die." Another student, when asked what he worries about said, "When mom drinks and parties." Our data on alcohol problems has not been analyzed yet. The feeling with respect to low achieving students is that their family life was generally more disrupted and unpredictable.

When asked about what they would do when they grew up, the students responded as shown in Table 4. High achieving students were more specific in their responses than the low achieving students. Several of the high achieving students already had identified with the aims of education by responding that they would be teachers.

Table 4  
"What Will You Do When You Grow Up?"

High Achieving Students	Low Achieving Students
Get a good education	Don't drink
Go to college	Get a good education
Be a teacher	Get a good education
Be a teacher	Get an education
Be a teacher	Get a good job
Be a lawyer	Go to college
Be a doctor	Be a doctor
Be a nurse	Don't know
Get a good job	Don't know
Be happy	Don't know
Get married	Don't know
Be a pro football player	Don't know

## Discussion

Many variables distinguish the high achieving students from the low achieving group in this small sample. A composite profile of the high achieving and low achieving Sioux Indian student was constructed from this data. Obviously, many factors contribute to success and failure. How much weight to give each of these factors is still unknown. Thus, at this point a descriptive profile rather than a ranking of factors is in order.

### The High Functioning Sioux Student

This Indian child is male or female scoring somewhere between the 60th and 80th percentile on majority-based achievement tests. His/her WISC-R and Draw-A-Person IQ is in the range of 100 to 105, with a 10 point difference between verbal and performance items on the WISC-R. He/she usually exhibits left cerebral dominance (right handed).

His/her parents are both working. His/her mother has about one year of college level training beyond high school. He/she comes from an intact two parent family with an average size of five members. He/she enjoys frequent contact with four additional family relatives or friends. His/her parents visit the school an average of eight times during the school year. The family speaks English, and is oriented to accommodating Indian values in a white culture. Yet, they also subscribe to many traditional values.

This child expresses some anxiety and fearfulness. He/she strongly identifies with the aims of education and is rather specific about a future occupation. This child's teacher rates him/her as doing not only well academically, but socially and verbally. He/she is seen by the teacher as being relatively free of behavioral or emotional problems.

### The Low Functioning Sioux Student

This Indian child is male or female scoring on or below the 15th percentile in standard majority-based achievement tests. His/her WISC-R IQ falls in the mid 80s, with a 20 point spread between verbal and performance subscales. However, his/her Draw-A-Person IQ averages in the 100-105 range. This child has a 50% chance of showing right or mixed cerebral dominance.

His/her parents most likely have not completed 12 years of school. This child typically lives in a single parent household, and there is a 50% chance the family is on welfare. The family averages five members. The child has frequent contact with one or two additional family relatives or friends. The parent makes about five visits to the school in an average year, but there is a 30% chance that no school visits will be made. Often, both English and Sioux are spoken at home. This child's parents often identify

with a more traditional cultural stance, and are less comfortable with accommodation or acculturation to the majority culture.

Yet, the parent also expresses the importance of education. This child experiences a number of anxieties and particularly fears. His/her ideas of future occupation tend to be vague and/or lacking in detail. This child's teacher views him/her as not only being less academically capable, but socially less adept as well. He/she is seen by the teacher as prone to behavioral and/or emotional problems as well as academic difficulties.

### Conclusion

Cognitive, social, emotional, and perhaps cultural factors all play a role in mediating academic success or failure in the Sioux student. What factors will prove to be most important over time is still to be answered. One can be certain that socio-economic stability will play a major role, as it always has (Douglas, 1964). Children function well when the adults around them function well.

Based on these findings, are there any preliminary words for the school? While not being teachers ourselves, we feel that these results suggest that teachers might first play to the Indian student's strengths, which lay in visual motor tasks such as art, and specifically, drawing. From that strength students might then be encouraged in verbal skills by describing what they have drawn or created. Such a suggestion probably has already occurred to many others. These students' skills in representational drawing should not be neglected and might prove a link in helping them master language skills.

It seems that the Sioux have always been a visual people. Black Elk's famous comment about his nation illustrates this with his vivid description of the circle:

Everything an Indian does is in a circle...In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us through the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as the hoop was unbroken the people flourished. (Nerhardt, 1961, p. 276).

Unfortunately, the circle of educational success and its relationship to emotional health remains broken for many of these children. How to make one relevant to the other for a meaningful future is still an enormous and unsolved question.

Department of Psychiatry  
Oregon Health Sciences University  
3181 S.W. Sam Jackson Park Road  
Portland, Oregon 97201

### Notes

1. See Beiser, M., & Manson, S.M. Prevention of emotional disorders in North American Native children, *Journal of Preventive Psychiatry* (in press).
2. Taken from the Brookings Institution, Institute for Government Research, Lewis Meriam, Technical Director, "The Problem of Indian Administration" Washington, D.C., (1928) New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1971.
3. Ibid, pg. 41
4. Wilson, J., October, 1985. Personal Communication. Pine Ridge, SD.

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