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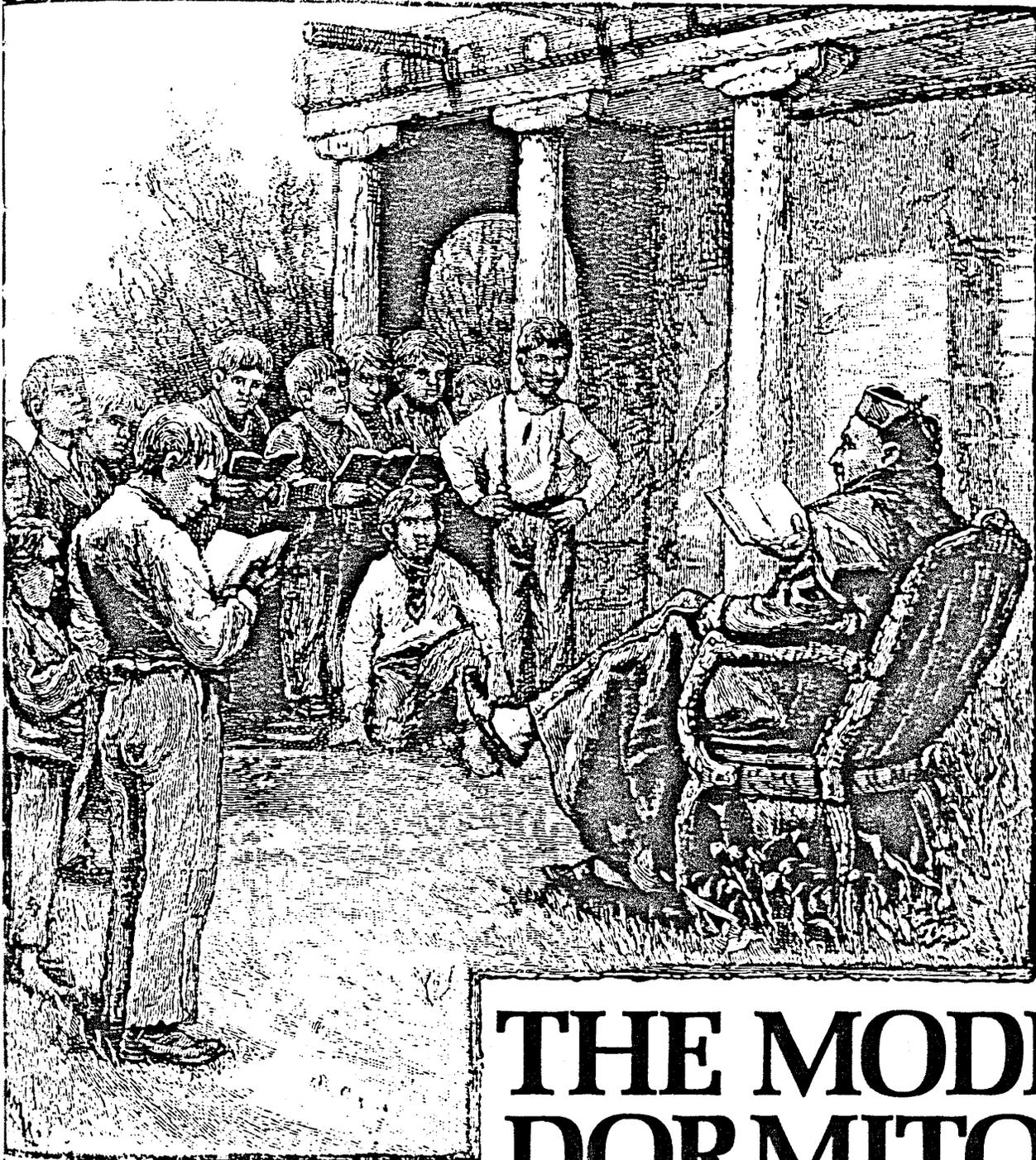
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THE MODEL DORMITORY

By GEORGE S. GOLDSTEIN, Ph.D.

Indian boarding schools are notorious. When the United States Senate formed a special subcommittee on Indian education six years ago, it took sufficient adverse testimony to fill six large volumes.¹ Many of the observations and recommendations were the same as those made by the Meriam Commission, which investigated the same

This paper is a modification of a presentation by Dr. Goldstein and Robert L. Bergman, M.D., to the 1973 meeting of the American Psychiatric Association.

problem in 1928.² Numerous researchers have studied Indian schools and found a high incidence of mental illnesses, suppression of natural ability, and low achievement among children who attend these schools.³⁻⁷

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Neglect and disregard of Indian culture and language, student and parent powerlessness, overcrowding, and underfinancing are problems common to almost all Indian schools. On the Navaho reservation, more than 25,000 children are attending boarding school. Most boarders are enrolled when they are six years old, but some begin as early as four or five. Those who start later are usually already in emotional difficulty, referred because of delinquency or the disintegration of their families. Thus children who are young, disturbed, or both are subjected to the stress of being separated from their parents and then to all the other stresses of Indian school.

In most instances the ratio of children to adults caring for them is planned to be 80 to one. If a dormitory attendant is sick or a position is unfilled, the ratio often rises as high as 200 to one. This ratio compares unfavorably with that of many prisons, and indeed such a number of students to each staff member implies that nothing more is expected than that the students be controlled. The students are young children more or less permanently separated from their families, and they need to find, in the school, a substitute for the family. But even the greatest child-care worker could not be a surrogate parent to that many children at once.

The lack of concern for the children's basic needs that is reflected by the small number of dormitory staff is evident in many other aspects of dormitory life. The children have little or no encouragement to confide in school personnel. The houseparents at a number of schools are told that they are not qualified to do counseling and should refer all such problems to their superiors. If

they manage to find the time to talk with a small child who comes to them in tears for comfort, they may get into trouble for overstepping the limits of their position in trying to help him.

Many of the instructional aides are aware of the faults in this system, but as they are the lowest-ranking, most easily replaced members of the school staff, they are not in a good position to do anything about it. Some schools do encourage aides to try to be substitute parents, but it is not unusual for staff and students to get each other in trouble if they try to develop a personal relationship. One school employee invited several girls to come to her quarters and make fried bread, a traditional Navaho food. All concerned were reprimanded for this violation of the rules.

The lack of parents or parent substitutes leaves the children with few opportunities to identify with any adult, except in a negative way. They see that the Navaho employees of the schools are generally low in status and not much respected by those in authority, and this does not help their own feelings of self-esteem. They have little chance to learn by observation how one may live in the non-Indian world.

For most of us, school was a natural and expected development in our lives. We knew we would go, and when we got there it was not greatly unlike what we had known before. The lessons learned in school only confirmed and extended our identities and values. But many of the Indian children who are introduced to boarding schools each year find themselves in so strange and confusing an environment that they are forced to reconsider most of their ideas of how one goes about the business of living. The physical environment and the goals they are expected to adopt are strange and illogical in terms of their past experience.

If the children found reassuring adults with whom they could identify and share their worries, they would still have a hard time, but they would be much more likely to decide that school was a good place for them and that they were good enough for school. As things are, the children arrive in great numbers, all at once, and the staff have all they can do to meet the bare physical necessities. Too often the children find that they are not supposed to speak the only language they know, and that their way of life is not only vastly different from the school's but poorly regarded by the people who now care for them.

Only an exceptionally energetic and efficient aide has the time to do much in the way of advising, reassuring, or simply befriending children, and then he must pick which child to spend time with. Aides naturally tend to work with the children who come around or who, by being noticeably in trouble, ask for help. The children who in their loneliness and discouragement seclude themselves are easily missed. Most of the children have no significant adult to admire and use as a model and no one to please by coming back from class with a good grade on a test or a new skill to demonstrate.

The children come to depend on themselves and each other, even becoming alienated from the world of their parents. Many of the adolescent and preadolescent children believe that their old way of life is poor, but they have only vague ideas of what would be better. The school has succeeded in convincing them that some things are not good for them, but not in helping them find what is good for them. In many cases we find that they are guided more by their need to oppose the school than by any wish to succeed on its terms. The children, no longer feeling respect for values learned at home and definitely distrusting the school, find their guidance from the values of classmates. In many cases the group pressure is towards delinquency, or at least towards passive resistance.

Deploring the institution of boarding schools is to attack a beaten horse but not a dead one. Some authorities have tried to ignore the problems of boarding schools because these are gradually being replaced. This seems to me a very short-sighted policy, since boarding schools will exist for some time to come. They exist in the form of large, new, reasonably well-built structures whose abandonment would be difficult, fiscally and politically. For many children, day school attendance is impractical for geographic and social reasons. In many areas all-weather roads, necessary for school bus transportation, are nonexistent, and many families depend on free housing and food for their children as a social welfare necessity. Many other children are in boarding schools because their families have become so disrupted and disorganized that it is felt they are better off away from home, and no other care is available.

For many years Indian groups, school administrators, consultants, and a variety of outside experts have pointed to the need for improvement, but new funds were not provided by fiscal

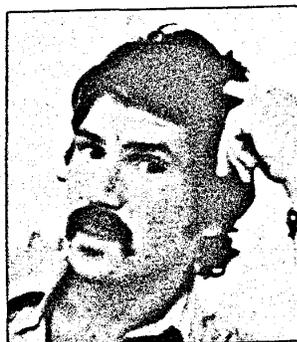
managers, who were unconvinced that more money for child care would make any difference. Although much expert testimony was presented to the effect that the children would benefit by having more and better surrogate parents, there was no concrete evidence that this was true. We decided to attempt to provide such evidence in order to increase the pressure for change and to set up what we call the Model Dormitory Project.

This project, which began in the fall of 1969, is a joint venture of the school board of the Toyei Boarding School, the Education Branch of the Navaho Bureau of Indian Affairs, and our program. Financing has come jointly from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Indian Health Service, and the United States Office of Education. It is located in the Toyei School, an elementary school near the center of the Navaho nation. The model dormitory serves 200 children, ranging in age from six to 11.

The design of the project is simple. Only the dormitory staff was changed; no facilities were constructed or remodeled, and no changes were made in the classrooms. Thirty-two additional houseparents were hired, a number sufficient to lower the child-adult ratio to 12:1. One of the assumptions in the original plan was that Navaho children are best cared for by Navaho-speaking people; so the houseparents are all Navaho, chosen by the school board for personal qualities and work experience rather than for formal training. The project director and a large group of consultants have carried on continuous in-service training designed to increase the workers' ability to help the children and ultimately to help the houseparents become dormitory directors and houseparent trainers themselves.

Most of the houseparents had attended boarding school themselves, and many had worked in ordinary dormitories. It was hard for them to

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believe that they should do what seemed sensible and pleasant rather than what had always been done. At first, many of them felt guilty about having so much fun at work. After six months or so these anxieties were largely overcome, and the dorm became a more pleasant place for the children and the staff.

Since our purpose was to demonstrate that such changes could produce objective improvement, a three-year evaluation procedure was in operation from the beginning. The work of a separate team, it aimed to reduce confusion and eliminate any question of prejudice.

Evaluating projects of this sort is notoriously difficult; when dealing with different cultures and languages, it becomes close to impossible. At the beginning of this project, no standardized instruments had been developed for Navaho children at this or any other age level. A few tests that were relatively culture-fair had been used with children this young, but even with these there were no Navaho norms or even evidence that the test was functional with Indian children. Other tests had been validated at these age levels, but they employed the English language and cultural concepts. We made careful translations of some of these tests, as well as constructing new instruments, making the stimulus materials specific to Navaho children. In addition, we used trained teams of observers to look at actual behavior differences in the dormitories; we asked teachers to make observations; we collected critical incidents that showed what the model dormitory could do for individual children; and we had a specialist study the development of English as a second language. In short, we tried everything we could think of that might tell us whether the model dormitory was having any effect on the children.

About half our attempts failed. Tests were too difficult, specialists were too specialized, supposedly standard calipers were unreliable, and ingenious approaches to measurement proved singularly ineffectual. But more of our measures showed statistically significant differences between our experimental and control groups than we had expected. Although some of the differences are small, they are almost uniform in indicating that the model dormitory is having a positive effect on the children.

In selecting the control school, we looked for a school comparable in size and location, one in which the children had been raised in similar

economic and social conditions and the administration would allow such a study. We selected Lower Greasewood Boarding School, located south of Ganado, Arizona, approximately 50 miles from Tseyi. After extensive base-line testing we found that the schools and the students were similar, and that the insignificant bias (in economic background and in the children's height and weight) was in favor of the Greasewood School.

Tests of intellectual development showed that the model-dormitory children performed better than those in the control school

We measured three areas—intellectual development, emotional adjustment, and physical development. The instruments administered to measure intellectual development were the Draw-a-Person, Bender-Gestalt, Developmental Form Sequence, Stanford Achievement Test, and teacher assessments of classroom behavior. Physical-development dimensions included essentially everything from height, weight, arm and leg development, and chest and hip measurements to push-ups, sit-ups, ball throwing, and running.

The problems of measuring emotional adjustment proved more difficult. We found that the emotional signs of the Draw-a-Person and Bender-Gestalt tests were somewhat useful; beyond this, the standard methods proved of almost no value. We had to develop our own measures, test them with other groups, and then try them. When the background culture was carefully considered and the tests were kept direct, they worked well.

Overall, the results were striking. Tests of intellectual development showed that the model-dormitory children, especially the boys, performed better than those in the control school. Teacher ratings indicated that model-dormitory girls worked harder, persevered longer in a job, and paid more attention to directions than did the controls. Model-dormitory children had fewer negative emotional indicators on tests of emotional development. In tests designed to determine how the child sees himself in his environment, model-dormitory boys saw themselves as more

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cooperative, successful, and generally more active than the control-school boys. They also used less fantasy and avoidance to meet their needs. When dealing with total emotional development protocols, the experimenters attempted to identify profiles that were thought to indicate severe emotional difficulties (intense anxiety, fear, lack of self-esteem, and depression, in addition to disorientation or schizophrenic response). The evaluators did not know who took the test or which school the child attended. Of the seven such abnormal profiles identified, six were from the control school.

At Lower Greasewood, the children were not particularly interested in each other's performance on the physical tests. The children of the model dormitory, in contrast, would gather around and cheer the child taking the tests. They showed great interest in having each other do well. On physical tests in which endurance and motivation seem to have the most effect—push-ups and sit-ups—the model-dormitory children did very well. Differences in social interaction that attended the physical testing suggest greater group identification and peer encouragement at the model dormitory.

In January, 1971, a period of systematic observation for more than 700 hours provided some of the most convincing evidence of the model dormitory's effectiveness. The 14 observers received three days' training before their site visits in the process of naturalistic observation of child-adult interaction. Particular care was taken to teach these observers the distinction between observation and inference and the need for concrete behavioral description of events. The observation forms were broken down into chronological categories: getting up in the morning, going to school, afterschool period, evening activities, and going to bed. Another category, "critical incidents," assessed unusual aide-aide, aide-child, and child-

child interactions. From the massive amount of data accumulated, we can draw three basic conclusions about the model dormitory:

1. More instructional aides in boarding-school dormitories can manage the children more effectively. This is clearly visible in the smooth, relaxed operation of the model dormitory and the warm, human atmosphere that prevailed. Having more aides does not mean that the dormitory will be more attractive, but it does mean that more adults are available to act as parent surrogates for the children.

2. Instructional aides respond to training as professional houseparents and take seriously their responsibility as parent surrogates to the children. Initial resistance to the model-dormitory concept came from those who held that more instructional aides would do less work and contribute little to the children's welfare. It is now clear that more instructional aides will do not only more work but a qualitatively better job of caring for the children.

3. More and better-trained instructional aides can provide the conditions for development of happier, more secure children. The most important effect of the model dormitory is on the children. The individual attention they receive, the sense of living and learning that is stimulated, and the sheer amount of positive interaction between children and aides provide a social network that supports and reassures the children at a critical period in their lives.

We must still consider the difficulty of obtaining reliable data from children at these ages, and the problem of testing children from different cultural contexts. But we do feel that the model dormitory not only had a significant effect as measured by objective test results, but may have prevented serious emotional problems from developing in some children and may have offered others a chance to develop their capacities to an unusual extent. ■

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