

**The Educating of Native Americans in U. S. schools:
A historical perspective**

by

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Introduction

For the last three hundred years, little has changed in the perspective of how and why Native Americans have been "educated" in U.S. schools. The dominant ruling class in the United States government for over two hundred years has been that of Anglo immigrants from European descent; therefore, to understand U.S. federal policy in regard to the formal education of Native Americans it is important to begin by looking at the prevailing attitudes in early European colonial pursuits and policies that have eclipsed into this century.

During the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance in Europe there was a legal system influenced by the lawyer-pope, Innocent IV, in which abstractions of legal status and rights of non-Christian societies prevailed in use by Catholic heads of states in transactions with the natives of the "New World." In early colonialization the papacy served to give lands and set a precedent of theological law and relations with aboriginals of foreign lands. After Christopher Columbus returned to the European continent, the Spanish government solicited and received a papal bull, *Inter Caetera*, issued on May third, 1493. The purpose of this document was to give the Spanish Crown "'forever' all that Columbus had discovered" (Shattuck & Norgren, 1991. p 25). And, "throughout the sixteenth century, Spanish rulers also convened formal boards of inquiry, often composed of church scholars, to consider what, if any, rights were due the indigenous people of the New World. These inquiries focused upon what actions, including war and enslavement, could be properly pursued in the name of Christianity and the Crown." (p 25) Although not all peoples coming to the New World after Columbus and prior to 1776 were governed by Catholic religious influences, from the onset, many believed that the Indians were inferior or even inhuman and, therefore, "marked from birth for subjugation" (p25). On the other hand, some, like Franciscus de Victoria, maintained that Europeans did not own the land on the newly discovered continent but had the right to trade, travel, and

"preach the gospel" under divine law and unless the Indians were conquered as a result of war, their land could not be taken away.

Later, for the orderly growth of empires, the Dutch and British governments initiated treaties for acquiring Indian land. Some greedy individuals dismissed their government's decrees that persons could not negotiate treaties on behalf of their own interests and this was to cause dilemmas of ownership and questions of authority of indigenous tribes over the colonialists. Unfortunately, the English, French, and Dutch did not think that their concept of land tenure was different than that of Native Americans. This caused problems as the new immigrants and European governments ignored Indian tribal systems of law. Eventually, in 1790, after the new United States had been established on this continent, the federal government enacted the Indian Trade and Intercourse Act and officially recognized Native American tribal governments as sovereign entities. However, in 1871, after most of the land area currently known as the continental United States was under some form of jurisdiction by the federal government, the recognition of sovereignty was then repealed with the Indian Appropriation Act (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1974).

Title to land has been THE key issue behind individual, corporate, state, and federal disputes between these entities and Native Americans ever since the Dutch's first treaty. The traditional tenure principles of land ownership espoused by Anglos do not fit with the ownership ideology of Native Americans in general; an existence of spiritual relationship between man and all living things and not to be polluted, profaned, or debased. The growth of American nationalism that was spurred on by Frederick Jackson Turner's tenets of "manifest destiny" rationalized the subduing of Native American societies and lands. Anglos perceived the domination of this continent not just as an opportunity for exploitation, but also as a God given duty.

Native Americans also differed from European immigrants with the perceptions of accumulation of goods, profit as a motivation for labor, privacy of the individual above

others, Christian morality and virtue, the "hostility" of nature, progress in social and technological venues, and being satisfied with the status quo (Tozer, 1993). These were not typical things important to most indigenous groups. Along with these differences was the idea of education.

Education Ideals of Anglos

Early education practices regarding Indians was primarily taken upon by missionaries, "for whom education and Christendom were almost interchangeable terms" (Prucha, 1984. p 688). One of the earliest attempts to "Christianize" Indian children was begun at Lebanon, Connecticut, with the Congregational minister Eleazar Wheelock's efforts at the Moor's Indian Charity School (Auerbach, 1994). In 1794, the first treaty that addressed the education of Indians was signed with the Oneidas, Tuscaroras, and the Stockbriges (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1974). Most of the treaties with American Indians before the last of 370 treaties was signed August 13, 1868, had some aspect specifically concerned with education.

From the very beginning of federal policy and Indian education the epitome of reform has been the "civilizing" of Native Americans. In 1819, Congress passed the first Federal Indian education program known as the "civilization fund." When placed on Reservations, Indians were considered wards of the U.S. government. Therefore, many citizens of the U.S. saw Native Americans in need of 1) the English language, 2) labor skills, 3) knowledge of Christian religion, 4) knowledge to perform the proper duties of family, the state, and the church, and 5) assimilation. Education was the chief avenue of integrating individuals into the political and socioeconomic life in the United States. However, these efforts seem to be a paradox in light of eighteenth and nineteenth century American history when one considers that except for the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887, in which some Indians were given land allotments and citizenship, it was not until 1924 that Indians collectively were granted citizenship and the right to vote.

E Pluribus Unum-"from the many one", these words on U.S. coins succinctly state this country's policies and attitudes of the "melting pot" or "pressure cooker assimilation" that has persisted in educational reform efforts both on and off reservations. Native Americans are not the only ones who have suffered this assimilation trauma. Assimilation through education has been the primary objective in general with immigrants as well (Bennet, 1995).

"American public education historically practiced an exclusivist policy of expecting children from diverse cultures to melt into a unique American culture, characterized by allegiance to capitalism, republicanism, and a secularized Protestantism, all of which was communicated in a uniquely Americanized English" (Auerbach, 1994. p 551).

The reservation system begun by the U.S. government in the 1840's was also designed to pressure Native Americans into "relinquishing" their customs and culture. Native religion was discouraged and some ceremonial practices forbidden by both the government and missionaries (BIA, 1974). For Native Americans, God was seen as Nature and their spirituality was manifested in their coexistence with it.

The formal education of Native Americans advocated by Anglos was started as an attempt to bridge the gap between the differences of European-American concepts of religion and civilization and molding the Indians into the standards and practices of the ruling culture. Indians were taught their roles for functioning in non-Indian civilization. Essentially it was believed that culture was defined by "civilization" and Indians were viewed as savages because they sought to live in harmony with nature and not attempt to subdue, master, and control it. It could be said that European Americans saw the world as a "great chain of dominance, with man second only to God in a hierarchy of creation." (Tozer, 1993. p 163) For the white man, civilization was progress.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs and Education

In 1824, the Secretary of War created the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) within the War Department to oversee the official federal policies of interaction with and the control of Native Americans; this included education. Then, in 1849, the BIA was transferred over to the Department of Interior. There the BIA is at the "bottom of the totem pole" in the hierarchical structure where it is positioned in authority under the deputy to the Assistant Secretary for Public Land Management. Here the matters of culture, of human welfare, of social cost, of self-determination and sovereignty are given less weight than the interests of the Department of the Interior in search for the proper use of land and natural resources: "the greatest good for the greatest number" is the rule (*this "greatest number" includes non-Indians*) (Cahn, 1970).

As stated earlier, land title has been the key issue in conflict between individuals and governmental bodies and Native Americans. In 1906, the Burke Act was amended to the Dawes Act allotment. It required that Indians proved "competency" in land management and farming abilities in order to maintain or receive control over the original 160 acre reservation lands apportioned to individuals (*of course this was based on Anglo methods of management*). The land allotment policy was concluded with the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934. Assimilation into the mainstream of governing Anglo culture was the dominant impetus throughout the land allotment policies. Many Indians were unable to farm the poor land areas awarded them and were not "educated" or "competent" enough to sustain control of the land. In order to survive they sold their parcels to Anglos. Between 1887 and 1934, over one hundred million acres of reservation lands were lost through the land allotment programs (Cahn, 1970). The Office of Indian Education (OIE) was initially opened in the BIA and was later transferred to the U.S. Department of Education.

Education of Native Americans

There are stark contrasts between Anglo education ideological perspectives and those of traditional Native Americans. For Native Americans, education begins at birth and the best education of the tribe's children is the responsibility and basic concern of all members of the tribe. Storytelling was the main avenue that Native American children learned their heritage. Anglo and Native American education ideals have not historically been parallel. As a member of the Lumbee tribe, Vernon Cooper, has pointed out "these days people seek knowledge, not wisdom. Knowledge is the past; wisdom is of the future." (Arden, 1989. p 63) Wisdom is perceived as more important to many Native Americans, not just knowledge. Schooling for a Native American child from a traditional home is both the process of enculturation of learning their own culture and acculturation, acquiring the necessary skills to survive outside one's own culture (Little Soldier, 1986). On the other hand, the specific focus of Anglo views and policy for education of Native Americans until 1975, has been assimilation at all costs (Blue Clark, 1989).

For centuries white man had seen Indians as a major problem in the way of progress. Therefore, formal school and social engineering efforts were needed to rectify the situation. Often times young Indian children were taken (*kidnapped*) from their parents and placed in boarding schools, usually run by missionaries. There their hair was cut, their home language forbidden to be used, their clothes in which they came in were burned, and they were punished for use of their religion and customs. The education of Native Americans on reservation land has been the prerogative of the federally operated BIA. Reservation schools were usually substandard in sanitary and safety conditions. Off reservation federal boarding schools were also started after 1880. If parents did not send their children to the boarding schools then the government threatened to withhold their rations and allotments.

Numerous children ran away from the boarding schools. Some were caught and were returned with severe punishment. In some instances Native American youth who

made it back to the reservations were unable to fit into their own culture anymore and did not fit into white man's world either. The term "*back to the blanket*" referred to those who returned to the reservation and either refused to adapt to Anglo indoctrination or were unable to do so.

Several groups and individuals criticized the barbarous treatment of Native Americans. In 1882, the Quakers originated a civil rights group on their behalf. In 1905, Francis E. Leupp became commissioner of Indian Affairs and chief administrator of the BIA. Although he did not disagree with the pretense of assimilation, he did object to the manner in which it was being done. He preferred the use of day schools over boarding schools. This way civilization could be brought to the Indian rather than take the Indian to civilization. (Tozer, 1993)

During the "progressive era" of education, 1890-1920's, a movement toward scientific management emerged from the developments in business with the concepts of social engineering and maintenance. Activity based learning programs that mirrored the world of work were sought. This way Indians could learn to use their arts and crafts for employment. Furthermore, progressive educators began to encourage Indians to take pride in their culture and began the first bilingual education programs. Tozer aptly described this era of education reform in relation to Indian education.

"progressive education reflected emerging interest in such areas as democratic-participatory education based on the needs and interests of students; activity-based learning; the union between work and learning; and the incorporation of prevailing social conditions as a fundamental part of education. Yet, as progressivism worked its way into Indian policy, a number of contradictions arose. Democratization of schools conflicted with the fact that all Indian schooling was planned and administered in the B.I.A. hierarchy. Indian control of education was not intended for the Bureau, for despite their long tradition of consensual decision-making, it was supposed that Indians lacked the rationality for a democratic education decision. (*It would not be until the 1960's that the first Indian boards of education would be formed in the contract schools, and they would be of questionable autonomy.*) Activity-based learning reflecting the world of

work intended to adjust Indians to their social reality, would increasingly alienate them from schooling and from higher education." (p 167)

This "reality" was low social, economic, and political status that continues and Native Americans are well aware of it. Certainly the question arises: does the old adage "out of sight, out of mind" pertain to Federal policy of Native Americans? Mainstream America has had little interaction with Indians. Many Native Americans have been and still are in a reservation world hidden from public view and public consciousness.

The landmark case of *Brown vs Board of Education, Topeka* in 1954, in which African-Americans were stated to have equal educational opportunities as Anglos in public schools did not apply to equal educational rights to Native American children in reservation schools. During the Civil Rights movements of the 1960's African-Americans sought recognition, justice, and equality. At the same time Native Americans were marching for recognition of the prevalent reservation conditions: poverty, disease, and despair. During the 1960's, suicides among Indian teenagers was three times the national average and on some reservations it was ten times more. (Cahn, 1970) The first protest action by Indians to receive national prominence was the occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969, by the group known as AIM (*the American Indian Movement*). Later, this same group received notoriety for their takeovers of the BIA at Wounded Knee in South Dakota, and Washington, D.C.

The United States of America is a country of immigrants. Urban Native Americans have not fared much better than their counterparts on rural reservations. When Native Americans left the reservations to seek a better life in the cities they found, instead, more prejudice, overcrowding, crime, graft, corruption and disease. "It was all too easy for them to associate these evils with immigrants, who always seemed to be at the center of evil." (Weisberger, 1994. p 85)

As Native American youth have entered public schools, they have faced a predominantly prejudiced and ignorant description by non-Indians. The view of Native

Americans as savages and incompetents has been perpetrated in conscious effort. Early published literature of the Southwest nourished a racist society.

Before there was a firmly established legal system west of the Appalachians, between 1830 and the Civil War, Southwest humor focused on life in the semi-frontier. Humorists wrote of con men, fools, braggarts, fighters, and hunters. Included in these articles were stories of Davy Crockett, Mike Finh, Sut Lovingood, and Simon Suggs. One of the prominent humorists published from 1845-1856 was Johnson Jones-Hooper. He wrote stories about how white men could swindle Indians. Jones-Hooper penned tales of Cpt. Simon Suggs and his adventures in seeking Indians as human prey for personal gain.(O'Brien, 1994)

Although there is a recent trend in cinema to get away from the stereotype of Indians as savages in such films as *The Emerald Forest*, *The Mission*, *Dances With Wolves*, *Black Robe*, *At Play in the Field of the Lord*, *Thunderheart*, *The Last Tribe*, and *The Legend of Wolf Mountain*, early movies like D.W. Griffith's *Leatherstocking*, in 1909, had depicted the denigration of these noble people. By the 1920's, movies had well established Native Americans as almost sub-human and "pernicious savages." (Edgerton, 1994) The trend set by early film makers persisted for over a half a century. Many people remember the exploits of "the *Lone Ranger* and *Tonto*", a white man and his Indian sidekick, but few realize that "tonto" can translate as "idiot" or "moron" in the Spanish language.

It is no wonder that Native American youth have generally done poorly in Anglo schools. Their people have been represented disgracefully in textbooks. Native Americans as a group have not scored high on standardized tests. Furthermore, the Kennedy Report of 1969, which looked at Indian reservations in relation to the mainstream U.S., listed Indians at the bottom of every area addressed: poverty, education, and health (Fixico, 1989).

Indian Education Reform Efforts Since 1972

After the endeavors of AIM brought national recognition to their efforts, the federal government once again started to make changes in policy regarding Native Americans. The Office of Indian Education (OIE) was created under the Indian Education Act of 1972. It was signed into law as Title IV of Public Law 92-318 on June 23rd and education amendments were authorized for the funding of special programs to give educational opportunities for Native American youth and adults to address academic needs. (OIE, 1991) In 1975, Congress once again recognized Native American tribes as sovereign entities and passed the Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act, also known as Public Law 93-638. Here Congress recognized Indian tribes, bands, nations, rancheria, pueblo, colony, or villages with "the right to direct their own destinies, while at the same time preserving their special rights and trustee status with the Federal government." (BIA, 1976. p 1) This marked the end of official federal policy of assimilating Native Americans into the mainstream of Anglo America.

The OIE was originally in the Bureau of Indian Affairs and in 1978 was transferred to the U.S. Department of Education. The Education Amendments Act of 1978, PL 95-561, provided for a school board training fund, health and safety survey of BIA schools and dormitory buildings. Also, with this act, the OIE, which was originally in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, was transferred to the U.S. Department of Education to have educational programs run by educators under the direction of the Indian Education Programs. (BIA, 1981)

As noted earlier, Indian children as a whole performed poor academically in school. Many educators were unsure how to address their needs. "Cultural, linguistic, and other biases within existing techniques make it difficult, and in some cases, impossible to assess the true abilities and potentials of Indian students." (Unger, 1985. p 3) Some Indian tribes have taken over running schools operated by the BIA in order to meet the special needs of the locale. These tribes make arrangements with the federal government

for what are called "contract schools." The U.S. Department of Education has reported that over 309,000 Indian students receive educational assistance in 1,050 public school districts, 75 Bureau of Indian Affairs contract schools, and 82 other BIA schools. (U.S. Dept. of Ed. 1993)

The statistics of Native Americans attending school is disheartening. During the 1970's, only 25% of Native Americans living on reservations completed high school and 40% didn't continue after the elementary grades. On some Navajo reservations the drop-out rate was 80%. Less than 2% of Native Americans who graduate from high school complete college. According to the National Center of Statistics, for the 1989-1990 academic year, there were a total of 3,525 Associate degrees and 1,086 Bachelor of Science degrees awarded to Native Americans.(1992) As of 1991, 8 tenths of one percent of students in higher education were Native Americans, compared to an enrollment comprised of 76.5% whites, 9.3% African-Americans, 6% Hispanic, 4.4% Asian, and 2.9% non-resident alien students. (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 1993)

In 1990, the OIE established the Indian Nations at Risk Task to study Indian Education and make recommendations. Their report entitled *Indian Nations At Risk: An Educational Strategy for Action* stated that up to 60% of American Indian students do poorly in school. Also, they noted that 9% who were 8th graders in 1988 had already dropped out of school by 1990. This task force "called for higher expectations of students' capabilities, enriching curricula, support for Native languages and culture, involvement of parents and community leaders in partnership with schools, and training of teachers to teach Indian children more effectively." (p Title VI-2)

Epilogue

Despite the arduous efforts by Anglos to assimilate Native Americans into the mainstream of their worlds of education, work, and culture, fortunately some Native Americans have persisted in hanging on to their treasured customs, languages, religions, arts, and ideologies. With the renewed interest in bilingual education, changes in federal policies on behalf of Native Americans, concerns for human rights, and a greater emphasis on multicultural pluralism in U.S. society, perhaps the twenty-first century will witness a major acceptance and expansion of Native American cultures.

"Even when old blood is diluted, as it so often is today by mixed marriages, Indianness tends to dominate. Indians do not on the whole subscribe to the melting pot...They want education and modern advantages, as long as these do not interfere with what they have chosen to be. Many still believe that the natural world is an analogue to the spiritual one, and, in as much as they can, still abide by that concept. Even when they are Baptists or Catholics, inner Indianness remains." (Coe, 1986. p 57)

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