

American Indian Boarding Schools: What Went Wrong? What Is Going Right?

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Boarding schools for Indigenous children in the United States and Canada have a deservedly bad reputation for mistreatment and abuse. However, faced with rapid loss of land and ways of life, some Indigenous families intentionally sent their children to school to learn English and to cope with new realities. Experiences in the schools varied. Some students endured traumatic experiences, while at times boarding schools served as a place of refuge from the harsh realities of life on Indian reservations and reserves. Assimilationist policies and practices attacked Indigenous languages, cultures, and identities in the boarding schools. Today Indigenous nations are reclaiming the education of their children, promoting strong Indigenous identities through culture-based education and language immersion.

SCHOOLING FOR THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE of North America was an experiment in teaching them to live like White people, so they could coexist with a rapidly increasing immigrant population from Europe who settled on the lands that had sustained Indigenous people for centuries. Adults, often set in their ways, tended to resist change, so children were taken away to boarding schools where they could learn English and become “civilized” Christian farmers and laborers. Schools had only limited success in their civilizing mission, leaving a legacy that includes profound academic and economic disparities (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Maxwell, 2013). Currently Indigenous people are working to take back control of their children’s education and to utilize the strengths of traditional cultures as they live in the modern world.

Institutional Life

U.S. and Canadian boarding schools differed across place and time while Indigenous students’ experiences varied dramatically (Adams, 1995; Milloy,

1999; Reyhner & Eder, 2017). The recollections of American Indian Movement leader Dennis Banks exemplify the conflicted feelings students could have:

My memories are rooted in the military boarding schools I attended in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota during the [19]30s and 40s. Even now, the varied faces of my friends stay with me. . . . [D]uring the eleven years I spent in government boarding schools, smiling was always far from my mind. . . . What days those were! But somehow, despite the difficulties, those were the glory days. . . . I say “glory days” because those are the fondest memories of my early childhood. It was in this phase of my life that I met other kids who became my friends for life. . . . We went through the forced haircuts during which we’d be shaven bald, the slaps on the wrists by wooden rulers when we spoke Indian languages, the mouth washing if we said “damn” or other bad words. And we all learned how to march; in cadence we marched to the dining room, to the school building and to the gym. Yes, we marched—until we learned to run. We all ran away from those schools from time to time, not really knowing where we were running to. In a way it was our own survival instinct telling us to go, and so we went. But the price for getting caught was the “hot line.” That was when the older boys would form two lines facing each other—ten boys on either side—and they would hit you with belts, sticks, and straps as you ran through the “line.” Can you imagine? A government policy that encouraged kids to punish other kids. But we all survived, though at times the Indianness was almost beaten out of us. Then there were the books we had to learn from. Books about white people. White heroes. White presidents. All the stories were about how the white settlers settled this land among savage Indians, or how Indians came marauding, stealing, scalping, and killing innocent babies. All our teachers were white. (1994, pp. viii–ix)

Esther Horne (Shoshone), Banks’s fourth-grade teacher at Wahpeton Boarding School, remembers Banks telling her about the impact of her teaching students about Indian contributions to America. Years later he remembered her saying, “Keep your heads up. Don’t smell your knees. And don’t be a puppet on somebody else’s string” (Horne & McBeth, 1998, p. 129).

Students and teachers who published accounts of their boarding school experiences were exceptional. Many of their descriptions recount harsh discipline and students running away from school in freezing

weather; their suffering sometimes led to post-traumatic stress syndrome (Bassett, Buchwald, & Manson, 2014; Lajimodiere, 2014). However, some students found boarding schools a refuge from poverty at home and a place to make friends and learn useful skills (Child, 1998; Lomawaima, 1994; McBeth, 1983).

Partly to cut costs, partly because of racist denigration of Indigenous capabilities, and partly to rapidly transform the many Indigenous people who were hunter gatherers quickly to farming and laboring, late nineteenth and early 20th-century boarding schools had a one-half day vocational curriculum that taught boys farming methods and trades, and girls homemaking skills. Students took care of farm animals, grew food, built and repaired buildings, sewed clothes, cooked, and cleaned. Alums were rarely able to use school trades when they returned home, and the schools' farming methods often did not fit climatic and soil conditions on their homelands. Students spent the other half of the day in "academic" classrooms learning English and the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic (Adams, 1995; Reyhner & Eder, 2017).

Even teachers documented the insufficiencies rampant in boarding schools. Estelle Brown taught at Crow Creek Indian School in South Dakota. She recalled that in 1897 students "dressed in a frigid room, washed in icy water in an unheated washroom" and "drank coffee three times daily. For there was neither sugar nor milk. Butter, cheese, fresh fruit, and vegetables were never seen in that dining room." A "daily diet of bread and molasses, coffee, meat and gravy" included eggs on rare occasions (Brown, 1952, pp. 72–73). Brown and others describe how conditions for teachers were often not much better (Reyhner & Eder, 2017).

In Canada, John S. Milloy (1999) used government records to document the unhealthy, brutal conditions in Canada's government-funded but church-run residential schools. He found them "marked by the persistent neglect and abuse of children and through them of Aboriginal communities in general" (p. xiii) and haunted by widespread physical and sexual abuse (both by staff and other students) from 1879 until the last one closed in 1986. In these schools, "discipline was curriculum and punishment was pedagogy" (p. 44). Canada's Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established by the Canadian Parliament in 2008, documented through seven thousand interviews and the examination of five million records the mental, sexual, and physical abuse of Indigenous students in the residential schools (National Center for Truth and Reconciliation, 2016).

Trauma

Indigenous parents sometimes sent children to boarding school despite the drawbacks, hoping children would learn to survive in the radically altered world inflicted by settler colonialism. Other families were threatened with loss of rations, starvation, or incarceration if they did not send their children to school. Sometimes Indian police or government officials stole children. Willard Beatty, director of the U.S. Office of Indian Affairs education program from 1936 to 1952, recalled how Clyde Blair, superintendent of the Albuquerque Indian School “recruited” students on “orders from Congress”:

He and a Navajo policeman had started out in a buckboard drawn by two horses and went from hogan to hogan looking for children. As they got in sight of a hogan and the Indians recognized who they were and guessed at their purpose, the children could be seen darting out of the hogan and running into the brush. Whereupon the Navajo policeman stood up in the buckboard and fired a shotgun into the air to scare the children and make them stop running—if possible. Then he jumped out of the wagon and ran after the children. If he caught them (and many times he didn't), he wrestled them to the ground, tied their legs and arms, and with the help of Mr. Blair put them in the back part of the wagon, where they lay until Blair had gathered in the quota for the day. Then they returned to the Albuquerque school and enrolled the children they had captured. (Beatty, 1961, p. 12)

Beatty wrote that no one at the school could speak Navajo to explain to the children what was happening to them. He noted, “The average Navajo parents felt a school education was a relatively useless thing, so far as they could see,” and they sent their children to school in rotation, keeping some at home to herd sheep (1961, p. 14).

Teacher Preparation

Boarding school teachers and staff were usually not well prepared to work with Indigenous students. In 1905 John D. Benedict, superintendent of schools in Indian Territory (Oklahoma), stated:

The greatest need of Indian education today is a corps of teachers trained to understand Indian life and environment, its habits of thought, its possibilities, its prejudices, its peculiarities, and its tendencies; trained in

the kind of knowledge the Indian needs to know; trained to do the things which the Indian should learn to do; and trained in methods of importing needed knowledge in such a manner as will appeal to the mind of the Indian child. (*Addresses*, 1905, p. 950)

Benedict found that successful public school teachers with “high examination grades and excellent recommendations, have failed as Indian teachers, while others with less knowledge of grammar, but knowing something of the work which they are expected to do, and something of the difficulties which they have to encounter, have succeeded” (*Addresses*, 1905, p. 950). In the nineteenth century teachers and Indian agents in the United States were often hired under the “spoils system,” not based on competency but on political party. Civil Service reforms at the end of the nineteenth century reformed hiring practices, but the Civil Service examinations teachers took had nothing to do with American Indians. Estelle Brown (1952, p. 48) took the examination around 1901, expecting “to be tested on [her] fitness to teach children of a savage race to whom the word education was unknown and who were without knowledge of a written language. No such test was given.”

English-Only Education and the Assault on Language and Culture

Efforts to prepare teachers to teach English as a second language to American Indian students did not develop until the 1970s. Teaching children in a language many did not understand, whether in off- or on-reservation schools, was a recipe for mis-education and student distress. Some missionaries recognized this early on; they translated religious materials into the Native language of the people they were attempting to proselytize and some ran successful bilingual schools. In contrast, federal boarding schools in the U.S. forbade the use of Indigenous languages in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Reyhner & Eder, 2017).

Polingaysi Qöyawayma (Hopi) attended boarding schools and later became a day school teacher. She remembered how she and “her companions had been treated like dumb little animals because they did not speak the language of the school authorities” (1964, p. 174). Negative classroom experiences did not mean, however, that Native people were uninterested in literacy. Hinman, a missionary, reported that three adult Yankton (Sioux) warriors rode forty miles every week to learn to read and write their own language (1869, p. 33).

Few school administrators or teachers learned about Native cultures, let alone languages. They saw nothing of value there, and even less in Native religions. U.S. Indian schools promoted a Protestant Christianity, while Canadian schools varied by denomination. Indigenous societies taught children cultural values of respect for others, humility, and cooperation (see the lists of Alaskan Native values in the appendix of *Sharing Our Pathways: Native Perspectives on Education in Alaska*, edited by Ray Barnhardt and Oscar Kawagley, 2011). In contrast, schools taught individualism, even selfishness (Kneale, 1950). Sioux author and physician Charles Eastman (1915) attended a bilingual mission boarding school but pointed out that Indians often learned the Whites' worst habits: the real "civilizing" influences of White settlers on Indians were whiskey and gunpowder.

Dr. Lori Arviso Alvord, the first Navajo woman surgeon, wrote in her autobiography:

In their childhoods both my father and my grandmother had been punished for speaking Navajo in school. Navajos were told by white educators that, in order to be successful, they would have to forget their language and culture and adopt American ways.

They were warned that if they taught their children to speak Navajo, the children would have a harder time learning in school, and would therefore be at a disadvantage. A racist attitude existed. Navajo children were told that their culture and lifeways were inferior, and they were made to feel they could never be as good as white people. . . . My father suffered terribly from these events and conditions. (Alvord & Van Pelt, 1999, p. 86)

She concluded, "two or three generations of our tribe had been taught to feel shame about our culture, and parents had often not taught their children traditional Navajo beliefs—the very thing that would have shown them how to live, the very thing that could keep them strong" (Alvord & Van Pelt, 1999, p. 88).

Suppressed Sovereignty

Culturally assimilationist, English-only schooling was not inevitable. Hawaiian King Kamehameha III established a public education system in 1841, the oldest educational system west of the Mississippi. Schools used the Hawaiian language until the monarchy was forcefully overthrown by White businessmen and settlers, who outlawed Hawaiian

language in schools. The results of this English-only effort were apparent in the 1980s when Native Hawaiian children had some of the lowest test scores in the United States and few could speak the Hawaiian language (Benham & Heck, 1998).

The “Five Civilized Tribes” in Indian Territory also established their own schools in the nineteenth century. The Cherokee used the writing system developed by Sequoyah, but the U.S. government closed the Cherokee schools in the early twentieth century. The Cherokee, like the Hawaiians, were adapting to new ways of doing things, but when they lost control of their schools to the new state of Oklahoma many Cherokee dropped out after elementary school, adhering as much as possible to Cherokee life even when that meant living in poverty (Thomas & Wahrhaftig, 1971). Indigenous people have always been able and willing to learn new ways of living, using guns to hunt several centuries ago or computers today. However, most desire the freedom to sustain the traditions they cherish and to change in their own way at their own pace, without losing group identity.

In addition to suppressing sovereignty in schooling, federal policy directly attacked Indigenous systems of land ownership. Communal land-holding was anathema, and boarding schools were required to celebrate the 1887 General Allotment (Dawes) Act that broke up tribally held lands, made allotments to individuals, and sold the “surplus” lands to settlers. In an 1886 article, a delegate from Indian Territory to Washington, DC, protested allotment:

We were sent to the wilderness because the whites wanted our country in the States. Now we have developed the new country and built for ourselves homes in it, and the whites want that. We are doing well. We are happy and prosperous. We are working out the problem of civilization. We have schools and churches and governments patterned after your own. Our lands are patented to tribes, and our people hold it in common. We all have names. There are no paupers among us. We never see anybody begging for pennies in our country as we do here [in Washington, DC]. Let us alone. Don't break us up. (*Indian*, 1886, p. 25)

The boarding schools attacked Indigenous notions of community identity and property. Curriculum and pedagogy were not only designed to replace Indian cultures, they could also be intellectually and emotionally deadening.

Boarding School Boredom

Recent studies of high school students from all ethnic groups find that boredom in the classroom is the most common reason given for dropping out of school (Bridgeland, DiIulio & Morison, 2006). In 1891, Elaine Goodale, superintendent of education for the Indian Office in the Dakotas, criticized the pedagogies used in Indian schools: "Four fifths, if not nine tenths, of the work done is purely mechanical drill. . . . The child reads by rote, he memorizes the combinations in arithmetic, he copies letters and forms, he imitates the actions of his teacher" (1891, p. 58). The same year the Dakota Mission's *Word Carrier* declared the "chief difference between English-speaking and Indian children [is] the need of grinding, drilling, and driving English into them" and commenting on the "deadness" of Indian classrooms (North, 1891, p. 35).

Albert H. Kneale wrote about the "decidedly monotonous" lessons at the Pine Ridge day school where he taught in 1899:

Few of the pupils had any desire to learn to read, for there was nothing to read in their homes nor in the camp; there seemed little incentive to learn English, for there was no opportunity to use it; there seemed to be nothing gained through knowing that "c-a-t" spells cat; arithmetic offered no attraction; not one was interested in knowing the name of the capital of New York. (1950, pp. 52–53)

Creek teachers educated in boarding schools in the late nineteenth century used

The a-b-c method in vogue at the time [that] was bad enough for English-speaking children, but was worse for the young Creeks. They learned to pronounce nonsense syllables like parrots, and to read rapidly in the First and Second Readers before they dropped out of school in disgust without knowing the meaning of a single word. (Debo, 1941, p. 309)

Some teachers tried to make lessons more comprehensible and relevant, but they faced an uphill struggle. U.S. Commissioner of Indian affairs Francis Leupp wrote in 1910:

[T]he more intelligent teachers in the Indian Service are ignoring books as far as they can in the earlier stages of their work. They are teaching elementary mathematics with feathers, or pebbles, or grains of corn; then the relations of numbers to certain symbols on the blackboard are made

clear, and thus the pupils are led along almost unconsciously from point to point. Had a system like this been in vogue twenty years ago, an Indian who became a bank teller would have been spared a confession he once made to me, that he had reached a full man's estate before he understood why he multiplied four by five in order to find out how much four pounds of sugar would cost at five cents a pound! Throughout his school life he had been an expert mathematician, yet figures meant nothing to him but so many pure abstractions which could be put through sundry operations mechanically; they bore no relation in his mind to any concrete object in nature. (pp. 127–28)

Don Talayesva (Hopi) described his experience in 1899: “The first thing I learned in school was ‘nail,’ a hard word to remember. Every day when we entered the classroom a nail lay on the desk. The teacher would take it up and say, ‘What is this?’ Finally I answered ‘nail’ ahead of the other boys and was called ‘bright’ ” (1942, p. 90). Another Hopi, Helen Sekaquaptewa, attended the Keams Canyon Boarding School in the early 20th century; she liked school and recalled, “Our teacher was Miss Stanley. She began by teaching us the names of objects about the room. We read a little from big charts on the wall later on, but I don’t remember ever using any books” (1969, pp. 12–13). Rote English-only learning triggered student boredom, resistance, and rebellion, which in turn triggered harsh discipline, in a destructive but predictable feedback cycle.

Discipline

Late-19th and early 20th-century boarding schools were organized by military methods, including uniforms, mass drill, and rigorous discipline. A relatively small number of employees could then control large numbers of students. Even school staff could dislike the regimen: “Our every action of every day was prescribed by a bell, and the bell was controlled by a clock—there was the rising bell, the breakfast bell, the work bell, the school bell, the recall bell, the dinner bell, and again the work bell, the school bell, the recall bell, the supper bell, the night school bell, the retiring bell. It was a drab life” (Kneale, 1950, pp. 89–90). At the Navajo boarding school at Fort Defiance, Arizona, in 1903, 23 bells began at 6:00 a.m. and ended at 8:00 p.m. (Mitchell, 1978).

James McCarthy (Tohono O’odham) attended Phoenix Indian School just before World War I. He recalled the school jail and runaway students being punished: “The boys were laid on an empty barrel and whipped with a long leather strap. After that they had to work hard on

a long tunnel under the mess hall. Sometimes they were put on a ball and chain. The school's rules were strict, and punishment was hard" (1985, p. 30). McCarthy ran away after a year and was not caught; however, he later returned to school on his own.

Ruth Underhill, the U.S. Indian Office's supervisor of Indian education from 1942 to 1948 also described harsh discipline:

[A]s late as 1928, trucks arrived at Fort Apache [boarding school where chronic Navajo runaways were sent] with the children shackled together to prevent their jumping out. When they were once inside the school, scarcely a week passed without some group attempting to run away. . . . They were brought back by a Navaho [sic] policeman and, as punishment, were dressed for weeks in girls' clothes. In their free time, they had to carry heavy logs round and round the parade ground of the old fort as punishment. (1953, p. 228)

White Earth Ojibway student Elaine Salinas (1995) witnessed an 18-year-old boy at Wahpeton going through a "belt line" consisting of two rows of students with belts who whipped a student running through the gap between. She noted, "That caused a lot of hostility within the student body, which I think is what the staff intended. There was a divide-and-conquer mentality" (p. 81). However, not all abuse was tolerated. The superintendent of Chemawa Boarding School in Oregon was demoted and transferred to a boy's school in 1911 for whipping in anger older female runaway students (Chalcraft, 2004).

Going Home

When students returned home from boarding schools, they often had not seen their families for five years or more. That difficult situation required tact and diplomacy: how to use their school knowledge without appearing arrogant to their parents and grandparents? A Carlisle Indian Industrial School graduate advised the agent at Crow reservation "that her mother constantly nagged her about wearing white clothes and aping the ways of a white woman, and that when her mother was completely worn out and exhausted her vocabulary along these lines, she invited the neighbors to come in and take up the task, which they did" (RSS #24, pt. 9, 1917, p. 220). In contrast, at the Ponca Agency in Oklahoma the superintendent reported, "An old Ponca Indian, now dead, once said that it takes Chilocco [Indian School] three years to make a White man out of an Indian boy, but that when the boy comes home

and the tribe has a feast, it takes but three days for the tribe to make the boy an Indian again” (RSS #24, pt. 5, 1917, p. 88).

In Indigenous cultures elders orally pass down knowledge about how to survive and prosper, and how to treat one another. Boarding schools ignored elders’ educational role, and attempted to replace elder knowledge with book knowledge. Realistically federal schools needed the support of elders, but the schools often undermined elders’ influence. Hopi Indian agent Leo Crane (1929, p. 98) described his Navajo interpreter as “one of those half-educated, half sullen returned students[,] . . . a part of the economic system aimed at cheaply teaching grandfather through his unrespected grandson.”

Students who returned from boarding school as English-speaking Christians could be considered traitors if they did not “go back to the blanket,” reintegrating into their families’ traditional culture. The Cass Lake, Minnesota, agency superintendent wrote in 1917:

[T]he longer the student has been away from his home in attendance at a non-reservation school the more worthless he is. . . . [T]hose who have spent from one to three years away from home do not lose that love for home and the home people, and when they return are still able to content themselves with conditions and go to work and be fairly good citizens. On the other hand those returning after having spent from six to perhaps fifteen years away find that everything has changed and find themselves an utter stranger, if not an outcast. And there is not much chance for them even if they were inclined to do well. (RSS #24, pt. 5, 1917, p. 94)

As Luther Standing Bear (1933), a student at Carlisle Indian Industrial School and later a teacher, wrote, American Indian children faced the double task and challenge of being educated in both their tribal and the White way. Despite the questionable quality of some of their schooling, former students often became tribal leaders who were able to more effectively deal with the U.S. government, using their knowledge of English and the literacy skills they had learned.

Another View

While schooling was often fiercely assimilationist, White Buffalo Woman (Cheyenne) relates what some elders felt about schooling:

Perhaps this education the White Man talks to us about is not all bad. We need to understand the Veho [white people]. We have to live with

him. We have to deal with him. If our children go to his school they [will] learn his language; they will know how he thinks. They will become our eyes, our ears, our mouths. Through our children we will listen, and we will speak. Thus we can better protect our ways, our culture as it has come down to us through many generations. (as quoted in Mann, 1997, p. 44)

American Indians did not face trauma only in schools; the theft of their lands and subjugation on reservations turned their world upside down, forcing them to come to terms with the Veho. Some accepted Christianity because its God seemed to give White people so much power. Others tried to reject all things White, but there were few places to hide as settlers overran the land. Others, like the Paiute religious leader Wovoka, sought compromise. Wovoka's Ghost Dance religion advocated taking up farming, wage labor, and sending children to school, but also kept some of the traditional ways and allowed elders to retain prestige as community leaders (Mooney, 1896; Warren, 2017). Today the Native American Church blends facets of Christianity with Indigenous religious beliefs. Some scholars (Deyhle, 2009; McLaughlin, 1992) describe Native American Church meetings where the roadman and a student's relatives exhort the student to stay in school and study hard.

In 1947 Navajo Tribal Council delegate Roger Davis spoke in favor of boarding schools and compulsory education:

When I ran away [from school] they sent a policeman after me to bring me back and gave me whipping like that. That knocked some sense into me and I did not have the desire to run away. The Government says it cannot whip children, cannot punish them. How can we get somewhere? I blame the Government. . . . I sent my boy to school at Bacone College. I realize that education is the only salvation for the Navajo tribe. (quoted in Iverson, 2002, p. 102)

Davis's comments should be interpreted in light of the dramatic changes Navajos have undergone, including a rapid increase in Navajo population that makes it increasingly difficult to make a living in traditional ways despite repeated enlargements of their reservation. McBeth (1983, pp. 108–111) cites reasons alumni give for attending boarding schools: being better able to cope with cultural changes, the food and clothing they were provided, death of parents, to be with friends and meet other Indians, and inability to do well in public schools. Peterson Zah, who became Navajo Tribal Chairman and then President, described the boarding schools he attended in the 1940s as overcrowded

but also recalled that the “food included a lot of vegetables, milk, juice, and toast” when at home food was not plentiful (Zah & Iverson, 2012, p. 33).

Boarding schools helped children from various tribes and First Nations meet each other, intermarry, and develop a multi-tribal identity. Students played basketball, football, and other sports with a few going on, like Jim Thorpe, to become professional athletes. Boarding schools had literary societies, bands, and musical groups such as mandolin clubs. Students put on Shakespearean plays, and a few students exhibited their talents at world fairs and local expositions (Peavy & Smith, 2008).

Change Over Time

For decades English-only Indian schools punished students for speaking their tribal languages, but many rules changed over time. Zah, who attended Tuba City Boarding School in the 1940s, recalled that speaking Navajo was “frowned on” but a Navajo dormitory employee “was very, very concerned with every kid that was going to school there and always talked to them in Navajo,” and a “special bilingual instructor” could be called upon for help (Zah & Iverson, 2012, pp. 35–36). Today, UNESCO, an arm of the United Nations, declares:

Teach children in a language they understand. At least six years of mother tongue education should be provided in ethnically diverse communities to ensure those speaking a different language from the medium of instruction do not fall behind. Bilingual or multilingual education programmes should be offered to ease the transition to the teaching of the official languages. (UNESCO, 2016, p. 9, emphasis in original)

Ethnocentrism drove assimilationist, English-only education for Indigenous students. EuroAmerican settlers were convinced that their culture was superior to Indigenous cultures and that conversion and civilization were gifts. Ethnocentrism was not just a characteristic of English-speaking Americans. Albert H. Kneale, looking back on a 36-year career with the Indian Bureau that began in 1899, wrote:

Every tribe with which I have associated is imbued with the idea that it is superior to all other peoples. Its members are thoroughly convinced of their superiority not alone over members of all other tribes but over the whites as well. . . . I have never known an Indian who would consent to being changed into a white man even were he convinced that such a change could readily be accomplished. (1950, p. 105)

American Indians were not always eager to assimilate. After the horrors of World War II, ethnocentrism abated somewhat. The establishment of the United Nations and the U.S. civil rights movement emphasized human rights. The important 2007 adoption by the United Nations of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples confirms their right to control the education of their children and maintain their Indigenous languages and cultures in and out of schools.

Today, teachers in the U.S. government's Bureau of Indian Education and public schools must be state certified, but there are still often no specific requirements to know anything about Indigenous peoples. An exception is Montana's Indian Education for All Act, 1999, which states:

Every educational agency and all educational personnel will work cooperatively with Montana tribes or those tribes that are in close proximity, when providing instruction or when implementing an educational goal or adopting a rule related to the education of each Montana citizen, to include information specific to the cultural heritage and contemporary contributions of American Indians, with particular emphasis on Montana Indian tribal groups and governments. (MCA 20-1-501)

African American scholar Lisa Delpit reminds us, "If the curriculum we use to teach our children does not connect in positive ways to the culture young people bring to school, it is doomed to failure" (2012, p. 21).

Current Challenges

English language mass media has probably posed a more potent threat to tribal languages and cultures than English-only schooling in day and boarding schools. Even though most Native peoples in the United States and Canada speak English today, cultural differences and the academic equity and achievement gap remain (Brayboy & Maaka, 2015). Educational reform efforts in the United States are currently focused on using "evidence-based" curriculum and instruction, but the evidence tends to lead to a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and is seldom derived from studies of Indigenous students. Studies can ignore important aspects of education. For example, the U.S. Congress established the National Reading Panel (2000), which ignored studies of the role of student engagement in teaching reading, including finding reading material that students could find interesting. That study was used to design the Reading First elements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which, after

spending tens of millions of dollars, did not achieve its goal of closing the gap between reading test scores of American Indian/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian students and national averages (Reyhner & Hurtado, 2008; Reyhner & Cockrum, 2015, 2016).

Antigovernment conservatives are also launching a general attack on public “government” schools today in an effort to privatize them, and they use poor test scores as part of their argument. Naomi Schaefer Riley, in *The New Trail of Tears: How Washington Is Destroying American Indians* (2016), argues that government welfare policies lead to family disintegration and a culture of dependency on Indian reservations. Similar conservative criticism led to the termination policy of the 1950s when some Indian reservations were abolished and the residents “set free” by the U.S. Congress only to sink further into poverty.

Poverty pervades many U.S. Indian reservations and Canadian reserves, but poverty today results from the loss of valuable lands and forced removal, now called ethnic cleansing (Anderson, 2014), and the cultural destruction caused by assimilationist, English-only educational efforts that continue today. Dillon Platero, the first director of the Navajo Division of Education, described “Kee,” a student whose experience was all too often the fate of a boarding school student:

Kee was sent to boarding school as a child where—as was the practice—he was punished for speaking Navajo. Since he was only allowed to return home during Christmas and summer, he lost contact with his family. Kee withdrew from both the White and Navajo worlds as he grew older because he could not comfortably communicate in either language. He became one of the many thousand Navajos who were non-lingual—a man without a language. By the time he was 16, Kee was an alcoholic, uneducated, and despondent—without identity. (1975, p. 58)

A recent study of 150 First Nation communities in Canada found suicide rates six times higher in the communities with higher rates of language loss (Hallett, Chandler, & Lalonde, 2007).

As Brenda Child (this volume) points out, “there is a wide-ranging continuum of Indian experiences” and some students were crushed by the experience, some soldiered through and survived it, and some thrived. As more and more studies of American Indian education are published in the *Journal of American Indian Education* and other venues, we can learn how to better educate American Indian students.

Current Opportunities: Language and Cultural Revitalization

University of Arizona professor Sheilah Nicholas (Hopi) has found a dark side to assimilation (2010, 2013). The Hopi elders she interviewed see the recent decline in youth speaking Hopi associated with their “un-Hopi” behavior, including gang activity and disrespect of elders. Conversely, the Hopi language is associated with traditional values of hard work, reciprocity, and humility. Indigenous and other youth need to develop a strong sense of identity that focuses on respect for oneself and others to make them less susceptible to peer group pressure and Madison Avenue advertising. Richard Littlebear, current president of Dull Knife Memorial College, writes about the pull of gangs on youth in Indian nations today; a strong sense of tribal identity helps youth resist that pull (1999). As early as the 1970s, the Rock Point School Board on the Navajo Nation responded to student disrespect for elders and classroom teachers by establishing a Navajo-English bilingual education program. A Navajo social studies component emphasized clan relationships and aspects of Navajo culture that teach respect (Holm & Holm, 1990).

Today in Hawai‘i, the Navajo Nation, Canada, and elsewhere language and cultural revitalization are occurring in Indigenous language immersion schools. Some efforts are small-scale, while in Hawai‘i thousands of students are involved. English-speaking students are successfully immersed in their heritage language to learn reading, writing, mathematics, science and other subjects. Many parents who place their children in immersion schools value the academic success of their children in these schools, but value more highly the positive effects of the schools’ emphasis on Indigenous culture on their children’s behavior (Kawai‘ae‘a, Kawagley, & Masaoka, 2017; Luning & Yaumauchi, 2010; Reyhner, 2010, 2017; Reyhner & Johnson, 2015).

It might seem contradictory to criticize assimilationist English-only schooling for Indigenous children in the past, and to praise Indigenous language immersion programs for English-speaking Indigenous students today. The critical difference is this: English-only schooling attacked Indigenous identity and sought to replace Indigenous languages and cultures. Immersion programs today seek to revitalize Indigenous languages and cultures and introduce English in the upper grades so that students have the opportunity to become bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural. In the past, families had little choice about schooling, while today placement in immersion schools is voluntary, often with a waiting list for admission.

Indigenous people have insisted that the U.S. government continue to operate four off-reservation boarding schools for high school students in 2018: Flandreau in South Dakota, Chemawa in Oregon, Sherman in California, and Riverside in Oklahoma. The schools do not offer Indigenous-language immersion education, but they no longer directly attack Indigenous identity. Terry Huffman (2010), among others, has marshaled evidence that “rejects the notion that American Indian students must undergo some form of assimilation to succeed academically” (p. 171). Extensive interviews with experienced American Indian educators reveal how a

strong sense of cultural identity serves as an emotional and cultural anchor. Individuals gain self-assuredness, self-worth, even a sense of purpose from their ethnicity. By forging a strong cultural identity, individuals develop the confidence to explore a new culture and not be intimidated. They do not have to fear cultural loss through assimilation. They know who they are and why they are engaged in mainstream education. (p. 171)

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NOTE

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