Assimilation and Cultural Destruction:

Education of Native American Youth in the 19th and 20th Centuries

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The term “civilization” carried a particular racial and political meaning when used to describe a Native American during the 19th and the 20th centuries. The ability to achieve this civilization was, for the most part, understood as the assimilation to white and Christian societal values. The treatment of Native Americans throughout American history is rife with abuses. From the *Dawes Act* to *The Trail of Tears,* relocation, subjugation, and, in many cases, extermination, can account for much of the poverty and dysfunction on reservations that was then thought to be an example of the Indian populations lack of civilization. The method to forcibly instill white values was a debate that for long periods of American history, gave rise to the concept of the “Indian question,” that is, what to do with a large population of non-white or uncivilized people who represent an untapped resource to American society. Education, as a method of “civilizing” Native American populations, gained national attention around the end of the 18th century. The presence of Indian boarding schools, on and off the reservation, were characteristic examples of 19th - 20th century class systems and the racial prejudice of the era.

Movements to educate, convert, and control Indian populations have been present throughout American history, but near the end of the 18th century the methodology changed dramatically. Removal of Native American youth from contact with their reservations and their cultural heritage was thought to be necessary to limiting the destructive effects of reservation life.[[1]](#footnote-0)The off reservation boarding school evolved from early on-reservation schools, in which, attention to language and industrial training were the primary focus of the curriculum[[2]](#footnote-1) Largely owned by private entities, and almost entirely religiously dominated, the schools aspired to convert Native American youth as a method of “civilizing,” the larger Native American society as a whole. The federally funded, but privately operated boarding schools were set up at the beginning of the 19th century. One of the most influential early boarding schools was the Carlisle Indian Boarding School. Boarding schools varied throughout the country. Everything from religious teachings to manual labor became a primary focus in the classroom. The enforcing of gender roles was also common within the schools. It was more common for male students to be trained in the field of industrial work and manual labor, whereas female students generally were instructed in the field of work that would take place within the home[[3]](#footnote-2) Missionary institutions often worked in close collaboration with the boarding schools. Understanding this close link between Christian instruction and being civilized begins to give us an understanding of the class systems of the era.

The Native American student was largely recruited to government schools through local representatives. There are many documented cases of schools using individuals from the community to try and persuade Native American children to attend. The coercive nature in which students were recruited to attend such schools left an indelible mark on the psychology of the students. This perception of white intervention into the lives of the Native American was only exacerbated by the long history of poor Native American relations. At the turn of the 19th century, a federal agency called the The Bureau of Indian Affairs was delegated the responsibility of administering educational efforts on the part of the United States government. Racial discrimination was very prevalent in the Bureau’s early history. In this excerpt from a New York Times article, dated 1880, Secretary Schurtz, Secretary at the Department of the Interior, describes the nature of the United States’ Native American policy.

“When I took charge of this department, the opinion seemed to be generally prevailing that it was best for the Indians to be gathered together upon a few large reservations where they could be kept out of contact with the white population, and where their peaceful and orderly conduct might be enforced by a few strong military outposts.”[[4]](#footnote-3)

From this statement we can derive a partial understanding of the racial prejudice within public perception and policy leading up to the institutionalization of federal boarding schools. The passage describes a fear of Native American violence directed upon the white population. Native American and white settler conflicts had existed during the period. The article goes on to state the benefits of employing Indians as laborers in agriculture. The shift in viewing Native Americans as a substantial threat, unless said Native Americans are employed and controlled by the white population, gives us an understanding of the method of de-humanization which was largely used as justification for the coercive nature of U.S. policy. The section of the article entitled, “Obstacles to Indian Advancement,” states. “Indians will not work; that they obstruct the progress of the country.”[[5]](#footnote-4) Furthermore the journalist states that the desirable remedy for this condition is that Native Americans adhere to white “civilized” practices, hence the movement to educate Native American youth.

Distinctions between an Indian’s acquisition of civilization, and the belief that the white individual had an innate possession of the values and principles of civilized life, by no other means than their white skin, is a crucial aspect of this subject. But what were these schools teaching, and how did these teachings relate to the acquisition of civilized values? Training in labor and teaching of english were seen as the crucial needs to achieving civilization.[[6]](#footnote-5) Having Native Americans viewed as commodities or assets for the white society is stated within several of the sources which I collected. This concept of the servile status to white society is illustrated well in a New York Times article entitled, *Work Among The Indians.* Dated 1893, the article contains a statement from an ex-commissioner, stating “The negro fought for his freedom, the Indian has no such stimulus.” He then goes on to state that, “The Indian has had traditions of fighting with the whites, according to a method of his own.” The statement seems to conclude that the African-American earned his “freedom,” through proving himself to the white society. The Native American by his own resistance to servitude to the white society is denying himself his freedom. Within the schools, students were stripped of their ability to express their cultural identity, made subservient to white customs, and taught to regret their cultural way of life. Individuals seeking justification for the obviously cruel treatment of Native American populations by white society evoked notions not far from paternalism and Social Darwinism. An unknown author in a publication dated 1887, states that, “It is in accord with the great rule of progression, which has guided the human family in its development throughout the ages-- the survival of the fittest, the supplanting of lower forms of life by the higher.”[[7]](#footnote-6) Society justified the cruel nature of their policy towards Native Americans and recognized the long complex history of racial hatred. This story of racism becomes convoluted when the society begins to maintain that it’s within their right to teach, “civilized, Christian doctrine,” and within the same breath seeks to define the Native American, deprived of his humanity, as a sub-human to be exterminated or controlled. At the beginning of the publication you find the same writer, describing the nature of Native American policy as, greatly unjust.[[8]](#footnote-7) How could a society maintain these two conflicting viewpoints- and would they come to shape school policy?

Practices such as cutting of hair, separation of genders, and enforcing school uniforms was used as a way of teaching civilized values. In fact, hair and dress in particular had a significant cultural and spiritual meaning to the students attending the schools. The practice of cutting the hair had been documented as being psychologically traumatizing. The use of Christian teachings also left a considerable psychological effect on students in early missionary schools. Passages in, *School Days of an Indian Girl,* describes the method of instilling fear in students using the imagery of the Christian devil, stating that students who disobeyed orders from a teacher would be tortured by said Devil.[[9]](#footnote-8) Student runaways were a common phenomenon throughout the period. Often returning home to the reservation, which was considered a stigma, as it was believed that the students returning home would soon forget the values taught at the boarding schools, and return to their “savage” way of life.[[10]](#footnote-9)

The institutionalization of the off reservation boarding school was a policy decision largely influenced by the realization that to properly strip the Native American of his/or her cultural identity, and then properly assimilate them into white society, you would have to isolate them from their home life. The decision to situate the boarding school off the reservation drew Native Americans from various areas and tribal backgrounds into a single student body.

Students that didn’t suffer from psychological pain, fear, and anxiety would suffer from poor living conditions, overcrowding, and illness.[[11]](#footnote-10) A high death rate among Indian youth is known to have been documented at several schools. A notably disturbing statement is made in a Deseret Evening News article dated January 18th, 1890, in which the journalist states that the reason for the high mortality rate at said schools was the culture shock that the students faced, after having to return to the “rude,” homes of their parents after experiencing civilization.[[12]](#footnote-11) The lack of empathy concerning the numerous possibilities for the high mortality rate illustrates a racial egocentric attitude towards Native Americans. The cause of the high mortality rate on reservations was in fact due to the prevalence of diseases such as tuberculosis and measles which were common in early boarding schools. The story of boarding schools in general did not present an encouraging vision for the students that were attending. There was an incredible amount of racism that perverted the schools practices and policy. The poor living conditions and rampant abuses bordered on manipulative forced labor.

These institutions did continue to exist in the late 1970’s, and with greatly reformed outlook toward their student bodies cultural identities. Intermountain Indian Schools was a Native American boarding school founded in the 1950’s in Brigham City, Utah. The school is interesting for several reasons, but I would like to use it as an example of the shift in the societal outlook towards Native American culture in the 20th century concerning the boarding school. Contrasting institutional factors such as dress and hair, the school seems to have taken a great leap. The children in the school were able express their cultural heritage. As school uniforms were not provided, and students hair was no longer deemed a degree of “savagism.” Greater attention is directed towards creative expression.[[13]](#footnote-12) Although racism was still persistent within the schools, however not as unabashed. Students were still required to take part in Americanized, White, Christian practices. The curriculum within the schools had also greatly changed. Greater focus on academics contrasted against an era of focus on labor training. Home economics classes were still maintained for girls, and the persistence of stereotypical gender roles was still present.

Although the development of the Indian boarding schools ended in the late 1970’s, the story of these schools occupies a position of considerable academic research and is important to understanding the difficult and exploitive history we have had with Native Americans for a large part of our nation’s history. Illustrating the nature of governmental policy concerning a subjugated Native American’s place in the United States, it holds an important historical standpoint for those that wish to study racial class systems of the era. The Native American boarding school was founded on the assumption that Native American’s were savages. Racial hatred was the motive when Richard H. Pratt founded Carlisle Industrial Boarding School, and its effect is clearly documented throughout the history of the schools. Richard H. Pratt’s speaking at a convention in 1892 stated the following concerning the necessity of Native American education, “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”[[14]](#footnote-13) It was this common attitude that shaped boarding school education in the country and contributed to the family disruption and exploitation of thousands of Native Americans.

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1. anonymous, *Secrectary Schurtz’s Work,* (New York Times) December 2, 1880. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. David W. Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875 - 1928, (University Press of Kansas, 1995.) 30.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. “In addition the girls from the fifth grade up received instruction in all the branches of home economics and the boys are given instruction in carpentry, baking, dairying, and farming.” Anonymous “*Mount Pleasant Indian School,”* Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, 1930. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. anonymous, *Secrectary Schurtz’s Work,* (New York Times) December 2, 1880. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. “we should have a new generation of Indians, able to speak English and disciplined in the habits of industry” Anonymous, *Work Among The Indians,* (New York Times) March 21, 1893 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Anonymous, *The Indian School at Chemawa,* (The West Shore) January 1887. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. ibid. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Zitkala Sa, *The School Days of an Indian Girl,* (Atlantic Monthly,) February 1900, 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. anonymous, *Secrectary Schurtz’s Work,* (New York Times) December 2, 1880. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. David W. Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience,* 1875 - 1928, (University Press of Kansas, 1995.) 114 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Anonymous, *Indian Schools,* (Deseret Evening News) January 18th, 1890. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. All-Indian Study Commission Intermountain School, *All-Indian Study Commission,* (Bureau of Indian Affairs) 1974. 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. National Conference on Social Welfare, *Official proceedings of the annual meeting: 1892.* (1892) 46 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)