

NATIVE AMERICANS' EDUCATION

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This article examines the historical impact of assimilationist education on Native American students. Efforts have been made to reverse this trend, with some reservations implementing bilingual policies and incorporating Native American culture into the curriculum. The article highlights the long-lasting effects of assimilationist education on Native American students and emphasizes the importance of addressing cultural differences and promoting inclusivity in education.

Key words: Native Americans; American Indians; curriculum; culture; education; identity; students.

The statistics of the American community survey reveal significant disparities in college enrollment, graduation rates, financial aid, and educational opportunities for Native American students compared to the overall U.S. population. Only 24% of 18-24-year-old Native American students are enrolled in college, whereas the figure stands at 41% for the general population. Furthermore, the graduation rate within six years for first-time, full-time Native American students attending four-year institutions beginning in 2013 is 41%, compared to 63% for all students.

Financially, Native American students are more likely to rely on grant aid assistance and less likely to take out student loans. While 38% of Native American undergraduate students take out federal student loans, this figure rises to 55% for all students.

In terms of educational opportunities, Native American students face disadvantages. They have limited access to Advanced Placement or college prep courses in high school, hindering their readiness for higher education. Additionally, they are less likely to have family members who have attended college, which can affect their exposure to college culture and support networks.

The disparities extend to household educational attainment as well. In 2017, only 21% of Native American children under 18 years of age lived in a household with a parent who completed a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 52% of white households [1].

These statistics underscore the need for targeted efforts to address the barriers and inequities faced by Native American students in accessing and completing higher education. And it is not so related to racism towards minorities in the United States or challenges in the educational system, but a whole complex of historical trauma.

Before contact with Europeans, Native Americans developed an effective system of informal education or what is called aboriginal education. The purpose of education was for an immediate integration of the next generation into society and preparation for adulthood. Both boys and girls had equal access to education and there were barely any dropouts and the community ensured that every child received a full education. Culture was passed down orally, “crafted into stories that would instruct, inspire, provoke, question, challenge, and entertain”. In the period before their contact with Europeans, there were barely any miseducated Native American children [2].

When it came to the question of the education of the Native Americans, the early settlers focused on their conversion to Christianity. The aim of the schools was to take away the Native American culture so that the "barbarians" could be saved through their acceptance of Western culture. Through the loss of language and the Indian way of doing things, Native Americans faced the reality of losing their very identity.

If Native Americans became part of mainstream American culture, many of the troubles, that were associated with their behavior in relation to whites, could be overcome. Furthermore, society would not have to face such questions as whether the Native American had been treated fairly in the multiple interactions between them and the new settlers. For many, education was viewed as the panacea for the many unsettling questions that rose through the colonization of America. The schools of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions followed essentially the same sort of curriculum as other schools. This program of studies was generally known as the “50/50 curriculum”. [3, p. 10] About half the time was spent studying more traditional subjects such as the English language, arithmetic, history as well as the religion. The other half of the curriculum was dedicated to more practical skills such as farming and cooking. There were no elements of Indian culture included within the curriculum.

There was the hope among educators that as the children stayed in the boarding schools off the reservation, their natural parents would be replaced by the Christian home of the boarding schools. It was noted that children who attended the reservation day schools did not appear to give up their culture easily. In fact, they kept their regular way of life and reverted to "bad habits and loose morals." [3, p. 17]

One assimilationist teacher said in the 1992, “the thing that gets me most is they got no respect for anything. They don't want to listen to you. They don't want to do their work. They don't want to settle down and be polite. Even if they're not gonna listen, they could at least be polite. They just don't want to learn, period. How can I teach them anything if they don't want to learn?” [4, p. 11]

Native American students were punished for speaking their native languages. This approach motivated European American educators to force Native American students into boarding schools where it was believed that it would be easier and much more effective to “civilize” them. Students were forced to dress like Europeans, convert to Christianity, and take European names. Students who refused to conform were severely punished. From the 1930s some boarding schools were replaced by day schools closer to reservations and a bilingual policy of educating Native American students in both Native American languages and the English language was discussed. More Native Americans have been added to school faculty and staff. Native American art, dances, and languages have been included in the school curriculum. Indian Bureau was forced to respond to the growing need and call for accredited high school education on. In 1936, there were 13 high schools in the federal school system for Indians, none of them accredited. By 1951, there were 33 fully accredited high schools; the number reached 42 in the 1960s, but shifting enrollments into public schools reduced the number [5, p. 92].

Today, many Native American students attend Native American-controlled community colleges. The central curriculum taught in both BIA and mainstream schools have remained the same from colonial times until recently. In many reservations today however, there are efforts to reverse this. In the Choctaw Reservation in Choctaw, Mississippi for example, students is taught in the Chahta and English languages in the first three years of formal schooling and in the English language from the fourth grade onwards [2].

The mainstream educational system has however failed to meet the needs of Native American students. The failure stems from the absence of a Native American perspective in the curriculum, the loss of Native American languages, and the racist and discriminatory activities of many European American teachers and administrators. As a result, many Native American students dropped out of educational institutions. Donna Deyhle quotes two American Indian students: “The way I see it seems like the whites don't want to get involved with the Indians. They think we're bad. We drink. Our families drink. Dirty. Ugly. And the teachers don't want to help us. They say, "Oh, no, there is another Indian asking a question" because they don't understand. So we stop asking questions. It was just like teachers want to put us aside. They didn't tell us anything about careers or things to do after high school. They didn't encourage us to go to college. They just took care of the white students. They just wanted to get rid of the Indians” [4, p. 12].

European American teachers and administrators have blamed Native American educational problems on cultural differences. Students from minority groups must reject their own cultural patterns and absorb European American cultural patterns in order to be successful in school.

Furthermore, the impact of historical trauma on Native American communities cannot be ignored. The “survivor's child complex” is a constellation of features resulting from the transmission of parental traumatic experiences. "Survivor's child complex" features are depression, suicidal ideation and behavior, guilt and concern about betraying the ancestors by being excluded from their suffering, as well as internal obligation to share in the ancestral pain. Other features include feeling obliged to take care of survivor parents, identification with parental suffering, intrusive memories and also fantasies, images, and a perception of the world as dangerous [6, p. 65]. Many of these themes were also found in the dreams of the Native Americans.

The absence of a Native American perspective in the curriculum, the loss of Native American languages, and the presence of racist and discriminatory practices by European American teachers and administrators have contributed to the high dropout rates among Native American students. Students have reported feeling neglected, misunderstood, and unsupported in educational institutions.

To address these disparities and challenges, targeted efforts are needed. In recent years, there have been efforts to reverse the educational system's failures and address the needs of Native American students. Native American-controlled community colleges have emerged, and there have been discussions about bilingual education, where students are taught in both Native American languages and English. These efforts aim to provide culturally relevant education and support the educational aspirations of Native American students and preserve their identity.

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