

Elizabeth Montmagny
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Perspectives Paper

Native American Education: Quiet Controversy

Before I begin, I would like to say that while American Indian/Alaska Native tends to be the politically correct term for the indigenous peoples of North America, preferred labels depend upon the individual. Within this paper, I have taken the liberty to use American Indian/Alaska Native, Native American, and Indian interchangeably because I have come across all three in my research and have used all three myself. Education is an integral component of life, and rarely will this be disputed. Philosophers have pondered the concept of knowledge and all that surrounds it for centuries and even millennia. Yet this basic necessity of life is still an issue today. Funding, equality, politics, and many other factors continue to play a colossal role in a fundamental element of society. While countries, cultures, genders, classes, and numerous other classifications of people struggle to gain knowledge through mediocre educational systems, one such group in the United States is continually overlooked. In fact, seldom is Native American education a topic for discussion when posed a question about controversial contemporary education concerns. That is not to say that Native Americans haven't succeeded in creating effective institutions. On the contrary, tribal colleges are making a great impact on reservations. Still, American Indians/Alaska Natives hold the highest dropout rate of any minority at 7.3% (Stillwell, 2010). This particular issue is kept quiet much of the time because reservations are so isolated and removed from mainstream society. A failing education system combined with a controversial history of persecution and genocide make for an interesting perspective and an eye-opening topic.

Customarily, Native Americans educated through oral tradition passed down by elders. Children learned through storytelling and memory skills, in real life experience and practicing hands-on skills, and often most importantly through prayer. Though no two tribal traditions are identical, all of the 500+ tribes in North America have these things in common. With the incursion of European settlers in the 17th century, the American Indians were frequently forced to relinquish their traditional education system and adopt a European lifestyle. It was the church that initiated these changes in an attempt to save what they believed to be savages from an uncivilized life (Stein, 1997). As America grew, federally supported boarding schools of the 19th century for Indian children provided a subversive structure for education that forced students into assimilation (Stein, 1997). The aim of these schools was to introduce Native children to the European educational system and to annihilate their traditions and philosophy (Hale, 2002). In fact, one philosophy of a former commanding officer of a prison in Florida believed that “the Indian in them must be killed in order to save the man (or woman)” (Stein, 1997 p.76). This was achieved through physical retribution, something practically unheard of in the Native culture, for parents viewed their children as sacred gifts entrusted to them by their Creator (Hale, 2002). When the Indian children fell ill at the federal boarding schools they were sent back home to the reservations with contagious diseases unknown to the Americas. The Native Americans did not possess a natural resistance to these diseases, as the Europeans did, and the epidemic spread rapidly (Hale, 2002).

The federal boarding schools were more like prisons, but they did provide Indian students with skills needed to function within the emerging society. For the first time

many tribes shared a common trait that improved communication and connection between the tribes, which would be a valuable resource for activist groups in the near future. As Hale (2002) appropriately summarizes, “thus an experience that was intended to strip the Native Americans of their culture had the opposite effect of building newer and stronger relationships among the different tribes” (p.25). There is a central assumption that education will provide students with the appropriate skills and knowledge necessary to function profitably in the social order (Hale, 2002). In turn, education should provide for the community to better enable the people to have resources that keep their society thriving. With these notions in mind, it is only natural that the Indian child be taught to recognize the value of both the wider American culture and her own Native culture. With the 60’s and 70’s came a much-needed sensitivity to the education methods for ethnic groups. Educators began to take into account the aspects that diversify people rather than attempting to force unification. By the early 90’s, tribes managed many primary and secondary schools: 58 day schools on or near reservations, 12 boarding schools further from reservation land, and six dormitories for Native students attending off-reservation schools (Hale, 2002). In March of 1990, “Indian Nations at Risk” was commissioned by the Department of Education to decipher reasons behind the failing education system of the Native Americans (Hale, 2002). They discovered persistent underfunding of all education programs for native children, which came as ironic because government funding of education programs had often been part of treaty obligations in the past.

Despite the struggles that ensued after the intrusion of European settlers, Native nations attempted, and many succeeded, to build their own educational facilities based on

what was so wrongfully thrust upon them (Stein, 1997). From these early efforts comes the foundation of a modern attempt to regain control of American Indian education: tribally controlled colleges. It is here where Native students come to learn, not only to live in the progressive culture of America, but also to “preserve, enhance, and promote the language and culture” (Stein, 1997 p. 83). Though there are clear lines separating tribally controlled colleges and community colleges, there are striking similarities that bring this educational attempt closer to home. Both non-Indian and tribal colleges do their utmost to provide their communities with programs that answer the needs of both the community and the students. Gilbert Vigil, the governor of the Tesuque Pueblo said, “no program, no matter how well funded or staffed, can be successful if it fails to incorporate and reflect the values of the community” (as cited in Hale, 2002, p. 80). Tribal colleges aptly serve their communities with a value system that combines traditional Native culture, conventional American culture, and welfare culture.

Sadly, the success of the tribal college creates a false sense of improvement. Only 15% of American Indian/Alaska Native adults over the age of 25 held at least a bachelor’s degree in 2008 (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani 2010). While these schools should be seen as a great accomplishment in the journey to give American Indians an equal opportunity at education, the real problems lie within the elementary and secondary education system. In compiling research back in the early 90’s, John Reyhner (1992) found that approximately a third of Native students do not finish high school. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (Stillwell 2010), the high school dropout rate for American Indians/Alaska Natives was 7.4% in 2006 and 7.3% in 2008, the highest of any minority in the country. The Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate for

American Indians/Alaska Natives was 61.8% in 2006 and 62.2% in 2008. Yes, the numbers are minutely increasing, but compared to other ethnic groups, these numbers are abysmal.

According to Jon Reyhner (1997), “school achievement is highly correlated to family income” (p.96). In 2007, 33% of American Indian/Alaska Native children were living in poverty. The unemployment rate for American Indians/Alaska Natives was 10% in 2008. 68% of American Indian/Alaska Native children were eligible for free or reduced rate lunches in 2009. These numbers are appalling to many Americans, but the truth is that “reservation poverty has been documented time and again” (Reyhner, 1997 p.99). In fact, the poorest county in the nation, Shannon County in South Dakota, is home to numerous Oglala Sioux Native Americans who live despairingly on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

There are three dynamics that weaken the performance of Native American students when they reach the higher education level: “first, a lack of academic preparation; second, uninformed expectations of college life, and third, unsupportive college culture” (Morrison, 1997 p.95). These shortfalls in preparation point back at secondary level education. Many Indian students comment on never learning about any part of Native American culture, let alone even having a Native teacher. Most Indian students viewed their teachers as callous or apathetic at most. Generally the history of America is seen as “a process of civilizing a savage frontier” (Reyhner, 1997 p.97). Teachers of Native students commonly urge vocational options and do not encourage college as an opportunity after high school. These attitudes and views are only teaching the Indian student that his ancestors were uncivilized and his culture shameful, when in

reality we should be grateful for the historical contributions Native Americans have given and learn from their ways. Reyhner (1997) writes, “If mainstream Americans practiced such Native American ideas more universally, I believe, we would create a better world” (p.101).

Hale (2002) mentions, “Education was woven into the fabric of the daily life of the tribe. Skills and knowledge were passed on in a natural and nonthreatening manner” (p.85). Though the American Indian lifestyle was different than that of the European settlers, they were happy, fruitful, and thriving. Their education system worked perfectly fine within their way of life until they came in contact with European settlers. Native Americans are a tribal people; as children and adolescents they learn best within a group of peers from the same background. As soon as an Indian student is thrust into a school that does not recognize his culture, he begins to develop similar traits of disadvantaged youth. Thus, “there has been escalation in gang activity, violence, and use of weapons at younger and younger ages” within Native American education (Hale, 2002 p.84).

So where do we go from here? First, an accurate, balanced, and complete picture of history needs to be integrated into all education. The story is skewed without the discussion of minority groups’ achievements. In order to recognize and accept the growing diversity of American society, incorporating balanced curricula will help citizens overcome unfamiliarity and increase respect. There is the growing idea of assimilation vs. multiculturalism, where education highlights rather than ignores the diversity encompassed within the United States. Multiculturalism strives to meet the needs of all students by recognizing, reinforcing, and expanding on cultural knowledge and promoting awareness, sensitivity, appreciation, and respect for one’s own and others’

cultures (Hale, 2002). Educators truly want their students to succeed, and “students who can identify with the school and its education programs have a better chance to achieve academic success and strengthen their cultural identities” (Hale, 2002 p.80).

Native Americans were truly the first Americans, long before colonists, pilgrims, puritans, and Columbus. It is deeply distressing to see such a compassionate and spiritual group of people still suffering after years of struggle and persecution. As is in the Native tradition, what is past is past, and it is time to move on. As Stein (1997) put it so beautifully,

American Indians understand that today’s world demands that they be able to function comfortably within their own cultures, as well as in relation to mainstream American culture. They recognize clearly that a good education, which takes their needs as a people into consideration, can be a wonderful tool with which to live life, as it also can be a terrible burden if imposed from the outside with no regard to who they are as a unique people. (p.87)

The Native Americans have persevered through hundreds of years of turmoil and it is apparent that they will continue to fight for equality in all facets of life, especially in education.

The Afterthought

Dr. Sweeney,

I misread the form of citing quotes in APA format, which explains the multiple errors. I have fixed those, as well as my references list, which I was confused about because one of my sources was a book filled with articles that the editor gave brief introductions to, so I wasn't sure how to site it. However, I am not going to bother with any more research or editing for this paper because quite frankly I don't care to.

I firmly believe I have researched the topic of Native American Education quite well and presented my issue, statistical data, various perspectives, and the relevance of this topic today: that Native Americans have the highest dropout rate in the country and nothing is being done about it. If that is not enough reason in itself to cause controversy in modern education, then perhaps the concern should be looked at as a matter of racism. Blacks, Latinos, Jews, Muslims, and endless other ethnic groups speak of the hardships and current problems with racism and other social oppression in America. Yet multiple centuries have passed, and still Native Americans live on reservation land; barren, infertile land that their ancestors were forced to make a living on, knowing that it could not sustain one generation, let alone two centuries of relations. It angers me, and many others, that this blatant disrespect, for arguably one of the most kind-hearted ethnic groups in the country, continues by letting tribal communities live in seclusion, cut off from the modern world, with no tools to bring themselves out of a downward death spiral. Those that try to be the change they want to see fail half of the time because they are not given the appropriate knowledge to live in this world, nor are they given a chance to obtain that knowledge. The controversy here is that no one recognizes reservation life as an act of racism. No one recognizes the dropout rate as an issue in America. And no one sees the issue because Native Americans are too humble and too proud to stand up for what is rightfully theirs as legal citizens of the United States of America: equal opportunity in all aspects of life, including education. Hence the title "quiet controversy". Well, it's about time someone spoke up, and I will not let this topic be in question of its relevance to contemporary education issues.

I have attached some more statistics and information on the subject and I hope you will take the time to read through them. I also hope you will reconsider your comment on the pertinence of my issue, not for grade, but for the cause itself. While working on the Flood of Flags project, Bryan Funk shared with us a wonderful quote, and while I don't remember it word for word, it's along the lines of, "neutrality never helps the oppressed, it only helps the oppressor". Once we become educated, it becomes our moral obligation to educate others and to dare to fight the urge to stay neutral. As a Diversity Fellow on campus, I have been working closely with my fellows to plan a new and unique program for next semester, and we will be hosting a traditional Native American powwow, a social gathering, in the PE Center gymnasium on Saturday, February 12th. I invite you to come and experience the richness, the friendship, and the love of the Native American community that is alive and thriving right here in New Hampshire. I dare say that this paper is only the beginning of my personal goal to save the world, and it is most certainly not the last the world will hear from me.

~Elizabeth

"What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime. It is the little shadow, which runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset. It is the soft caress of love between two lovers. It really is worth fighting for, risking everything for. And the trouble is, if you don't risk everything, you risk even more. Because it is your life." – Crowfoot

"Listen to all the teachers in the woods. Watch the trees, the animals and all the living things--you'll learn more from them than books."

Joe Coyhis, Mohican

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