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Civilize Them with Indian Boarding Schools

Abstract

Indigenous communities continue to be pressured to conform to Anglo-American culture. Through the use of Indian boarding schools, Indigenous communities were interrupted in a myriad of detrimental ways related to their culture, especially in regard to intergenerational cultural continuance.

Keywords

Indian Boarding Schools, Indigenous colonization, Boarding Schools

Disciplines

Cultural History | Indigenous Studies | United States History

Comments

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Civilize Them With Indian Boarding School

The colonization of Native Americans has not stopped in the United States. As a result of the continual colonization Indigenous people face, there are many lasting intergenerational effects. The ramifications of legislation, social constructs, historical actions, and policies related to Indigenous people are omnipresent within Indigenous populations. Through the use of boarding schools, Indigenous cultures and people were subdued as Anglo-American society tried to civilize Indigenous people through assimilation. The experiences Indigenous people had within boarding schools have contributed to a myriad of detrimental, intergenerational effects on its people and culture that shed light on the issues Indigenous people face today.

Indian boarding schools were used as a means to assimilate, as well as ethnically cleanse, Indigenous people into mainstream Anglo-American society. The schools enabled the federal government and missionaries to take children away from their communities, parents, friends, tribes, and the cultural traditions of their Native heritages. The Civilization Fund Act of 1819 made it explicitly clear how the federal government felt toward Indigenous people. The act summarized the concept that the United States wanted to “civilize” its Native population by eliminating Indigenous peoples’ identifications with their culture. It also granted funding to societies and organizations, such as churches and missionaries, to educate Indigenous people, often through developing schools in Native communities (Sellers, 10.31.2016). To this extent, Indian boarding schools were used as a means to civilize Native Americans thus reservations then served as social laboratories for civilizing people. In turn, this allowed Christian churches to play a prominent role in Indian lives through missionary schools (Lobo et al, 2010. p 104 -112).

By the 1880s, government efforts to assimilate Indigenous people in the United States became more aggressive (Lobo et al, 2010. p 104 -112). Civilizing Indigenous people meant

teaching them English, when to pray, when to eat, deterring traditional ceremonies, and discouraging the use of their own language. President Andrew Jackson in 1833 went so far as to say, “They have neither the intelligence, the industry, the moral habits, nor the desire of improvement... Established in the midst of another superior race... they must necessarily yield... and ere long disappear” (*Indian School*, 2011). This quote clearly conceptualizes the intentions and attitude of the federal government toward ridding themselves of the Indian problem. Eventually, civilizing Indigenous people, and through the promotion of a more aggressive policy of the United States for assimilation, extended to the use of boarding schools that became federally mandated as Indigenous education was not considered a real education by the government.

Captain Richard Pratt, who founded the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, said, “Kill the Indian, save the man”; this somewhat became the rallying cry for the use of missionary and boarding schools as a means to civilize Indigenous people in the United States (*Indian School*, 2011). Mission schools were the first means to deter the omnipresence of Indigenous culture as it prevented a child from being raised and educated within their own community. To Indigenous people, sending a child to school signified “giving up all his distinctive tribal life, his ancestral customs, his religious beliefs, and sinking himself into the vast unknown, the way of the white man” (Lobo et al., 2010. p. 285).

In the beginning Indian schools specifically targeted young men and boys due to the Angle-European belief of men being the center of society. However, by the mid nineteenth century, the focus shifted to also include young women and girls, with the belief that “women, as mothers, must be educated in order to raise virtuous male citizens” (Lobo et al., 2010. p. 285). Initially, missionary schools faced low enrollment and high dropout rates of girls, but many girls

did end up attending the schools for some time. Attending the mission schools hastily contributed to the physical transformations of the young girls; they were immediately expected to know English, their braids were cut off, they were surrounded by strangers, and without their mothers or other members of their community (Lobo et al., 2010. p. 285-286). The abrasive initiation of the young girls to the schools was emotionally straining and there were feelings of abandonment and aloneness. As their time continued at the school, other harsh conditions awaited them, such as malnourishment and corporal punishment.

Indigenous children at the schools were also subject to physical and sexual abuse. Mary Crow-Dog describes in her own book *Lakota Woman* (1990) the abuse she, her family members, and her friends were subject to. Mary talks about when her grandmother tried to run away when she was attending boarding school. The grandmother was found and brought back to the school, stripped naked and whipped with a horse buggy whip (*Lakota Woman*, 2011. p. 32). Mary's sister, Barb, also tried to run away. When she was found and brought back, she was told she would not be able to visit home for a month and was subject to work duty; then they were beaten with a leather strap. To Mary Crow Dog, the experiences of her and her friends caused her to mistrust "every white person on sight because I met only one kind" of those who she interacted with at the boarding school (*Lakota Woman* 34).

Moreover, many children died at these boarding schools due to high rates of disease, such as tuberculosis and others. Tragically, families were not always notified if their child died and some of the deceased children were placed in unmarked graves. Records of the children were lost, disappeared, or destroyed. Fear of a child dying and not seeing their return from school resonated with the Indigenous population and enhanced their fear of outsiders (Sellers, 10.31.2016).

The curriculum at the boarding schools also hurt Indigenous people. The Indian schools in the United States primarily focused on the assimilation and elimination of Native culture, rather than giving the children an actual education. On the reservation “a girl’s education took place constantly, through listening to and working with elders or in games with peers” through impersonating mothers, mimicking roles, and working “companionably alongside their mothers, cooking, cleaning, and imitating them in beadwork and preparing medicinal plants... designing and working... on moccasins” (Lobo et al., 289). Grandmothers told stories and taught lessons to their grandchildren to help younger generations understand their own tribal philosophy and values. Illustrations of history and tradition by the grandmothers were meant to help younger generations understand “their own place within the group and their people’s place in the world (Lobo et al., 2010. p. 289). The boarding schools did not allow for such education, resulting in many people being unsure about their place in the world. Instead, the curriculums at the boarding schools were themed toward domestic work and a life of servitude-- skills that were not applicable to reservation life (Lobo et al., 288). Boarding schools removed girls and boys from learning the roles in and daily practices of their communities thus resulting in an intergenerational cultural loss. Boarding schools did not allow for such community-oriented education, therefore the relationships between granddaughter, mother, and daughter were not built, as well as that of grandfather, father, and son. In fact, when children were taken away from their homes and taken to boarding schools, women sang death songs for their children because they knew their children would not come back the same (*Indian School: Stories of Survival*, 2011).

Furthermore, even when students did well in class, earning the grade of A or B in a course, they were still not deemed smart enough. The students were subject to constant criticism.

Through these criticisms, frequent beatings occurred to “fix” Indigenous behavior. One woman in *Indian School: Stories of Survival* spoke to the use of intense punishment. The woman spoke to how if a teacher or schoolmaster thought you were being disobedient, the schoolmaster would make the student kneel on a bag of dried kidney beans (2011). The emotional strains of such abuse and neglect thus impacted how survivors of these boarding schools interacted with others, which in turn, would affect how those people would interact with their own children and other generations of Indigenous people within their communities.

Mary Crow Dog wrote, boarding school “was a curse on our family for generations”; this can be applied across the Indigenous community (1990. p. 31). The boarding schools contributed to losses in language, culture, relationships, community roles, trades, and other traditional practices. These losses have contributed to a larger cross-generational loss. The effects of the boarding school contributed to many becoming victim to alcoholism, domestic abuse, prostitution, and drug addiction. Many survivors of boarding school did not fit into Indian society or white mainstream society. Throughout boarding school and post-boarding school, many committed suicide or attempted to commit suicide. Survivors of the schools felt they did not belong in their Native communities or white mainstream community, thus contributing to higher rates of suicide and attempted suicide among Indigenous people. Estimates identify that Indigenous people are two to seven times more likely to commit suicide or attempt suicide than other races (*Indian School: Stories of Survival*, 2011).

Interpersonal skills were also impacted by boarding schools, which has affected not only the survivors of the schools, but also their descendents. One woman in *Indian School: Stories of Survival* discussed how her mother lacked parenting skills because of what she had been exposed to herself at the boarding schools. The boarding schools emphasized a militaristic upbringing of

lines, no talking, taking orders, and constant criticism. As such, the mother did not know how to talk to her own children or grandchildren other than by yelling at them. The woman noted that her mother expressed her love for her children through providing them with a roof and food, but did not know how to do so else wise because her experiences at boarding school were absent of love, comfort, human touch, affection, and companionship. The daughter herself noted how she struggled to be a good parent because of how her mother interacted with her. Evidently, this has interrupted several generations of parenting for the family and the sort of relationships the family members have with one another.

Similarly, Mary Crow Dog describes how, at night, girls would be in bed together for security and reassurance, especially the younger and newer girls. Some nights, a nun of the school came into the sleeping quarters and said, “What are you two doing in bed together? I smell evil in this room. You girls are evil incarnate. You are sinning. You are going to hell and burn forever” (*Lakota Woman*, 1990. p. 35). Mary then states how on the reservation people slept “two and three in a bed for animal warmth and a feeling of security” (*Lakota Woman* 35). Mary’s description demonstrates how children were deterred from touching one another, even for comforting one another in times of need. Like the mother of the woman, the absence of love and comfort definitely impacted the relationships that these generations of people had with younger generations as they were taught affection and consoling was not appropriate. Moreover, the nun’s reaction sexualizes the Indigenous women, even as young children, which again dehumanizes them, as well as the natural need for human touch.

In the documentary, *Sacred Spirit: Lakota Sioux Past Present Future* (1999) many of the speakers mentioned how domestic abuse, alcoholism, and gangs have been incredibly detrimental to Indigenous societies. Indigenous rates of alcoholism are 510% higher than that of

other Americans and 62% higher in regard to suicide (Lobo et al., 2010. p. 45-47). As such, the speakers in the documentary mention how they have tried to work with children, teenagers, and at-risk youth on their reservations to deter them from drinking, substance abuse, and becoming a gangster in order to help them evolve as healthy, reassured Indigenous people through teaching them traditional dance and cultural customs to maintain the traditions and relationships of people to their land and surrounding community. As described by many people in the *Indian School* documentary, boarding schools contributed to these high levels of abuse, alcoholism, prostitution, and substance abuse, therefore it is pertinent that such measures are taken by the Indigenous community to support and reassure their people since so much has been taken from them in abundance through colonization.

Due to these traumatic experiences, there was some resistance to sending Indigenous children to boarding schools as a means to protect their people, although it was not always successful. Some parents tried to protect their children from being taken to boarding school by hiding their children when government officials came onto Indian land. However, some fathers were arrested and jailed at Alcatraz for not allowing their children to attend boarding schools (Sellers, 10.31.2016). Today, it is difficult for non-Indigenous people to come onto reservations or act on behalf of Indigenous people if they are not Indigenous themselves due to the mistrust established in the past. Gettysburg College alum, Jenna McKeag '73, spoke to this in her own field of work, when she has had to prove she is an Indian when questioned about her positionality. Ms. McKeag talked about how she had to show her government-issued Indian identification card when challenged about being an Indian (Sellers, 10.12.2016).

Additionally, Indigenous people have attempted to regain power over their children's education through other means. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Indian education system

received renewed attention by the public. The Indian Education Act of 1972 and 1975 emphasized Indian self-determination in which Native Americans have tried to regain control of their education slowly (Sellers, 10.31.2016). Other movements have evolved as well. For example, Mending the Sacred Hoop combats domestic violence through culturally specific programs while the Indigenous Women's Network attempts to bridge the political dialogue and transfer of information from elders to younger women. Perhaps the purpose of these organizations is to bridge the gaps of information caused by the boarding schools. High levels of abuse in various forms exist within Native communities, which have entailed many parents to leave their communities as well as give up raising their own children to grandparents or foster systems (Sellers, 10.31.2016). These organizations attempt to fold back the layers of abuse that boarding schools and others practices of colonization have inflicted on Indigenous people through conversation, awareness, building relationships, and empowering people.

Indian boarding schools continue to directly affect subsequent generations across Indigenous communities. The schools directly tried to thwart Indigenous culture and identity by removing entire generations of individuals from their communities. The emotional, physical, and mental mistreatment Indigenous people faced at the schools have impacted Indigenous societies in a multitude of ways, such as high levels of alcoholism, drug abuse, prostitution, parental absence, and the absence of relationships. Boarding schools adversely influenced Indigenous society today in regard to Indigenous traditions and belonging. As the effects of colonization continue to unfold, it is pertinent that action is done to reclaim Indigenous culture and provide ways people can discuss and speak out against the abrasive natures of the boarding schools.

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IDS 206
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