FIRST NATION EDUCATION CRISIS

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

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ABSTRACT

First Nation Education Crisis

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The purpose of this research is to analyze the current educational crisis occurring in the Native American population. According to the Teach for America Organization, the high school graduation rate for Native Americans is at an overall 49%. While other minorities are gaining ground, only 11% of a Native graduating class will obtain a college degree, and projections predict that this number will continue to decrease. As the cultures of Native Americans are on the decline, academic circles are forgetting that Native students still have a seat at the table.

Throughout the world, the unique situation of indigenous peoples is an issue of contention for many governments, and the United States is no exception. Native American education has a long, controversial history that has created deep divides between the First Nations and Federal Government (Adams, Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience). Studying how this crisis began, and how it has contributed to Native cultural decline will not only provide a clearer understanding of the issue, but perhaps offer an appropriate solution for future First Nation students.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research to my family, and to all Natives still seeking a future of peace, justice, and freedom.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Miranda Walichowski for guiding me through this process. She is a true example of what it means to be an advocate, and what is takes to make change happen.

I would also like to thank Dr. Angela Hudson for all of the support she has given me through books and contacts. Dr. Hudson has been supporting Native American students for many years, and her excitement over this project has kept me encouraged.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 1854, the Federal Government offered the Squamish Nation a land deal in which the tribe would be financially compensated for the ownership of the land. This deal, shortly after named the Oregon Donation Land Claim Act, opened up tribal land to settlers, and forced the tribe onto a reservation. The Squamish leader, Chief Sealth (Seattle), a renowned orator, knew of the slaughter that would occur if the tribe refused. In response to the offer, he made a moving speech, in which he stated:

Day and night cannot dwell together. The Red Man has ever fled the approach of the White Man, as the morning mist flees before the morning sun. However, your proposition seems fair and I think that my people will accept it and will retire to the reservation you offer them. Then we will dwell apart in peace, for the words of the Great White Chief seem to be the words of nature speaking to my people out of dense darkness.

It matters little where we pass the remnant of our days. They will not be many. The Indian's night promises to be dark. Not a single star of hope hovers above his horizon. Sad-voiced winds moan in the distance. Grim fate seems to be on the Red Man's trail, and wherever he will hear the approaching footsteps of his fell destroyer and prepare stolidly to meet his doom, as does the wounded doe that hears the approaching footsteps of the hunter.”

Many historians, to this day, debate if this speech ever occurred. In an article sponsored by the National Archives, the author states, “Noble words from a noble savage. But were these words actually articulated by an otherwise obscure Indian more than a century ago? (Jerry L. Clark, The Prologue, 1985).” Somehow, to this author, it seemed doubtful that a tribal leader, “savage,” and “obscure Indian,” could ever be capable of articulating such thoughts. Interestingly enough, at the bottom of the page, there is a note from the National Archives that reads “Articles published in Prologue do not necessarily represent the views of NARA or of any other agency of the
United States Government.” As comforting as that statement is, it is hard to wonder about the current views of Native Americans held by the United States Government, if affiliated articles are publishing such remarks in an academic publishing.

Since Seattle spoke his now famous words, they still are truth for many tribes in the United States. For First Nation peoples, the cycles of poverty extend to the creation of the first reservation: a flawed system. Obscure government documents are beginning to confirm the claims of criminal acts that have been shouted by Native Americans for years. For the past century, boarding school abuse (Adams, Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 122), forced sterilizations (Rutecki, G, The Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity), contamination of lands, unlawful seizing of children (Adams, 222), misappropriated funds, industrialized racism (Shayla Yellowhair, Native Lives Matter, Teach for America), and dozens of more acclaims all seemed to be a one sided story. This was called into question, however, when many tribes, and thousands of first-hand accounts across the entire country are telling the same story. Among these problems, we find that Native American students are suffering. With the high school graduation rate at less than 50%, the future of these youths is unknown. Many feel that indigenous students have to choose between tradition and Western education, but that should not be the case.

“We constantly fight against stereotypes created to erase individuality inherent in a Native person, created by those in power, and perpetuated by mass media. We have to fight to remind everyone that we aren’t ancient relics (though we strive to protect our traditions), that we haven’t died off (though we know death too well), and that we know the sides of history that are not told
in textbooks (Shayla Yellowhair, Native Lives Matter, Teach for America).” As in any population, studying the cultural history of at-risk students often reveals why a culture is suffering academically. If this is indeed the history that the United States is choosing to ignore, studying it will give more insight into the complicated social situation our Native American students are living in.

Many First Nation people feel that a regular, public school education is not appropriate for their children. As cultures decline, some feel that the students should be instructed in more traditional roots. In modern day boarding and reservation schools, however, this is not an option, resulting in an even deeper divide between tribes and the federal government. Scholars believe that it is the Native children caught in the middle. If Native American students are indeed marginalized by the government, it is time for a long overdue reform.

The United States indigenous population is currently riddled with the highest statistics of violence, substance abuse, health issues, and suicides, and the lowest statistics of academic achievement. Studying the history of education for First Nation cultures can reveal the problems, but more importantly, the solutions to the academic crisis Native Americans are currently facing. This research will honestly evaluate and analyze this crisis, in hopes that our nations can see the situation for what it truly is. Perhaps, in the coming years, we can set aside the past, and bring up a new generation of Native Americans that realizes their full academic potential.
CHAPTER II
THE HISTORY OF NATIVE AMERICAN EDUCATION

To understand any problem, one must first know how the problem began. In this situation, we must examine the history of Native American education, and how the system has progressed through time. Tribal culture is deeply rooted in history and traditions, and understanding the influences of government education on culture through time will aid in the understanding of the current situation of Native students.

In 1786, the first Native American reservation was formed as a way to remove the tribes from the land that the government wanted to settle. From that point on, the farther west the United States grew, the more reservations were formed. With this complete sacrifice of land, the government felt there was still the problem of “savagism” within Native populations. In 1871, after every tribe was contained within a reservation, “Congress officially confirmed the altered statues of Indians: they were now deemed to be wards of the government, a colonized people (Adams, 7).” The term “wards of the government,” at this time and context, was synonymous with “prisoner of war,” and the Native populations were now confined to the reservations, under the law of the United States.

After attaining the land, the ultimate goal of the government for the tribes was “civilization.” While today, this is an abstract concept, at that time, the United States had clearly set goals for these people. Conversion to Christianity, agriculture instead of nomadism, patriarchy, capitalism, and English were all necessary components of the American Civilization. If the
Indians were to become farmers in a capitalist society, they would need less land. “In 1803, Jefferson observed that this ongoing process was in fact producing a ‘coincidence of interests’ between the races. Indians, having land in abundance, needed civilization; whites possessed civilization but needed land (Adams, 6).” At the time, many people felt that the Native Americans would choose civilized ways over savage ways.

In reality, many tribes where more advanced and civilized than the United States at the time. Assimilation would be a demotion for many Native peoples, particularly for women. In many tribes, women had an almost holy place within society. With their natural ability to create life, many believed that women were more connected to the spiritual aspects of life and the Earth. Many women were an essential part of tribal government, extending all the way to high positions on confederation councils. In the United States’ push for civilization, women would come to lose their right to govern, vote, and their position in society. The undermining of half of the tribal populations would eventually lead to an imbalance within many societies, creating countless problems for women and men, alike. The change in cultural structure would leave tribes exposed to the influences of the new order.

The government felt that the most effective way to “evolve” the tribes was through education. By teaching the children the ways of civilization, they would become civilized. Through government funding, the first mission schools for Native Americans were built. The curriculum was to teach Christianity, reading and writing (in English), and agriculture. School was to become a place of evolution, and death for the Indian Way.
The mission schools

In Pre-Civil War Era United States, the first mission schools for tribal children opened up their doors. Run by missionaries, and supported by government funds, the schools not only sought to teach the basics of academics, but also Christianity, individualism, and citizenship. It was also a place where all things Indian were discouraged. “At these missionary run schools, traditional, religious, and cultural practices were strongly discouraged while instruction in the Christian doctrines took place utilizing pictures, statues, hymns, prayers and storytelling (Carolyn J. Marr, Assimilation Through Education: Indian Boarding Schools in the Pacific Northwest.).”

Individualism and citizenship

When teaching the Native American children, the purpose was to assimilate them into mainstream American culture. While academic and Christian education were important, it still did not eliminate the collective Native American culture. Individualism, or the freedom to live as an individual, rather than collective interest, is fundamental in a capitalist economy. Most Native cultures were collectivist, and centered their way of life on the good of tribe. If the tribal people were going to assimilate, they would have to stop thinking of the tribe.

Citizenship was also a priority in school teaching. No longer were these people from free nations, but wards of the government. After the government took their lands, they wanted Native culture to become extinct. This push for teaching citizenship was an extension of the movement within immigrant populations, but for Native populations, this was not well received. Unlike immigrants, most Native Americans were adverse to the idea of becoming a part of the society.
that took away their way of life. In fact, the parents of the students took the time their children spent at home as a time to teach tradition, religion, and speak their language.

*Mission school system decay and revision*

Ultimately, the mission schools did not succeed in the total assimilation into mainstream United States culture. While conversion to Christianity and the English language were taking effect, the students were still able to go home, and be a part of their tribe’s culture. The mission schools were ineffective in meeting all of the goals of the government, and thus they were largely defunded. In their place came a new, more rigid system of education that would forever change the lives and culture of Native Americans: the boarding school.

*The boarding school*

By the 1880’s, every Native American tribe had been conquered, and relocated to reservations. The government had the land that they wanted, but it was not enough. In their eyes, there was still the issue of Native peoples abiding by their own cultures, commonly called the “Indian Problem.” The continuation of culture was vital to Natives. They saw how their way of life was disappearing in a violent manner, and looked to their children as the future of their tribe.

The government looked at Native children as an opportunity. A new generation of “civilized” Indians could arise, and become individual citizens of the United States. The failure of the mission school system to assimilate the Native tribes had become apparent, mostly because the children returned home to their own cultures, languages, and religions at the end of the school
day. Thus, the government came up with a new plan for Native children’s education: the boarding school.

The boarding school system was designed specifically to eliminate Native American culture. The Native child, at 5 years of age, would be taken from their home, and sent to a residential school, often hundreds of miles away from their parents. At the school, which housed many different tribes, the child would learn English, core curriculum, agriculture, and Christianity. Most importantly, the child would be away from their culture, and immersed into the new order. Children would often go years without going home, leaving them to grow up without parents. Specifically, without Indian parents.

With the creation of boarding schools came a new age for Native American Education: one of heart-ache and devolution for tribal cultures that would last for almost a century. This education system, if one can stomach to call it as such, was put in place to systematically eliminate culture. The effects of the boarding school system are still felt in the hearts of many people today. In the rest of the chapter, we will examine the boarding school system through aspects of time, and examine how this system operated over the course of a century.

**The first generation of students**

When the boarding schools were first built, many Native American parents were skeptical. They did not want to send their children far away, to be taught by the same people who killed their families, and forced them out of their homes. Consequently, the first few years of new boarding schools had low attendance. However, many tribal leaders were hopeful, and began sending
some of their children to learn how to read and write in English. Stories began to come back from the schools of high rates of disease, and many children who were sent home due to illness, died shortly after returning. In the early years, one school had a death rate of over 50%. This did not help the attendance rates at all, and fueled the outrage of parents. Many began withdrawing their children from the “Death House,” and refused to allow their children to go back. However, for the government goals of assimilation to become a reality, attendance was not optional.

**Guns and rations**

With attendance in boarding schools low, headmasters and reservation agents collaborated to forcibly encourage parents to send their children to the boarding schools. Using means of politics, pressure, and food, the government was bent on civilizing the tribes. Many times, the reservation agents would persuade the chiefs of the tribes to speak with the people, and encourage their people that education was the future. Often, the agents would also ask the chiefs to send their own children to the schools, as to set an example.

With tribal structure in chaos, many parents did not feel obligated to listen to the chiefs, especially concerning their own children. Agents would then go around the reservations, collecting children, sometimes without the parents’ knowledge or consent. This lead parents to begin hiding their children when school was about to start, which proved very effective. There are many cases where parents would go with their children off into the wilderness for a few weeks, to avoid the agents’ advances.
For some tribes, collecting children for school was harder than on other reservations. As time went on, the tactics began to change. The tribal peoples on reservations were a conquered people: wards of the government. The agents of the reservations found it necessary to switch to more aggressive tactics. On some reservations, the agents withheld rations to families who refused to send their children to school. It would have been impossible to survive without the rations, thus parents were forced to make a choice: send my child to school, or starve my family to death.

In this manner, the population of the boarding schools were secure. While there were very few instances of violence related to school attendance in the 1900’s, the policies of attendance did not change. If you were a Native American child living on a reservation, you would go to a school specifically designed for your culture’s extermination.

**Going to school**

For tribal children in the 1800-1920’s, “going to school” meant a lot of things. “Going to school” meant that at the age of 5, they would leave their parents, and not see them for a very long time. “Going to school” meant being hundreds of miles away from home. “Going to school” meant being lonely, confused, and without love.

On their first day of school, children arrived to the residential school, get enrolled, receive cloths, a schedule, and a bunk. Many accounts have described their first day of school to be traumatic on many levels, however, one particular aspect of initiation stands out among the rest: hair cutting. Boys were not allowed to have long hair, and consequently needed to have it cut to be in
regulations. For some tribes, cutting your hair means that you are in mourning over someone’s death. Many personal accounts describe the forced hair cutting as if they were dying a spiritual death.

Run like military training camps, children wore military style uniforms, marched everywhere they went, and kept on a tight schedule of school work and chores. The differences between the U.S. military and Native American lifestyles could not be more striking. For example, Native Americans did not have a calendar concept of time, but rather tracked time through the cyclical patterns of the Sun and Moon. The school, however operated on a strict schedule that the students were forced to keep.

Another stark, but significant, contrast between the two cultures was how the children would henceforth be raised. Many Native American cultures have specific ways in which to instruct children, and young people are often allowed to freely develop with guidance from an older teacher. There were also specific behaviors practiced, regarding honor, politeness, and generosity, which no longer applied in the boarding schools. Students residing within the system were told who to be, and not allowed the freedom to be an individual.

*Curriculum:* “*Kill the Indian, save the Man*”.

When examining the curriculum, one must keep in mind the objectives of the government: civilization, conversion, and individualism. Within each goal, there are many complex facets to the culture of the United States which were contradictory or different to Native American
culture. The mantra for all teachers and curriculum was “Kill the Indian, Save the Man.” The basis for the teachings of the boarding schools were to destroy every aspect of tribal culture within an individual, and replace it with mainstream culture.

An example that is extremely relevant today would be the extinctions of Native languages. In the boarding schools, the language of instruction was English. Instruction in class, along with communication outside of class was strictly regulated. Students who spoke in their native language were severely punished, often beaten, or forced to stand in line for hours at a time. This strict rule is widely believed to be the greatest factor that lead to the near extinction of many Native languages today.

Students of the boarding schools from 1880’s-1930’s were taught the basics in reading, writing, mathematics, and science, but also more heavily instructed in the technical professions. Women often graduated with a degree in homemaking, while men were taught masonry, construction, and agriculture.

Another aspect of the curriculum was cultural conduct. Politeness, customs, conversation, dance, and even dining properly were all subjects taught in school. Some personal accounts recall being bewildered by the strange, uncomfortable manner in which white men dined. Another former student describes his first dance class, where he met his lovely dancing partner, who would, one day, become his wife.
The boarding schools bred students to become citizens in United States society, teaching skills only useful off of the reservation. The purpose behind this was so decrease the populations of the reservations, and assimilate the next generations of Native Americans with the general public. Unfortunately, the idea of “killing the Indian to save the Man,” continued well into the 20th century when dealing with Native American education. Both boarding schools, and eventually reservations schools, continued with curriculum that was not only culturally inappropriate, but destructive to culture. The effects from these deliberate actions are still felt in modern tribal culture.

**Abuse**

Richard Pratt, the founder of the infamous Carlisle School, was a former military man, and a known “Indian Killer.” At the time, Pratt was actually considered a humanitarian, believing that assimilation of Native Americans, rather than genocide. “A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one,” Pratt said. “In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian, there is the race that should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.” The Carlisle School became the first federally sanctioned boarding school in 1879, and the boarding schools that followed assumed the Pratt model. The boarding school system, from it birth, was built around the purpose of eliminating Native American cultures. Many have argued that the boarding school system was not about an academic education, but rather one of the largest programs of indoctrination and brainwashing the United States has ever seen.

While the term “abuse” can have multiple meanings, this conversation will focus on violations of human rights committed against the Native American peoples. Unfortunately, abuse within the boarding school is not an officially well-documented subject, however there is an abundance of
eye witness accounts, both spoken and written. Many, including the federal government, refuse to acknowledge that these accounts have validity. After concluding my research on this subject, however, I believe the accounts are undeniable, and in fact, may be more widespread than originally believed.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what was the worst violation of human rights within the boarding school system, or to determine which abuse was the most harmful to the individuals or general population. The key thread in every offense is the system. The abuse endured by Native American children attending these schools was systematic, and overtly intentional.

The following sections on human rights violations are not one-time offenses, but rather heavily documented accounts telling the same story. This research will be referencing “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” provided by the United Nations in 1948, over thirty years before the boarding school system was disbanded.

Article 1.

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” Truly, the boarding school system’s existence could be considered the first violation of human rights. The system operated under the notion that the Native American way of life was not only a sub-human civilization, but all cultural aspects of First Nation peoples should be eliminated. Considering the fact that the government took it upon themselves to systematically exterminate language,
religion, and tradition at the expense of children, it is without a doubt that Native peoples were denied the right to free birth, and equality in dignity and rights.

**Article 9.**

In the case of the boarding schools, can going to school be considered a violation of human rights? Article 9 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.” In the beginning, many boarding schools at the time were built away from reservations, with the intention of separating children from their families and culture for prolonged periods of time. Attendance of these schools was mandatory, and there were no other schooling options available to Native American students at the time. Reservation agencies were charged to gather the children to be taken away to school, and children were often kept for years at a time, with very little visitation from their families.

In the majority of cases, parents and children did not want to be separated. One personal account from Floyd Red Crow in an article by NPR says, “…he still remembers watching his mother through the window as he left. At first, he thought he was on the bus because his mother didn't want him anymore. But then he noticed she was crying. ‘It was hurting her, too. It was hurting me to see that,’ Westerman says. ‘I'll never forget. All the mothers were crying.’” This account was from when Mr. Red Crow was first taken to the boarding school back in the 1950’s. Children being forcibly removed from their home for no other reason than their race and ethnicity is a clear violation of many human rights, for both children and parents. These removals continued until the late 1970’s.
The consequences of this act alone caused an enormous amount of issues for the family structure within Native American societies. Children and parents subjected to the boarding school system were not allowed to maintain their relationships as the child grew into adulthood. When the child returned home from school, many people describe their families seeming like familiar strangers. It is a well-known fact that children who grow up in the absence of their parents suffer from many psychological effects. In this case, however, not only were Native children forced away from their parents, but they were sent to an environment catered to exterminate part of their identity.

*Article 5*

Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that, “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.” This is probably the most heavily violated human right within the boarding school system, with thousands of personal accounts attesting to the harsh, neglectful treatment of Native American children by school personnel.

With the military and religious influences within the boarding school, the culture of the school was extremely strict. This strictness was enforced through harsh punishments, many of which could be categorized as abuse. Children were often punished for speaking their native language instead of English. The boarding school had an “English-only” policy that was brutally enforced, as all cultural expression was banned from the school. For many new and young students, this lead to frequent beatings and humiliation. Many personal accounts recall being beaten frequently and made to eat soap for speaking their native language while they were young.
children. Not only were children being denied their language, many did not understand what was going on around them.

Other cultural practices were forbidden, and punished in the same manner. Many “infractions” were due to the cultural differences, and children lacked understanding of the rules around them. Beatings were commonplace, and children were made to believe that something is inherently wrong with them. For example, consider the nature of any five-year-old. Not only are they talkative, they are curious, and bound to ask an extensive amount of questions. However, when they, and their friends, are beaten every time they talk or ask a question, it creates isolation, loneliness, and a belief of inferiority.

The extent of these beatings could go to extreme, with many accounts of serious, “accidental” injuries, creating an environment of fear among the students. Many students were forced to participate in inflicting these beatings, adding to the brokenness of these children’s identities. Often, these students would go without appropriate food, medical care, and love, leaving many children in a state of neglect.

The environment of the boarding schools was nothing short of horrific, and for many students, this was responsible for their painful, psychological ramifications in the future. Any child that grows up in a home of physical and emotional abuse is considered to be at risk for problems in their adult lives. It is important to remember, however, that this was not the home that they were intended to grow up in. This environment was forced upon them, as were the psychological consequences that they would later have to endure.
Article 3.

“Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.” While the physical abuse rampant in the boarding schools obviously violates this human right, sexual abuse within the system was also prevalent, and, arguably, an overt attack on this right. Girls and boys were both subjected to assault and rape, with little protection or concern.

Sexual abuse within the boarding schools was not only systematic racism, but also a facet of a system trying to break down the identity of children. This was so common, that it was expected, with little, to no punishment for the offenders, and no help given to the children. So many survivors are still alive, living with the scars of their childhood, crying for justice.

Every person has the right to live freely, with security in knowing that they have the right to their own body. It is a human right to not be sexually abused. This idea, however, was so far from the reality of the boarding school, it took until the early 1980’s to disband this system.

Articles 6, 7, and 8

These articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees the right of people to be given justice, unconditionally. The boarding schools were wrought with injustice, and this research’s explanation could only be described as brief. The violation of these human rights is unique, because it is still continuing. The perpetrators of these horrific crimes were never held accountable for the crimes they have committed against multiple generations of people. Many of the boarding schools survivors have tried, and are still trying to see justice served on their abusers. Unfortunately, the time has come where many of the crimes cannot be tried, and the
accused are beginning to die off. This has left a large, unfinished chapter in the lives of thousands of people.

Summary

The boarding school system is a symbol for great pain for Native Americans, and the effects are still felt by the newest generations of the First Nations. For as many as 5 generations, children were forced into a school of assimilation, and a system of calculated racism. This system of abuse has continued, and is effecting tribal peoples to the core.

There is something that is not normally said while telling this story, however, that is important to note: the purpose of this system was to eliminate culture, tradition, and identity, and despite every length that this inhumane system went to, it did not work. What is forgotten is the resiliency of these people. Despite generations of pain of the acutest kind, there is still a burning desire for peace and justice. There is still a desire to learn, protect, and to be free. Many Native people believe that this is still a possibility, and long for the opportunity.
CHAPTER III
FINDING THE BALANCE: WHERE HISTORY MEETS TODAY

The problem that we are observing is a low success rate for Native American students. We have also examined one facet of where this problem is stemming from. The boarding schools were extremely detrimental, however, the tribal school system has since been changed. If the boarding schools were the only contributor to this issue, the issue would have been resolved. So this begs the question: What is going on in the lives of Native American students that could be affecting the outcome of their education?

For every complicated question, there is a more complicated answer. Not only are we trying to pinpoint the one or two factors in every struggling tribal student’s life, but also make generalizations about every individual. Obviously, it is impossible to put every Native American student, from every tribe, in a categorized box. It would be better to examine the cultural environment of First Nation students, and illustrate the possible backgrounds that a student could come from. Beyond this, we should examine the current school structure and climate to understand the system that the students are not succeeding in.

Historical trauma and oppositional identity theories
Many academics have tried observing the current crisis that Native Americans are experiencing, including, but not limited to, the realm of education. According to the National Congress of American Indians, Native people are more likely to die at higher rates than other Americans from tuberculosis at 600%, alcoholism at 510%, diabetes at 189%, vehicle crashes at 229%, injuries at
152%, and suicide at 62%. Additionally, 1 in 4 Native Americans are living in poverty, 4 in 10 Native Americans live on tribal land, and 1 in 3 Native American woman will be raped in their lifetime (many people within tribal communities claim that it is at high as 2 in 3). Native Americans also are killed by police than any other race, per capita, every year.

It is important to understand, that all tribes are different in culture, language, traditions, and history. Native American tribes are as diverse as the European countries, however they are grouped together into a conglomerate by academics and the government. “Native American” is simply a blanket, racial term, while the only thing that all Native American tribes share is a similar, historical fate. Unfortunately, the most widely used theories to explain the current status of tribal nations does not take that variability into account.

The historical trauma and oppositional identity theories are the most commonly used theories in the academic world to describe the current position Native American tribes. Historical trauma theory is described as the modern effects on a culture due to historical loss of land, possession, and people. This theory is often used to understand Native American and African American communities that are struggling below the general United States population. Oppositional identity theory is defined as the deliberate resistance to the dominant culture, often due to a perceived glass ceiling set upon a population. Again, this theory is also used to describe Native American and African American communities.

While these theories hold elements of truth, they represent a pattern of wrong thinking, and the root of these ideas could ultimately cause further damage to these communities. The theory of
oppositional identity is seriously flawed, in that the basis of this theory implies that the basis of a person’s identity is purely to oppose the dominant culture. One’s culture is not existing to spite or resist the dominant culture; one’s identity is simply part of who they are. A polite decline of the dominant culture is not deliberate resistance, but simply an acceptance of their own way of life.

The historical trauma theory is heavily used to describe the First Nations’ crisis, and while it is true, the way it is often used is false. The loss of people, land, and possession deeply wounded the Native population, but that does not explain the alcoholism rates, the physical abuse, deaths by car accidents, substance abuse, and countless other statistics. If the situation was purely about the land, possession, and people, the current situation would be very different.

The historical trauma theory is a simple neglect of human history, in that it is not sufficient to explain the reasons for today’s situation. Truly, it was the process in which the land, possession and people were taken, and the events occurring thereafter, that has caused the trauma that we see today. While it is generally overlooked in public education, to this day, the First Nations are a conquered people. For that reason alone, this paper has examined the general history of the occurrences after the reservation system was put into place. It is hardly spoken of, but the conquering of the Native people did not stop after they were put on the reservations. The best example of this statement would be the boarding schools, which we have already discussed.

As previously stated, historical trauma, in the opinion of this researcher, is a neglect of human history. This theory does not fully take into account the massive scale of psychological history
that majority of Native Americans carry with them. If we explore this notion from a generational perspective, we have generally divide each generation into 20 year periods. From the time the last tribe was put onto a reservation, to today, we have about 6 generations within a Native American family. Given this information, we can put together a historical and psychological timeline of events.

The last free generation of Native Americans were the people who saw their families and friends die from guns, disease, and starvation. They lost their land, holy places, and had their children forcefully taken from them to attend a school run by their conquerors. This generation experienced some of the most devastating losses and violation of human rights this country has ever seen. The psychological tolls are immeasurable for an individual, much less on a mass scale for an entire generation.

Their children where the first generation of Native Americans to attend the boarding schools, and were viewed by the United States government as a solution to the “Indian Problem.” Unfortunately, they would be the first to be subjected to the horrific social experiment. The effects for this generation are more measurable on an individual scale, given what we now know about human psychology, but still impossible to accurately quantify on a generational level.

Children who attended the boarding schools were separated from their parents for years at a time, often without contact, and grew up in an emotionally, physically, and sexually abusive environment. Children who grow up in neglectful and abusive environments have increased risk factors for alcoholism and substance abuse, depression, PTSD, other psychological issues, and
violent behavior in their adult lives. According to the National Women’s Study and the National Violence Against Women Research Center, rape survivors are 3 times more likely to suffer a major depressive episode, 6.2 times more likely to develop PTSD, 13.4 times more likely to have alcohol problems, and 26 times more likely to have substance abuse problems. Beyond these statistics, these children were also the first generation to return to the reservation, having been “educated” by the boarding schools. They were the first to forget their language, the first to not know how to pray, the first to not know the traditions, and the first to come home as strangers to their families.

As more generations followed, the statistics for abuse and violence still held true for generation after generation. It wasn’t until the 1960’s that the boarding schools began to close, and the tribal schools were open. The last boarding school operating under the old system closed in the early 1980’s, leaving behind 5 generations of survivors, many of whom are still alive today.

Consider the statistics of abuse, and the massive scale and amount of time under which the boarding schools operated. Now consider the statistics about Native Americans today, and view the correlation. Given what we know about the boarding schools, human psychology, and the current statistics on tribal people, it is my opinion that we can safely assume that past statistics and current statistics tie together. While the boarding schools were not the only factor leading into the current crisis, they played a significant role leading into the modern issues.

“Historical trauma” cannot accurately define the linear progression of psychological distress that has dominated Native societies for over 100 years. For many survivors of the boarding schools,
this is not “historical” trauma. It is trauma that is still being grappled with today. “Historical trauma” is a word that is used to make this situation sound like it is far in the past, when in reality, it is a very real part of many modern Native lives.

**First Nation students, today**

This brings us to this generation of students, who are living in a unique, albeit difficult, time period for Native Americans. The generations leading up to the 1980’s have experienced the “aggressive oppressor” within their lives, meaning that these generations felt the effects of an institution built to push down and eliminate their way of life. Today, however, students are experiencing the “passive oppressor,” meaning that while the institution has been eliminated, the damages made from the aggressive oppression have yet to be fixed. In fact, the government has put very little time, money, or attention in to remedying the actions of the past towards tribal land and people. There is no surer sign of a people’s conquering when the conqueror can lift up their hands and say “Look. Look at what they are doing to themselves.”

The reality of the situation is if communities are going to revive, the cultures and languages restored, and the population be lifted out of poverty, the burden will fall to the First Nations. At this point in time, it will be the task of the Native American people to restore what was taken from them. To break a cycles of oppression, depression, and poverty as vicious as this, education is the first step in breaking those patterns.

If education is the first step in rebuilding communities, then there is a problem: less than half of Native American students graduate high school, and less than 1 in 10 will go on to seek higher
education. Considering what has been discussed in this paper, thus far, these statistics about student success should not be shocking.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs dictates that if basic human needs are not met, higher tiered needs, such as education, will not be met. If a student is hungry, they will only be paying attention to their empty bellies, and not a lesson. If the student is distressed by a death in the family, they will not be able to focus on a book. If a student fears for safety, or is traumatized because their environment is not safe, calculus homework won’t be a priority. This is not Native American statistics; this is how humans operate.

Additionally, the reservation schools are notoriously underfunded, there is a high teacher turnover rate, and the general curriculum does not account for the social and cultural exceptionalities of their students. When schools are struggling to meet the needs of the students, and the curriculum does not take population uniqueness into account, how can we expect to see an improvement in success numbers? The honest, yet sad, reality is that, given the current system, we probably won’t see drastic improvement over long periods of time. The education system today is not culturally appropriate for Native American students.

Thankfully, for the first time in history, this country is poised to realize its dream of becoming a truly free nation. Reform is on the rise, minorities are voicing their frustrations with the institution of our government, and politicians are taking notice of the equality issues within this country. Change is coming for all people, including Native Americans. There are grassroots
movements within tribal land that are working for the improvement of First Nation communities, and people are ready for change.

To truly break cycles of poverty, oppression, and depression, education must be at the heart of these movements. Education reform will be a necessity for drastic change to occur, and the new methods will need to be built around the idea of tribal restoration. The day is coming when a Native American child will not have to choose between their culture and their education, and it will be a beautiful day.
CHAPTER IV
A CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE EDUCATION: REVIVING AND
RESTORING A PEOPLE’S LEGACY

Native Americans are currently living in a critical moment of history, and there are two paths that can be taken from this point. Languages are being lost, and becoming extinct. Culture is dying out. Ancient artistrys and medicines are declining. Despite everything, there is so much left worth saving.

The boarding school system, while extremely detrimental to the lives and cultures of millions, failed miserably. Native American people are still here, and many are fighting to preserve what is left of the Frist Nations. The human spirit is hard to kill, and it is difficult to find a story of resilience quite like the one told by the indigenous people of this great land.

This social justice will be a massive and lengthy undertaking, requiring the cooperation of both the tribes and the federal government. History will need to be set aside in the pursuit of a future, and a new age of understanding will need to be reached for this to occur. With the passing of time, changing of administrations, changes in tribal government, and a new generation, one singular goal must be in the forefront of our minds: renewal.

Culturally appropriate education: breaking the cycle

As discussed previously, education is the first step into reviving a people’s way of life. Currently, however, the system that is in place is not successful. The Native American situation
is unique, and consequently, their education should be fitting to their cultural needs. Language, history, traditions, and crafts are all viable options for curriculum. Many tribal schools even offer these options, but, as they are considered non-essential, these options are often the first to be cut in a budget shortage.

This idea of cultural education being non-essential is probably one of the biggest downfalls of the federal government’s requirements for Native Education. By dismissing the significance of the culture of a student, they are dismissing a part of the identity of student. If, however, the cultural education would be a priority, along with the core subjects, schools would be fostering an understanding of a student’s role within their communities.

The following discussions are proposals for future education reform. Each of these teaching techniques are research based, and proven highly effective. These are methods that I, personally, believe would (generally) mesh nicely with tribal cultures, and encourage success for Native American students. Understand that while these may work within reservation schools, it is paramount for the tribe to decide what they want in their schools. Respecting the sovereignty of the tribes, and their decisions, is very important. They know best what their children need.

*Bilingual education and dual language instruction*

Bilingual education is a system of teaching through with both the home language and the language of school is equally taught through academic instruction. This model specifically targets younger children, to build up reading and linguistic skills through support of both the home language, and the second language. As the children accelerate in grade levels, so does the
increased usage of the second language. This system is used in countless public elementary schools around the country, and is specifically prevalent for native Spanish speakers.

Dual language instruction is a similar concept to bilingual education, however, the time spent in both languages is divided evenly throughout the grade levels. For example, a teacher might teach one week in a native language, and the next week in English. Throughout this process, the teacher teaches content-based lessons, in a continuous, natural progression of the information. Dual language instruction is very helpful in building up academic fluency in both the home-language and in English. This system is also very common in public elementary schools, and has proven to be very effective.

Many tribal schools have native language classes that are devoted to teaching the language, and its model is not unlike that of an ESL (English as a Second Language) style of instruction. While the class is devoted to teaching the language, academic content is not taught in these classrooms. A major difference between bilingual education-dual language models and an ESL style of class is the emersion into the language with the support of the home language. Not only does this help students learn and maintain the language better, it also adds levels of academic fluency that often is not possible within an ESL style of classroom.

Bilingual education and dual language instruction are widely available for English language learners, and is accepted as one of the best possible methods for children to learn a new language. This system would build a new generation that is not only fluent and confident with the academic content, but also in both English and their tribal language. Should this be used
within tribal schools, this program could potentially reverse the effects that the boarding schools had on tribal language loss.

Collaborative teaching method

Traditionally, Native American children were taught by people who had experienced life, and could pass on valuable information. In many cultures, grandparents were often revered as teachers of the tribe’s children. Today, Native children must go to school to comply with federal requirements, and there is very little interaction between generations in the academic setting.

The collaborative teaching method is when there is a team of two or more teachers for content instruction. If set up properly, and there is a mutual respect between the teachers, this system can work beautifully to help engage students within the material. Additionally, different teachers can provide different viewpoints on the content. For this method in tribal schools, it only seems appropriate to have a certified content teacher, and also include a cultural teacher. This could be a traditional teacher, such as a grandparent, or be a cultural historian, tribal leader, or citizen knowledgeable of their tribe’s language and tradition.

This system could provide countless benefits to not only the students, but the community as well. This model would restore the traditional way of instruction into the classroom, and provide additional viewpoints that an instructor, a non-tribal member, could not support. Additionally, this allows for cultural and emotional support for both the students, and the content teacher. Should this become a fixture in tribal schools, this could also become a job creator. Reservations
often experience as severe lack of economy. A job, such as this, would not only be meaningful to the tribe and individual, but also improve the lives of many people.

This model, in a sense, symbolizes the relationship Native Americans could have with education, once again. By providing qualified teachers, both in academic content and cultural knowledge, First Nation students will have the opportunity to receive a truly unique and meaningful education. Culture and education can work together in an impactful way, to the point where there is no need to sacrifice one for the other.

*I Montessori Method*

The Montessori Method of teaching provides a loose structure in which students learn through discovery, self-motivation, and collaborative learning. The classroom teacher is able to guide students in the direction in which they should go, and allow them the opportunity to learn for themselves, while providing additional support for struggling students. This method can be used through all grade levels, and can be molded to have an emphasis in tribal culture. Self-motivation, creativity, and collaboration are all developed through these types of classrooms, along with academics. An applicable example would be if a student is interested in tribal art, they could learn how to create it for themselves. A teacher, who knows that tribal art often has many raw shapes and lines, could provide a lesson in which the student could explore the concepts of geometry through tribal art. Not only does it teach content and culture, it helps the student remain invested in the topic because it follows their individual interest.
This method is suggested for countless reasons, but the point of emphasis, or the reason why it should be so desirable, is the culture it fosters within the classroom. The Montessori style fosters a community of learners, where students work together to learn, share, and grow together. It cultivates an environment of learning through multiple viewpoints, and diminishes an individualistic competitiveness. Additionally, the motivation to succeed and love for learning is higher than that of a normally structured classroom.

The culture of collectivism that this method supports is not unlike traditional Native American society structure. For tribes to be restored, it will take the collective effort of the people, rather than the hard work of a few individuals. This kind of classroom culture could lay the foundation for students to learn how to work together with their people in the future. The students learning in these classrooms will one day be citizens and leaders together, and, as such, they should be taught how to work in an effective, and collective way.

Ultimately, these are all very real possibilities that could become a part of a tribal school system. These methods were suggested to help build a community invested in the Native culture through education, and possibly build the next generation of Native minds in a supporting environment. The current system does not take the tribal culture or community situation into account, and consequently, that has left First Nation students without a seat at the table. However, through inclusive curriculum, and supporting teaching methods, it could be that, one day, school will not be a place where cultures are non-essential. Perhaps, one day, school will be a place where cultures are given new life.
Obstacles

The hypothetical world is a lovely place, where everything is possible, and people treat each other as they should. Unfortunately, that is not the world that we live in, and the reality of the reservations and inter-government relations is tough to swallow. It is hard to get things done, even if one is trying to help people.

It would be very difficult to rebuild an education system from the top, down, get every tribe to allow a system change within their education school, and to develop a moldable curriculum to fit each unique tribal culture. There is nothing simple about what is suggested, however the investment into an appropriate education would pay dividends.

The largest obstacle that a reform of this magnitude would be the time component. Administrations and tribal governments change, and priorities are rearranged. It will require pressure and commitment from both sides to make this a lasting change. While it sounds unlikely, it is completely possible for this to happen, and the only reason this does not sound possible is the inconsistency of government.

Another obstacle that will be faced is the time it will take for this system to make obvious improvements within communities. This is the first step in a process of recovery, and life on the reservation is hard. The external factors of life on a reservation will be there for a while, however, external change cannot happen unless the internal structure begins to change.
In reality, there will always be obstacles, and many more than the few described above. Challenges should not deter us from choosing the right path, in seeking a better future for the next generation. There is no perfect solution to an imperfect situation. The best we can do is to demand change, and work to make that change happen. Change is possible.

**Hope**

If there was ever a time to be hopeful about the current issues facing Native Americans, now is that time. Our country is on the brink of change, and finally, our destiny of being a free nation is on the horizon. Equality is not built upon the back of a brother, and freedom cannot be purchased at the expense of another man. Instead, equality is built through the collective interest and compassion towards the fellow man, and a free man is not truly free until his brother is also free.

It is time to restore freedom, justice, and peace to these people. It is time to break the vicious cycles, currently leading these tribes into a decline, and restore the proud legacy and future that is due to them. Not only is it the responsibility of this country to ensure the rights of their brothers, but it is an honor to do so. It is a sacred responsibility to preserve and protect this land, and its people.
REFERENCES


