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**Injustice, Inequality, Hope:
Public Education and American Indians**

This summer, I lived on a Navajo Reservation in Shiprock, New Mexico, researching geology and geophysics. The other student researchers on my project were from several highly acclaimed colleges across the United States, and all of us were non-Native American. An important part of the project was supposed to be working with a few Navajo students from the Diné College on the Reservation. We were to share our geologic equipment, and the opportunity for undergraduates to work on professional research, to the students at this tribal college. In the end, only one of them worked on the project, and she, only for a few days.

It was a real shame that the collaboration didn't work out; but more than that, it got me to thinking about how the Navajo students' attitudes towards our very white and privileged ideas of education may have shaped their decisions not to work with us for the summer. Reflecting on my experience and views, and on research exploring many issues of injustice and challenges for American Indian and Alaska natives in schools, I see the need for America's educational system to reach out to and support these students.

The American Educational system must better serve American Indian and Alaska Native students. These students have been underserved, marginalized, and have had their cultures actively attacked throughout the history of their participation in public schooling. Much must be done to right past wrongs, amend current problems, and work towards a brighter and more egalitarian future in their education. The road has been and will continue to be paved with conflicts and questions; no debate worth having is ever any different. I will examine the history of the issues, the myriad problems and injustices for AI/AN students, measures being

taken to address them today, and my own observations of the educational disconnect between native and non-native students in American schools. In this essay, I will show: how public schools for AI/AN students were initially explicit tools for assimilation and destruction of Native cultures; how these assimilation policies still exist covertly in schools, create unfair challenges and spur low academic performance of AI/AN students; what special programs are being implemented to address these unfair challenges; and what more can be done to reshape schools into tools for cultural re-affirmation and high academic achievement for Native students.

History

Historically, the role of Western-style American education for American Indian students has been assimilation into Western culture. Many of these colonial goals linger in today's schools with American Indian (AI) and Alaska Native (AN) students, and because of this it is important to understand the history and development of public education for America's native nations.

Assimilation

Required public education for American Indians was not begun as an entirely charitable institution, although it is possible that individuals involved in early education were benevolent and well intentioned. Since the beginning, AI/AN education has had at its heart the forceful desire to change these peoples. Schools were established as agents for spreading Christian religious doctrine and values, as well as western cultural values and societal practices. No AI cultures or languages were given space in this education; AI students were being taught to view their cultures as second-rate, that they had no worth unless they adopted the new American values as presented in these schools.

Schools were also part of an imperial effort on the part of the United States government to immobilize the country's AI/AN populations, to corral them onto less land and restructure their lives so that they would stay there, taking up as little space as possible. To do this, schools taught and imposed a farming lifestyle on many peoples who had subsisted on a roving hunting lifestyle for so many generations. The schools themselves, where AI students were required to attend by official law, also enforced the new stationary lifestyle. The government, and the broader cultural body of non-native Americans, was hoping to shove AI peoples into small spaces, to weaken their culture, to assimilate them but then give them now real space in the new culture, to make them an unobtrusive people. Only by the 1880s did the government begin to admit that this intentional cultural debilitation through "education" was threatening the survival of AI peoples and traditions.

Many AI/AN students were sent away from their homes, from the people who had raised them and particularly from the land essential to their cultures, to boarding schools off of the reservations that had been set aside for them. In a boarding school environment, learning was absolutely separate from place, a philosophy in direct opposition with a land-learning connection deep at the heart of AI/AN ways of knowing.

Education, at its beginnings, made overt its goals of breaking up tribes and bands of American Indians. By forcing AI students to be isolated in their pursuit of academic achievement, to lose personal attention from elders who taught them in favor of impersonal curriculum standards, AI students entered a system without the strength and unity of their community-based cultures. Western American society now, as then, is often focused on individuals: we are driven to advance, without much regard to the advancement or well being of the community at large. In schools for American Indians, these native students were made

to feel cut off from the strength they had found in community, made to feel isolated, alone and invisible. It is important to study the historical origins of this isolationism in school not because it is history, but because it is not; it is still very much a present and persistent problem.

Only in 1928 was the first federal report published deploring the educational system for AI students. The Merriam Report, as it was called, noted the poor quality of teaching and learning for these students, and made several recommendations to amend the state of education. It stated the need for schools to be vehicles for supporting AI family and social structures, and for other federal policies to strengthen these structures. A report like this may have broken ground in the data it presents, but it did not mean that new policies were put immediately into place, or ever put into place.

The Kennedy Report of 1969 was the first instance of the U.S. government admitting to the unstated but very much enforced policy of active assimilation of AI/AN students, which had been in place since the inception of education programs for these students. This report wrote of how schools, as an assimilation force, make students choose between allegiance to their education and allegiance to their tribal culture; schools become an alien and unwelcome institution in the community.

Legal Relationship

Legally, the United States of America has a special “trust relationship” with each American Indian Nation, the financial policies of which greatly impact the education systems that serve AI/AN students on reservations and off. This trust relationship states that the U.S.A. has a “legal and moral duty to assist in the protection of their property and rights.” The trustee in this relationship is the U.S. Congress, and the beneficiaries are American Indian Nations.

This set-up has often worked out to mean that Congress has stepped into AI affairs and taken over control, particularly in the area of education, creating mandates and controlling curriculum without much of a forum for local influence in policy-making. Funding for AI/AN schools on Reservations is especially tricky; most public schools receive a large portion of their funding from property taxes, but as reservation property is exempt from taxations, there is a deficit in school funds. Thus, federally provided money is a far larger portion of Reservation schools' budgets than other public schools, which Congress can use to exercise greater control in these AI/AN schools.

Student Struggles

American Indian and Alaska Native students are faced with incredible emotional and academic obstacles because their needs – academic, emotional and cultural -- are often not met by the American public education system.

Alienation

The AI/AN high school drop-out rate is extremely high across the nation, due to the fact that these students often feel unwelcome, alienated, isolated and discouraged from succeeding in public school settings. A survey in 1992 showed of those AI/AN students who would have graduated that year, 25.4% of AI/AN students dropped out. This is the highest percentage of dropouts in all racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. Especially in large public high schools where AI/AN students are a small minority group in a mostly-white institution, students often encounter loneliness, prejudice and teachers who expect less of them than of other students.

In an environment where students feel disconnected and alone, they will reasonably detach more from their educational experience, because they feel unnoticed and undervalued.

Where students perceive they are already negatively judged before they begin at school (prejudice) and that they are expected to do poorly, they will not feel motivation to take control of their education for the better.

Large high schools present larger struggles for AI/AN students. Feelings of isolation and alienation are escalated, and these students seem to get lost in the fray. Perhaps more thought should be given to restructuring these large schools towards more of a school-within-a-school model. This model often gives a voice to more students, allows students to work towards their interests, to some degree, in secondary education, and encourages teachers to have more time and energy to devote to each student.

Tracking of students has been shown to seriously harm the educational well being of AI/AN students. Tracking them out of college preparatory classes discourages from working harder to achieve college-level skills, and hopefully go on to that higher education. Instead of tracking, teachers should be adjusting their curricula and their teaching to give more to students with greater needs in AI/AN communities. Tracking may simply stigmatize those students who are not in the higher tracks, without encouraging their learning.

Teaching

Over 90% of educators nationwide are white (Eschelman, 1997). White teachers, often, have experienced and learned with a lot of white-majority cultural homogeneity; that is what these teachers then learn to teach. They cannot always understand the importance to individual students of their cultural backgrounds and values. Our attitudes reflect what we know and have experienced, and the fact that almost all teachers in public schools are white means that most do not know and have not experienced a public education that affirms and teaches

American Indian culture and knowledge. Thus, these are not taught, because most teachers have little understanding of AI/AN students and how to support their cultural values.

Teachers need to become more knowledgeable of the cultures of their students, and this is particularly true for teachers of AI/AN students, whose cultures have been forcefully marginalized in public schools for centuries. Perhaps part of teacher training should be a government-paid “cultural immersion” program, through which beginning teachers should spend a period of time living in the community of their future schools. In an American Indian community, they would learn about how learning happens on that community level: who the community’s leaders and elders are, how social structures operate, the values emphasized in settings outside of school, what issues and areas of study students and families might want to have taught in school. Curriculum and methods could then be better adapted to fit these specific community and individual needs, so teachers work as better as a part of the community, working as an ally with clear interest and personal commitment to student success.

Some AI/AN activists argue that restrictions on teacher qualifications should be lowered for AI/AN prospective teachers, so that teachers with personal cultural understanding of their students could lead more classrooms serving these students. I think this is as sticky an issue as affirmative action; essentially, it is a smaller-scale implementation of affirmative action. Although it is true that for many AI students, having a teacher with a similar background could enhance a feeling of welcome, encourage commitment to staying in school, and be a strong and supportive resource. Perhaps these “qualifications” are more meaningful than academic and professional teacher standards, or perhaps they are not. The debate is certainly not finished.

Cultural Discontinuity

Many American Indian and Alaska Native students who live on Indian Reservations attend small elementary and middle schools on the Reservation, but when the time comes to go to high school, they are sent off to larger district high schools, usually white-majority. This cultural discontinuity in education brings with it a host of problems. This difficult transition to high school is directly connected to the alarming dropout rate for AI/AN students.

Primary schools on Reservations have essentially all-Native student enrollment, and generally very little to do with neighboring non-Native schools. Entering a high school of almost-all students may be the first experience for these student of prolonged contact with a majority-white culture; it may also be the first experience of prolonged detachment from their own culture. Students often feel suddenly alienated depressed, unsupported, and hopeless in this new setting. This glaring cultural discontinuity needs to be addressed. One way to address this would be to federally provide for K-12 schools on Reservations, so that education would be a continuous process culturally. In Native community village high schools in Alaska, drop-out rates are extremely low; in similar communities in Alaska, where high schools are outside of the village setting, we see that alarmingly high drop-out rate again. Cultural continuity is called for.

Village and Reservation high schools would not be a perfect solution. Course variety would likely be limited; there would likely be less offerings of advanced level courses (AP, etc.), less extracurricular programs available, and also less exposure to a diverse environment. However, these downsides might be outweighed by the benefits of a culturally continuous education.

One of the most problematic issues in American Indian education today is that the essential values of American public school are often constructed so as to be in direct opposition to American Indian cultural values. Students are forced, through the education system, to choose between one and the other. Success in school becomes failure in tribal community life; success in the community means failure in schools. Failure in school may not be a passive act, but rather a conscious movement against the school system's perceived-to-be alien set of values. It may be that the violent clash schools create between AI/AN culture and the non-Native culture of academics encourages angry, often violent responses. There has been an alarmingly high occurrence of school shootings and violence on Reservations in the past few years. Maybe if public school were not a place of such violent ideological conflict, it would be less a place of violent physical conflict, too.

American public schools, as well as American society at large, tend to support such values as putting personal achievement and academic success over the welfare and accomplishments of the group, strictly adhered-to time schedules, of discarding old and traditional methods and only learning the newest methods – these are not traditional AI/AN ways of learning and knowing. To become a real part of this community, students must dissociate at least somewhat from their traditional communities, placing higher education over the importance of their tribal lives. This, I believe, is the greatest danger associated with the problem of cultural discontinuity in high schools that take AI/AN students off of Reservations and away from their communities. In places where it is not possible to staff a high school for a Reservation or Native-majority village, curriculum in public high schools needs to adjust to all parts of its student body, to be culturally relevant to all of its students.

Special AI/AN school programs

Some programs and methods are in place today to attempt to address the educational inequalities and cultural injustices that AI/AN students experience in schools, especially in schools that serve populations of these students off of Reservations.

Urban Charters

As urban populations of AI/AN students grow in number and in voice, American Indian charter schools have begun to sprout up to serve these youth. Today, at least 18 such urban charter schools are available for AI/AN students and non-native students interested in an alternative learning style and curriculum influenced by American Indian values and ways of knowing.

The idea behind these charter schools is that perhaps a culturally-blind education is not a good way of making students of an American Indian background feel supported in school; rather, their culture needs to be actively and specifically affirmed in their education. These schools accomplish such goals by keeping the classes small, holding daily school meetings, creating situations in which older students teach the younger students, as elders in a tribal community teach the youth. Physically, these schools create a more welcoming atmosphere, often built as circular structures, to encourage equality in communication among all members of the school community, an echo of how decision-making works in AI/AN traditions.

In Minneapolis, MN, this trend can be seen in two AI/AN charter and magnet schools, which focus on placing education into culture, as opposed to fitting culture somehow into education. The charter school, called Heart of the Earth school, tries to prepare young people to be productive and powerful citizens of the world through an experiential and holistic education that affirms Native cultures. In regular public schools, AI and AN students often

struggle just to keep afloat, balancing their tribal identity with their school identity in the face of prejudice, ignorance and assimilatory forces. At Heart of the Earth and other such charter schools, it's not just about survival; it's about a cultural blossoming, an educational renaissance of learning and pride in native traditions as a part of academic achievement and educational standards.

Charter schools emphasizing American Indian culture pose a problem: it is virtually impossible to separate religion from culture for AI ways; spiritualism is inextricable tied up in philosophy and daily life. So how can public school funding support this sort of "religious" learning, but censor, say, a fundamentalist Christian charter school? Legally, perhaps, American Indian-focused public education is not quite constitutional.

But then, I would respond that the history of unfair and unconstitutional marginalization of American Indian peoples, as well as modern-day marginalization of these students in public schools, may justify charter schools like Heart of the Earth. These schools are certainly not enforcing "conversion" of non-Native students; American Indian spiritualism is always open and accepting of all faith. I think there is much non-religious wisdom and knowledge to be gained from AI/AN ways of knowing that is not related to religion at all, and specifically much wisdom and knowledge not being presented in regular public schools.

These schools offer an option for urban populations of American Indian students and their families that directly opposes the culturally alienating, non-supportive feeling they would likely find in regular public school, and do not make students choose between pursuing their education or their culture. If it is not a perfect solution, then at least it is working to amend a far-less-than-perfect dilemma in American Indian public education today. We must start to fix this problem from where we are now.

I also see great and beneficial potential in bringing American Indian learning into non-Native majority public schools. I think there should be more projects encouraging real cross-cultural learning and interaction, so that Native students are encouraged to teach non-Native kids realities about themselves, and non-Native kids learn positive truths through positive and social interactions. A lot of teaching material on Native cultures is ridden with stereotypes, but that can change. We learn the most about our world when we learn about and celebrate its diversity, especially when we learn to understand groups of people historically categorized and overlooked.

Forced to Choose: Thoughts from the Shiprock Reservation

Last summer, I and my fellow geologists walked onto the Reservation very comfortable with our privilege, with our expensive and delicate scientific equipment, with our motivation to do good research because we knew we would be using it to write senior theses back at school, and with a high level of comfort with scientific research. Maybe the culture we walked into Shiprock with was so alien and discontinuous with these students' college and community "culture" that they backed away from working with us.

Science learning and research is often entirely disconnected from real human interaction and from the land on which it is performed, which is quite different from American Indian ways of knowing. It may even be offensive. They were forced to choose; they felt, between our white-scientist-wealthy-outsider culture and their own family and cultural ways. As long as these very non-Native learning styles are those exclusively supported by secondary and higher education, I think that AI and AN students will continue to defect from such learning, as the Navajo students in Shiprock did with our geology project.