



The Unbreakable Link: An Analysis of the Connection between Federal Indian Policy
and Native American Boarding and Canadian Residential Schools

Senior Project

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The Esther G. Maynor Honors College
University of North Carolina at Pembroke

By

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Mathematics/American Indian Studies
December 1, 2017

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Acknowledgements

To my wonderful advisor, Dr. Haladay, thank you for providing me with the knowledge and resources to pursue my ideas, encouraging me to follow my passions, and always challenging me to be the best writer/scholar I can be!

To the staff of the Esther G. Maynor Honors College, thank you for allowing me an avenue to dive deeper into an area of research that I'm interested in! Thank you for providing me with a wonderful and unique experience during my time here at UNC Pembroke!

To my constant sounding board, Korrinne, thank you for always listening to my ideas and thoughts, no matter how crazy they came out! Thank you for being my editor, reviewer, and presentee when I needed someone's opinion! This thesis would not have been possible without you!

To my loving family, thank you for going on this educational journey with me! Y'all were just as excited to learn as I was, and I was overwhelmed and delighted by the continuous questions and conversations that related to my work!

Abstract

Native American boarding and Canadian residential schools were a part of assimilation used by the respective governments to force Native communities into the Non-Native society. Both governments released different federal policies that would have a significant impact on the children who attended the schools and the communities that they were taken from. By studying different personal narratives, this paper will pay attention to how federal policies affected the students' experiences while they were attending these schools. It will also provide evidence to suggest that Native children had their own way of resisting the governmental policies that tried to assimilate them. Since the close of Native American boarding and Canadian residential schools, each government has had a different response to their involvement in this piece of history. Different organizations have also emerged to help the survivors begin and continue the healing process.

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Introduction

Since initial contact with Europeans, Native Americans and Aboriginal peoples have been in a constant tug-of-war with colonizers to maintain their sovereignty. At the same time, the United States and Canada have continued to establish programs and policies to attempt to “civilize” and/or assimilate the Native populations into their societies. Federal Indian policy outlines the relationship between the federal governments and the Native nations that live within their borders. The history of these relationships between Native nations and colonialist nation-states has been one of constant alteration and variation. From warfare to social policy, the governments have participated in the cycle that hinders Native peoples from maintaining their traditional ways.

The introduction of U.S. Native American boarding schools and Canadian residential schools was just one example of federal governments’ effort to phase Native peoples into mainstream societies. U.S. Native American boarding schools and Canadian residential schools took many different forms. It is important to note that there was not a uniform style that these schools took; even schools under the same category, missionary or government-run, did not look similar. Consequently, students’ experiences varied tremendously. Some of the students who attended these schools have since shared their stories and experiences through writing. Through analyzing and understanding personal accounts and narratives of children who experienced U.S. Native American boarding schools and Canadian residential schools, I will shine a light on the effects that Federal Indian policy and laws in both the United States and Canada have had on the students’

experiences at the school. In the face of these changes and policies, Native peoples found their own ways to resist the ideologies that were being forced upon them.

Mission Schools

The first type of schools that arose were mission schools in the 1800s. These schools were run by different religious denominations, Protestant and Catholic, that were each motivated by their own beliefs and ideologies. In the case of the United States, the contracts that the federal government established with school systems that began in 1896 provided funding for missionary groups to begin the formations of schools for Native children (Reyhner and Eder 112). When missionaries were first sent to reservations, they would usually open vocational institutions. These institutions would teach vocational skills, musical skills, basic academic subjects, and religious instruction. The students would learn different vocational skills that would help keep the schools running.

Mission schools in both the United States and Canada were established by different religious denominations in hopes to convert young Native children to their American religion. Most mission schools focused on two specific ideas: vocational training and religious training. They believed that these two things would help Native children transition to becoming “civilized” citizens of the country. In 1868, United States President Ulysses S. Grant announced the Peace Policy, the newest Federal Indian policy. The policy came after the Office of Indian Affairs was accused of corruption and dealing with Native peoples in an unethical manner. The Peace Policy had three main components: a reservation official would be appointed by various denominations’ church boards, expansion of federal support for education, and the President would appoint a

group of people, the Board of Indian Commissioners, who would review and oversee different Indian policies (Adams 7). The Peace Policy established missionaries among native groups.

The Canadian government had their own system of Mission schools. These schools similar to their American counterparts focused profoundly on the religious teachings of the school. Basil H. Johnston, an Ojibway writer and storyteller, describes his and his classmates' time in St. Peter Claver's Indian Residential School, also commonly referred to as Spanish, during the 1940s in *Indian School Days*. The school was located in Ontario, Canada, a good distance from his original home. In 1939, he and his sister were taken from their home and sent to the residential schools. Throughout his memoir, Johnston provides specific examples of the extremely hard times he encountered. He and his classmates experienced physical, emotional, and verbal abuse from the priests, yet Johnston and his friends were able to find little humorous moments while at Spanish that helped them endure. The boys were able to exert their own form of resistance through these small moments.

It would be easy to assume that the students at St. Peter Claver's Indian Residential School, including Johnston, were not able to do anything against their superiors, but the children had their own ways of fighting back. Johnston explains, "Since the boys could not openly defy authority either by walking out of the school and marching north or south on Highway 17 or by flatly refusing to follow an order, they turned to the only means available to them: passive resistance" (Johnston 30). Their resistance took many forms, but in each case, they illustrated that they would not be passive participants in the system of forced education. For example, one winter, Johnston

and his friends were pulling a sleigh to bring a nun named Miss Leutsh over from the girls' school for choir practice. Johnston describes how "the teamsters accelerated their pace, running not quite fast enough to capsize the sled when they turned left at the main road, yet fast enough to send the vehicle skidding sideways" (Johnston 58). Miss Leutsch was furious with the actions of the boys. Throughout the entire ride, she was yelling for the boys to stop running. Johnston and his friends knew that the nun would be upset with them running, but in a small way, it was their chance to defy those above them. They were able to blame the horrific ride on the slick roads, so they were not harshly punished. This experience that Johnston shares is the boys' own form of retaliation to their authority figures and the restrictive policies of the school.

The Canadian government, similar to the United States, gave religious groups, Protestant and Catholic, the ability to open schools to educate and "civilize" young Native children. This policy was coined "aggressive assimilation" by the Canadian government. Religious teachings of a denomination that ran the school would have a key role in the day-to-day lives of the children. Johnston explains, "The school's other purpose was to foster religious vocations by frequent prayer and adoration" (Johnston 27). The boys attended prayer services, masses, and benedictions, but it did not mean that they absorbed the instruction. Throughout his memoir, Johnston often elaborates on the different thoughts that ran through his head during these services. In one instance, he describes how he was distracted by the girls in the church and deciphering if he knew them (Johnston 59). It was common that students often had no idea what most of the Catholic teachings meant.

Albert Canadien, a Dene writer and educator, offers another explanation of mission schools in Canada. In his memoir, *From Lishamie*, Canadien describes his experiences at Sacred Heart Residential School in Fort Providence in the 1960s. The Catholic School placed substantial importance on different religious sacraments throughout the year. The students were also sent to confession without much knowledge of what to do. Although the students learned how to read and write, adopting Christianity was the main priority. Canadien expressed that, “The entire school curriculum was naturally based on reading and writing, but with a heavy emphasis on religion. I think actual education came second” (Canadien 57). He goes on to explain that students were not trained for a future career or higher education, but they were trained to be devout Catholics. Similar to Johnston, Canadien describes experiences where religion was a key force in the civilization policies of the governments and mainstream society.

One of the most significant aspects of Canadien’s experience is the distance of the school from his home. Every summer, he would travel by boat down river to attend the school (Canadien 47). The ability to attend the school was not a choice given to Canadien’s parents. *From Lishamie* depicts the influence that the Canadian government had on placement of schools and the forced removal of children from their homes to attend these institutions. The Indian Act of 1876 was a Canadian government policy that combined legislation and the idea of forcing Euro-Canadian culture, laws, and practices on First Nations. It inexplicitly allowed for the removal of Native children from their homes and placement of those children into residential schools (Carr-Stewart 127). This played a major role in Canadien’s and Johnston’s experience at residential school. They were far from home, and they were only permitted to go home during summer. In

Johnston's case, he lived too far from school and had to remain at the institution all year. Canadien was fortunate enough to be allowed to return to his family during the summer months.

Government Schools

As government-run boarding schools began to open, they included non-denominational religious instruction within their curricula. Due to the lack of funding, this incorporation of religious instruction caused many denominations to shift their support to government schools (Reyhner and Eder 128). Only the Catholics did not openly support this idea. They feared that these government-run schools were leaning towards Protestant religious ideas in their training, and they thought the schools lacked God in their institutions. The federal funding for the Mission schools began to decline towards the end of the 1800s as the concept of separation of church and state began to take hold within the country (Reyhner and Eder 129). Government-run schools began to represent a major portion in the experience of children who attended boarding and residential schools.

In the late 1800s, government-run boarding schools established an "academic curriculum [that] consisted mainly of elementary subjects. The vocational curriculum entailed having the students maintain the school. This included growing and cooking their own food, making and mending their clothes and shoes, and cleaning and maintaining school buildings" (Reyhner and Eder 132). The use of students to maintain the school is similar to the tactics used in Mission schools. This curriculum was similar in many government-run boarding schools. The idea was that students would gain the skills

needed to become functioning members of the mainstream society that the government hoped to assimilate them into. One of the most significant pieces of the schools was the idea of language. Since the students were supposed to be assimilated, they needed to learn English in the United States or French in Canada. Through the narratives described above, one can observe that children were often punished for speaking their own traditional languages.

The first government-run boarding school in the United States opened in 1879 by Richard Henry Pratt. Pratt was a military veteran who had worked with Native prisoners and believed that he could help integrate them into white society after they had, in his words, asked for his help (Reyhner and Eder 133). After his work to reform Native prisoners, Pratt noted that a portion of the prisoners did not return to their Native nations after being released. He worked with General Samuel Armstrong to allow Natives to attend the Hampton Institute for freed slaves. Due to the prejudice against African Americans in mainstream society, however, Pratt eventually thought it was ineffective to have Indians and African-Americans learning together because the outside world would associate the Indians with the African-Americans that they were going to school with which would greatly influence their social standings in society (Reyhner and Eder 134). His decision to establish a school exclusively for Native Americans speaks to the common idea that Native peoples could be saved from their “savage” and “barbaric” ideas through Western education.

The Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania opened its doors in 1879. Pratt often claimed that the school would successfully “kill the Indian and save the man.” This phrase exemplifies the focus of mainstream society to assimilate and “civilize” the

Native population. The idea of “civilization” was rooted in federal policy. Through erasing Native religious practices, languages, and family structures, the government hoped to “civilize” Native peoples to match their white counterparts. At the beginning of the United States government, Federal Indian Policy fell under the spectrum of the Department of War (The Harvard Project 200). This assists in describing the typical approach to dealing with federal government’s “Native problems.” A majority of the federal budget was spent on wars and military control enforced on Native Americans. Prior to the opening of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, the typical policy of the government was to deal with Indians with military force. As the population became aware of the forces used against Native Americans, the public sentiment towards the policy became quite unpopular. The government’s desire to “kill the Indian and save the man” demonstrated the switch to an educational approach to dealing with Natives, which was directly tied to the discourse of the military approach that had begun to phase out.

The course of U.S. boarding schools and Canadian residential schools began to fade towards the end of the 20th century as the era of self-determination ushered in a new approach to Native relations. Over time, many boarding schools began to close their doors but the final schools, including Phoenix Indian School in Arizona, closed in the late 1980s (Reyhner and Eder 157). Closure of these schools was attributed to the high cost of upkeep and maintenance, the ineffectiveness of the schools to “civilize” the children, the shifting opinion on the idea of the civilization policy and the role Native peoples have in the mainstream society, parental opposition to sending their children away, and the desire to have Native students go to public schools. There were some schools, including Sherman Indian High School in California, that remained open into the 21st century but

with changes to their motives and curriculum (Reyhner and Eder 157). These schools no longer aimed to completely remove students from their homes, and they did not target the eradication of Native cultures. The schools that remained open had to change in relation to the society that was changing as well.

Polingaysi Qoyawayma, a Hopi educator and writer, describes her experience with government boarding schools in her autobiography, *No Turning Back: A Hopi Woman's Struggle to Live in Two Worlds*. Contrary to popular thought that Native students hated the schools, Qoyawayma was very eager to attend school. She explains that when she found out that some Hopi children were going to Sherman Institute, "She began to daydream of going with them. She envied the chosen ones" (Qoyawayma 49). Her desire to travel outside her Hopi culture exemplifies the fact that some children were initially excited with the idea of going to school. She imagined the exciting train ride and the beautiful orange trees that her local teacher had explained, but these images did not live up to the reality (Qoyawayma 51). The mystery of a faraway enchanted land often lured children, like Qoyawayma, into wanting to travel from their home and away from their families.

When Qoyawayma was attempting to ride on the wagon to attend the school, the driver asked if she had her "papers" from her parents before she could leave for California. The driver explains "he couldn't take her without her parents' consent" (Qoyawayma 53). In the late 1890s, Congress decided that parental permission was required before children were taken out of state to attend boarding school (Adams 210). Prior to this decision, parental permission was not required to remove students from the home. Although this prohibited students from being moved out of state, it did not mean

that students could not attend school. Day schools were being established on reservations, and they had similar academic goals as the boarding schools. The problem with day schools, according to non-Native policy makers, was that students returned home at the end of the day, so they were not isolated from their families, who continued to share their Native languages and cultures with their children.

There was a transitional period that occurs between the early and the late boarding school era, and Adam Fortunate Eagle in his memoir, *Pipestone: My Life in an Indian Boarding School*, provides a picture of this time period. Fortunate Eagle's description of his time at Pipestone Indian Boarding School in Minnesota is unlike many of the other accounts that exist today. He fondly speaks of his time at school, and includes many sections on how he enjoys his time. For example, he describes his love for the library: "Going into the school library is like going to another planet for me. There are long shelves filled with all kinds of books" (Fortunate Eagle 74). The stories and books that he read stayed with him and inspired him.

Fortunate Eagle's experience, like the other authors of these narratives, was heavily influenced by another shift in federal policy. In the early 1930s, John Collier took over the office of Commissioner of Indian Affairs. During his time in office, he implemented new policies that directly affect Fortunate Eagle's time at Pipestone (Adams 329). Collier's policies valued Indigenous religions and languages, and these ideas indirectly influenced the running of schools during this time period, especially at Pipestone. Unfortunately, the policies that affected the schools reached further into the family structures. The constant stress from the federal government in changing their way of life caused a strain on peoples' everyday lives as well. For instance, Fortunate Eagle's

mother was insistent on sending her children to school. It was not because she was thrilled by the chance for her children to gain an education, but it was because she was in a position where she could not afford to care for all of them. After the death of his father, Fortunate Eagle's mother knew she would have trouble caring for her children, so she made the decision that her children would be better suited attending the boarding school (Fortunate Eagle 4). Fortunate Eagle's memoir exemplifies how the changing policy affected not only the students but the families as well.

Verna J. Kirkness, a Cree scholar and educator, provides a depiction of the more recent Canadian residential school experience from a student's perspective. Kirkness's experience as discussed in her autobiography, *Creating Space: My Life and Work in Indigenous Education*, allows readers to glimpse a new side of Indigenous education in Canada during the mid-1900s. The children in her community were educated in a reservation school for elementary school, up to the eighth grade. Due to her non-status as an Indian, she was not able to attend the Birtle Indian Residential School after the eighth grade. She even suggests that she was fortunate to be ineligible to attend the residential school. She explains, "In retrospect, I see this as a mixed blessing" (Kirkness 12). Yet Kirkness's teachers worked hard to obtain her funding and admission into Teulon Collegiate (Kirkness 13). Similar to Fortunate Eagle, Kirkness spoke highly of her educational experience throughout her work.

There was a growing popularity in Canada during the latter half of the 20th century of assimilating Indian children into local public schools to cut down on the cost of boarding and residential schools. Kirkness demonstrates this shift in her book through her own experience as a student and through her later experience teaching. There also

exists a shift in focus on the student. In Kirkness's experience, she is guided by her teachers to continue her education, but the reader also sees Kirkness inspire her students to continue their education during her teaching career in the late 1900s.

Fast Forward

Since the close of U.S. boarding schools and Canadian residential schools, many students have opened up about their experiences, both positive and negative. Due to the federal policies' influence on schools, survivor narratives reveal sharp, consistent [it is impossible for the governments to escape from] criticism of the governments for their roles in this experience. The traumatic experiences that students faced did not disappear when they left the schools or when the schools closed. The historical trauma has reached across generations and affected whole communities. The "lost generation" of students returned from these schools disconnected from their communities and families. In some cases, students were gone during most of their childhood and adolescences. Knowing what happened in the past leads to a follow up question: Where are we today? Each government, in the United States and Canada, took a different approach to addressing the part they played in the forced education of Native children.

In 2007, the Canadian government passed the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. The agreement between the government and the surviving Native residential school students included \$2 billion to pay reparation to students who had been enrolled in residential schools, especially those who had been physically or sexually abused (Residential School Settlement). In 2008, the Canadian government held a ceremony in Parliament to which they invited representatives from different First

Nations. The Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, offered a public formal apology for their government's part in the residential school era (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada). In one section, Harper states, "The government now recognizes that the consequences of the Indian Residential Schools policy were profoundly negative and that this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture, heritage and language" (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada). As part of these agreement, the Canadian government also introduced the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Commission's sole purpose was to reveal the true stories about the experiences that children had so that the Canadian public could become aware (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada). The ability for the Canadian government to take strides in the right direction had a major impact on the knowledge and stories we have about residential schools.

At the same time, the Canadian government has faced much critique over their 2008 apology. Many Native peoples were dissatisfied by the government's attempt to undo the past and found it relatively useless. Native groups have expressed that the apology is too little too late, and they argue that there have been no actions to follow up on the government's apology.

On the other hand, The United States has not released a formal apology specifically for their part in the policies imposed by Native American boarding schools. In December 2009, President Barack Obama signed the Native American Apology Resolution, an "apology" that does not directly link the government to any wrongdoing. Instead, it apologizes on behalf of the American peoples for any mistreatment done to Native Americans. The apology is a small piece of the Department of Defense

Appropriation Act of 2010. This “apology” has been the center of much controversy. A common critique is whether something is an actual apology if it is never announced or declared. Also, the fact that the apology is added into the appropriation as an afterthought demonstrates the level of importance that it holds to the government.

To help with the recovery, organizations have been established outside of the government to help survivors process the traumatic experiences they endured. The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition believes that breaking the silence is the first step to healing. Their three focuses, education, advocacy, and healing, center around helping the survivors and their descendants to work towards truth, healing, and reconciliation (The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition). Similarly, Wisdom of Elders is another organization that has dedicated itself to the recovery of Native American peoples after traumatic events. This group combats ecocide, culturcide, genocide, assimilation, separation, and termination (Wisdom of Elders). Through healing and prevention techniques, they are helping boarding school survivors heal and recover. It is through these groups and others that survivors and their descendants are beginning to reclaim their lives and their futures.

Conclusion

We are a few decades removed from the closing of many boarding and residential schools, but the lingering effect is still present. Individuals who endured these experiences have been forced to continue on without much acknowledgement from the government of what happened. Some, as we have seen, have taken to sharing their stories as a way to push back against the system that wronged them and to heal themselves.

Different organizations have provided support and avenues for survivors to begin the healing process. The governments' part in this piece of history is often overlooked or pushed to the side, but through these narratives, it has been clear to see that the government had a major hand in the experiences that the children faced when they arrived at these different schools. Despite the oppressive actions, the children were able to find small ways to resist and defy their superiors.

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