

Failure and success in Indian Education: A brief historical context

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To fully understand the challenges in Indian education, one must be cognizant of how four hundred years of European immigration forced the original inhabitants of this land, Native Americans, to give up their way of life and confine themselves to living on reservations. There also needs to be an understanding of why such fiercely independent people were resistant to all attempts to assimilate or acculturate them into the European-American society.

This resistance by Native Americans to assimilation and acculturation efforts of the federal government resulted in the failure of numerous Indian policies designed by the federal government to educate the Indians and to promote economic self-sufficiency on Indian Reservations. This pattern of failed education and economic development initiatives was not limited to federal government efforts; state governments, religious organizations and tribes themselves tried many times to improve the plight of the Native American, but the majority of these efforts failed (Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, 1969). Then, in the late sixties and early seventies, a new movement came on the scene in the Indian country - tribal colleges. Tribal colleges were an enigma in Indian country at that time, as they were founded, organized and operated solely by Native Americans, not the federal government, not the Bureau of Indian affairs, nor any religious organizations. For the most part, tribal government involvement in tribal colleges was kept to a minimum (Boyer, 1989).

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Tribal colleges appeared to be the result of a grassroots movement developing among Native American communities, in the homes of the people (Personal Interview, 2005). After four hundred years of active resistance to the American educational system, how could this be? Who, or what was responsible for this movement? To attempt to answer those questions, we need to start at the very beginning, when Europeans first set foot on these shores, now known as North America.

The “Discovery” of America

When Europeans first sailed to America, Indian tribes (Tribal Nations) were sovereign by nature. They conducted their own affairs and depended upon no other source of power to uphold their acts of government (Canby, 1988). Indigenous American nations were not conquered by the U.S. armed forces, as many believe (Cooper, 1990). Rather, indigenous lands were obtained through negotiation and contractual consent. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 declared: "The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards Indians; their land and property shall never be taken from them without their consent" (Pevar, 1992). Due to the Tribal Nations ability to wage war and the seemingly endless availability of land, both the colonial governments and the young United States realized it was in their best interest to allow Tribal Nations to regulate their own affairs. Thus began the era of treaty signing between tribal nations and the federal government. The first treaty between the American Indians and the United States was with the Delaware in 1778 (Utter, 1993, p. 45).

Treaties are defined as legally binding contracts between parties that cannot be changed or cancelled without agreement by all parties. Indigenous nations were recognized as separate, sovereign entities and treaties established distinct boundaries between Indian and non-Indian territories. Within their territories, Indigenous Americans governed their own internal matters (Cooper 1990).

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Cooper's definition of treaties is reflective of a general rule of international law that states that the internal laws of acquired territories continue in force (Wilkinson, 1987). A tribe, as defined by the United States Supreme Court is as follows: "By a 'tribe' we understand a body of Indians of the same or similar race, united in community under one leadership or government, and inhabiting a particular though sometimes ill-defined territory" (Utter, 1993, p. 29). Eventually, the United States made treaties with hundreds of indigenous American Nations, exchanging payments for land and access rights (Canby, 1988; Cooper, 1990).

From the first moment of contact with Europeans, the indigenous people of North America were at an extreme disadvantage. Not only were they at a disadvantage from a technological standpoint, but also, they were at a disadvantage from a cultural standpoint. This contrast in culture was evident in the relationship between the two groups.

Indian culture was based on an oral tradition, as they placed a high value on the spoken word. Their verbal words were binding. European culture was based on the written word: their written word was binding, but words spoken were often forgotten. Therefore, Indians were at a distinct disadvantage whenever negotiations took place. Whenever a European spoke, the Indians viewed the words as binding; Europeans did not. Whenever Europeans tried to write things down, Indians did not understand the necessity of writing things down. Weren't the words enough? The difference in methods of communications between immigrants and Native Americans often led to misunderstandings and broken treaties.

When Native Americans heard promises like, "... as long as the grass shall grow and the river flows ...," they took them literally. Even today, many Native Americans do

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not believe that the terms, education, health, and welfare, promised to them in the treaties, have all been honored by the United States. They are still waiting for the Federal government to fulfill promises outlined in the treaties. Another cultural difference is evident in the way Indians and Europeans approached negotiations. Whenever Indians and Europeans came together, the Indians often viewed their relationship as an alliance; the European immigrants, as a business proposition, a means to acquire more land.

An inherent weakness Native American tribes had when interacting with the “white man” was that the Indians did not view themselves as one group of people. Prior to European contact, American Indians were not “Indians,” but were members of many independent and diverse socio-political and cultural groups (Utter, 1993, p. 29). Tribes were well aware of the diversity and unique culture between each group of people. Each tribe had its own beliefs, customs, and cultures. Because each tribe was a unique entity and group, immigrants encroaching further and further into Indian Territory often divided Indians. The tremendous numbers of European immigrants eventually conquered the small independent bands of Native Americans, not necessarily through warfare, but through sheer numbers of persons. A surrender speech made by Cochise, an Apache leader and warrior, demonstrates his frustration at the numbers of immigrants.

Many people came to our country. First the Spanish, with their horses and their iron shirts, their long knives and guns, great wonders to my simple people. We fought some, but they never tried to drive us from our homes in these mountains. After many years the Spanish soldiers were driven away and the Mexican ruled the land. With these, little wars came, but we were now a strong people, and we did not fear them. At last in my youth came the white man, under your people. . . . I have fought long and as best I could against you. I have destroyed many of your people, but where I have destroyed one white man many have come in his place; where an Indian has been killed, there has been none to come in his place, so that the great people that welcomed you with acts of kindness to this land are now but a feeble band that fly before your soldiers as the deer before the

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hunter, and must all perish if this war continues. I have come to you, not from any love for you or for your great father in Washington, or from any regard for his or your wishes, but as a conquered chief, to try to save alive the few people that still remain to me. I am the last of my family, a family that for very many years have been the leaders of this people, and on me depends their future, whether they shall utterly vanish from the land or that a small remnant remain for a few years to see the sun rise over these mountains, their home. I here pledge my word, a word that has never been broken, that if your great father will set aside a part of my own country, where I and my little band can live, we will remain at peace with your people forever. . . . I have spoken (Armstrong & Turner, 1971, p. 187).

Native Americans were puzzled by how the colonists lived, but they did not see any reason to change them. On the other hand, the colonists' misunderstanding of the Native American way of life, of living as one with the land, wild and free, was sometimes used as an excuse by the colonists to change, "educate," or assimilate the Indian. Some colonists wanted to modernize and help the Indian out of his/her ignorant state. Many colonists were afraid of the Indian's fierce countenance and apparently "savage" existence and wanted nothing to do with him. Other colonists may even have felt that the Indian was a lesser human being, too ignorant and wild to change, and as a subordinate being, should be exterminated (Mintz, 2003).

The French philosopher Montaigne reflected on the pervasive ignorance about Indians that existed in early colonial times when he said, "The Indian had no knowledge of letters, no intelligence of numbers, no name of magistrate, nor of politics... no apparel but natural..." (Mintz, 2003). The majority of the English colonists did not want to coexist with the "Savages." (Mintz, 2003).

These cultural differences between immigrants and Native Americans did not bode well for the Indians and their descendents, as Chief Tecumseh was well aware. In 1810, he faced Governor W. H. Harrison to bitterly protest the land sales of 1805-06. He

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said they were affected by the use of strong liquor, a breach of The Treaty of Greenville.

He refused to enter the Governor's mansion; instead, he said to his tribesmen:

The way, the only way to stop this evil is for the red men to unite in claiming a common and equal right in the land, as it was at first, and should be now – for it was never divided, but belongs to all. No tribe has the right to sell, even to each other, much less to strangers *Sell a country! Why not sell the air, the great sea, as well as the earth?* Did not the Great Spirit make them all for the use of his children? How can we have confidence in the white people? (Armstrong & Turner, 1971, pp. 43-44)

For four hundred years, since the first settlers set foot on American soil to the present times, European colonists and later the U. S. government have been trying to educate and assimilate the Indian into European-American culture. All attempts have failed miserably, because the Indian is fiercely proud of his/her heritage, culture and independence. But it is hard to be proud when you are a conquered people, often living in poverty on reservations, when your history speaks of a free, plentiful, independent existence that no longer exists.

The Indians' past depended upon vast amounts of land to sustain their people. They needed to travel, hunt, and fish. All that changed and was gone when the colonists came. There were too many settlers for the land to sustain all the people on the land, as it had in the past. This defeat of the Indians, of their culture and way of life, has caused serious debilitating conditions to arise on reservations among the Indian peoples. But it has not totally defeated their spirit. They have been finding ways to improve their circumstances.

Tribal colleges

One manifestation of the Indians' fight for self-preservation and better living conditions has been the establishment of Tribal Colleges. Like other institutions, tribal

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colleges vary in their effectiveness. Still, extremely successful tribal colleges are found in different geographical locations, with vast difference in age of the institutions. What these tend to have in common is similar relationships with their Tribal Governments, and the fact that they are located on Indian Reservations (Longie, 2005).

The timing of this successful innovation in Indian education coincides with sweeping attitude changes in Indian Country. Most Tribal Constitutions, written around the time of the Indian Reorganization Act (1934) are increasingly viewed by young tribal members as old, outdated, and in need of change. Within the last decade, tribal members have been increasingly vocal regarding their expectations of the tribal government. Younger tribal members are increasingly questioning the status quo that exists in Tribal Governments. With a significant change potentially on the horizon, tribal members will be searching for and be receptive to a governance model that is efficient, effective and gets things done. Tribal members are demanding more and more that their governing members be accountable for their decisions/actions. Specifically, they want a government where policies and procedures are actually followed, where due process is a reality, not just lip service, where decisions are based on facts and objectivity, not favoritism and nepotism, where education is viewed as positive, not negative. With dramatic reform on the horizon in Indian country, effective educational institutions can be used as a catalyst for these changes.