

Understanding Historical & Cultural Underpinnings of Native Americans and Education

By David Sullivan, MPA (Kiowa)

Foundations of Assimilation:

The early Native American Experience with “Education” was an invasive and often time’s deadly process meant to assimilate indigenous people into a different mindset and erase the essence of indigenous life. The vehicle for assimilation came in multiple forms and institutions from 1810 to the present undergoing multiple variations over the past 200+ years. While the early period, filled with innumerable violations of human rights has passed, the ripple effects from thousands of traumatic experiences continue to wash over us into the present day.

A deeper understanding of this history is vital for contemporary educators of *all* students - but even more vital for teachers serving Native American students. The depth of understanding must go deeper than the general experience of indigenous peoples in the America’s - it must also include a deep dive into the local context. Contemporary educators should be intentional in developing their knowledge-base of the local history and how this continues to perpetuate in the lives of their students.

This deeper understanding, rooted in Place-Based Educational experiences, could begin with learning more about students’ heritage. With the establishment of stronger relationships with parents, teachers can learn more about the historical elements woven into their lives. Without this knowledge and connection, how can anyone expect to partner with the student on their educational journey, to guide them in the exploration of their interests, to help facilitate tailored learning goals, co-develop action steps with them and then coach them toward a shared definition of achievement that is not only culturally relevant but personally relevant?

Early Personal Accounts:

There are numerous accounts written by survivors of the early boarding school experiences as well as more contemporary accounts which can expand perceptions, not only of the negative impacts, but also of the resiliency of the people. The image below reveals the stark reality of early educational means used to capture and transport students to the mission schools and boarding institutions.



The children’s handcuffs are part of the Haskell Indian Nation University’s Cultural Center and Museum collection from the time when it was known as Haskell Institute. Though small, they emit stirring energy to those that view them, serving as stark reminders of the time. Take a few minutes to look at the image and imagine children being chased down, forcefully removed from their homes, and placed into restraints. Imagine the cold metal closing quickly around small, defenseless wrists as the child is placed into a wagon equipped with an iron cage. While these images are painful to consider – they’re vital in understanding and exploring how they connect to contemporary Native American students.

The work reported herein was supported by grant number [#S283B050022A](#) between the U.S. Department of Education and WestEd with a subcontract to the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST). The findings and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of CRESST, WestEd, or the U.S. Department of Education.

Zitkala-Sa: *The School Days of an Indian Girl*

The short excerpt below provides another brief glimpse into the experiences of a young Native American girl, Zitkala-Sa or Red Bird (1876-1938). Zitkala-Sa was a Sioux from the Yankton reservation in South Dakota. Her experience was captured in a series of articles published by the Atlantic Monthly in 1900 which outlines her experiences at a Quaker missionary school for Native Americans in Wabash, Indiana.

This section was chosen to not only show the external trauma inflicted upon Zitkala-Sa but also to reveal the internal trauma she was experiencing in the removal of something so centrally connected to her tribal identity and mindset.

THE CUTTING OF MY LONG HAIR

Late in the morning, my friend Judewin gave me a terrible warning. Judewin knew a few words of English; and she had overheard the paleface woman talk about cutting our long, heavy hair. Our mothers taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy. Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards!

We discussed our fate some moments, and when Judewin said, "We have to submit, because they are strong," I rebelled.

"No, I will not submit! I will struggle first!" I answered.

I watched my chance, and when no one noticed I disappeared. I crept up the stairs as quietly as I could in my squeaking shoes, -- my moccasins had been exchanged for shoes. Along the hallway I passed, without knowing whither I was going. Turning aside to an open door, I found a large room with three white beds in it. On my hands and knees I crawled under the bed, and cuddled myself in the dark corner.

From my hiding place I peered out, shuddering from fear whenever I heard footsteps nearby. Though in the hall loud voices were calling my name, and I knew that even Judewin was searching for me, I did not open my mouth to answer. Then the steps were quickened and the voices became excited. The sounds came nearer and nearer. Women and girls entered the room. I held my breath and watched them open closet doors and peep behind large trunks. Someone threw up the curtains, and the room was filled with sudden light. I remember being dragged out, though I resisted by kicking and scratching wildly. In spite of myself, I was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair.

I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother I had suffered extreme indignities. People had stared at me. I had been tossed about in the air like a wooden puppet. And now my long hair was shingled like a coward's! In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my own mother used to do; for now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder.