History of American Indian Education: A Journey toward Autonomy and Reciprocity

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As the 500th anniversary approached of Christopher Columbus’s arrival to the New World, hundreds of Native Americans, representing 120 Indian nations, gathered in Quito, Ecuador, to write a joint declaration entitled “500 Years of Indian Resistance.” Reflecting on their struggles and identity as a people, they rejected the planned celebrations for 1992. They reaffirmed their commitment to self-determination, demanded respect for their culture, and defended their ability to educate autonomously.\(^1\) Since the arrival of Europeans in the New World, Native Americans have indeed struggled to educate future generations autonomously. At times, indigenous peoples have willingly embraced the ways of settlers, but more often, Europeans coerced them into doing so. Native philosophy of education was so drastically different from the European framework that it took centuries of conflict before policies and practices moved toward cultural autonomy rather than external control, and—although Europeans had some sense that the educational exchange was reciprocal—it took reflective analysis of historians and philosophers to heighten appreciation for the contributions natives have made to Western thought.

**Perspectives on Education**

Just as there are various perspectives on education within other cultures, Native Americans also hold diverse educational views. In fact, it is important to keep in mind when studying any aspect of native life that Indian culture currently and historically has been extremely diverse. Overgeneralizations are common, not always out of disrespect but often from a desire to simplify the complexities of a multitude of Amerindian nations. This current work, for example, may at times include such simplifications and may require readers to remind themselves that there are always exceptions to general statements. Regarding the problem of

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overgeneralization, Bryan Brayboy of the Lumbee tribe is an anthropologist who conveys native perspectives on philosophy of education but acknowledges that even his own efforts are limited in scope. ²

One problem with defining a Native American philosophy of education, Brayboy explains, is that the concept is at the same time familiar and intensely complex. Education serves to transfer knowledge but also is an empowering agent. As K. Tsianina Lomawaima of the Creek nation explained, “The history of American Indian Education can be boiled down to three simple words: Battle for power.” For Seneca tribe member Arthur C. Parker, education must relate to the learner’s intentional actions and spontaneous experiences. ³ Another problem is the pervasive nature of education in Indian thought; it is everywhere and considers everyone as a potential teacher or learner. As Dudley, an Apache, said, “Wisdom sits in places” and comprises smoothness, resiliency, and steadiness. Education instills these qualities and does so from “particular places where stories and wisdom reside.” ⁴

Milton Gaither outlined three forms of indigenous education: landscape learning, cultural learning, and learning from mistakes. First, landscape learning was the acquisition of knowledge about the environment—especially about plants and animals and through observation and experimentation. Natives were so extraordinarily knowledgeable of their landscape that scientists have been unable to find an American plant with medicinal qualities of which natives were not already aware. Second, cultural learning drew from human technologies and beliefs. Such technologies involved the use of fire to burn undergrowth so that herbivores and their predators were drawn to the edge of forests; this made hunting much easier. Beliefs were taught

³ Ibid., 396-8.
⁴ Ibid., 399-401.
through stories, ceremonies, and indoctrination. Finally, when failures occurred in interactions with the landscape or culture, natural consequences taught natives to learn from their mistakes.\textsuperscript{5}

**Pre-Columbian Education**

A challenge for researchers of Native American education prior to the arrival of Europeans is that neither written records nor firsthand accounts are available. Sources are limited to surviving oral traditions, early European chronicles, and archaeological artifacts. In addition to these sources are a number of relatively new scientific techniques from fields such as genetics, climatology, linguistics, and epidemiology. There are problems, however, with each of these sources. Oral accounts are usually slanted and rarely tell the whole story. Early European chronicles reveal more about biases and interests of the Europeans than about the natives, and archeological and scientific evidence tends to result in speculation.\textsuperscript{6} Nevertheless, from a variety of sources, historians have gained valuable knowledge about pre-Columbian education of Native Americans.

Literacy in the European sense was limited in pre-Columbian America, yet languages were rich and complex. Over 1,200 dialects had developed from 300 diverse language groups. The Mayans of Mesoamerica developed pictographs, ideographs, hieroglyphics, and a limited phonetic system; all of which required formalized study to read and create.\textsuperscript{7} Mayans also made great strides in astronomy, arithmetic, architecture, medicine, and art—teaching these skills in schools attended only by the sons of chiefs and priests. The Incas of what is now present-day Peru were not as advanced as the Mayans in their writing, but they did develop a system of


communicating numbers by strategically knotting strings. In Cusco, the sons of noblemen attended a school where they studied warfare, history, religion, and language; while at another school, select girls trained to serve in the emperor’s palace.8

Being so isolated from the rest of the world, pre-Columbian America was limited in its development of formal reading and writing. The lack of beasts of burden—such as horses and oxen—required such intense human labor that there was little time remaining for intellectual development. They did not develop wheeled vehicles or other inventions that could have saved on human labor. The absence of domesticated animals limited their immune system because—unlike Eurasians—people in America were not exposed to diseases carried by the animals, which would have helped build their immunities. Their isolation, intense labor, and health factors contributed to the delay in developing literacy.9

Spiritual and moral instruction was integrated into daily life. The Cherokee, of the Tennessee River valley of Appalachia, were known for high ethical standards, teaching values through storytelling, rituals, and prayers. They taught children the importance of living in harmony with nature, and—when youth reached puberty—they held coming-of-age rituals to signify the separation between childhood and adulthood. These rituals sometimes involved solitude, fasting, and physical tests of endurance. Youths might experience a vision of an encounter with a spiritual guide. The ritual culminated in renaming the youth to represent either the presence of the guiding spirit or the youth’s new status within the tribe.10

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Moral correction rarely involved corporal punishment, but embarrassment and shame were often employed. In the Blackfeet tribe, for example, they publicly announced a youth’s poor conduct. At night, one person started by shouting out what the youth had done wrong. A person in a nearby tepee in turn shouted it again until it had spread throughout the tribe. Praise, rewards, and warnings were used as incentives for good conduct. If they did not behave, children were sometimes told, a large bird would fly down and grab them up.¹¹

**European Contact and Exchange of Knowledge**

To many Europeans who made early contact with the New World, the natives were wild savages incapable of learning. Later observers, however, like Dominican Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas, saw something different. Las Casas viewed the Caribbean Taíno as wise people who—rather than being innately inferior—were simply delayed culturally because they had not yet developed writing skills or been exposed to scientific and religious knowledge outside their limited experience. Both the natives and the Europeans, however, were ignorant of each other’s world, but it was the European’s very survival that depended upon knowledge from the natives.¹² Long before ships from the Old World arrived, natives had sophisticated skills in seed germination, soil rotation, forest management, city planning, and the creation and preservation of art.¹³

Engagement with the New World benefited European intellectual growth. It provided opportunities for the application of knowledge from the scientific revolution. For example, the friars who traveled to Mexico were not only skilled in evangelism but many of them were also accomplished as researchers, linguists, and anthropologists.¹⁴ Their zeal for evangelism helped

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¹¹ Ibid., 4-5.
¹³ Warren, “American Indian Histories,” 258.
to feed the scientific revolution. Furthermore, as Europeans found themselves revolted by what they considered barbaric practices, their introspection may have had a taming effect on their own barbarism. Las Casas was one who challenged the notion that Indians—even with their cannibalism, idol worship, and nudity—were any more barbaric than Europeans who stretched people on racks and burnt them at the stake. Las Casas argued that the Indians were humane, rational beings. Ethnographic studies by Bernardino de Sahagún may have prepared Europeans to be much more tolerant as a society. Sahagún challenged European superior attitudes, comparing ancient Indian cultures to those of classical Europe. Pedro Cieza de León reported how surprised the Incas were to see Pizarro stoop to pillaging villages to provide food for his army, comparing Pizarro’s actions to the much more civilized process the Incas used of preparing freeze-dried food for their soldiers.\textsuperscript{15} Could it be that Europeans were somewhat humbled, surprised, and even ashamed?

French philosopher Michel de Montaigne was another who may have shamed Europeans into being less barbaric and more tolerant. In his essay \textit{Of Cannibals}, he, like Las Casas and others, described ritual cannibalism practiced by some Indians as being much less tortuous than to draw and quarter a body as the French did.\textsuperscript{16} The critical look inward that these writers provided to Europeans served useful in the long run and may have cultivated the very ideas that later sparked the Age of Revolution. As historian Thomas Benjamin noted, “Montaigne, John Locke, David Hume, Thomas Paine, Jean-Jacque Rousseau and others drew upon New World ethnography as well as other sources to invent such ideas as the noble savage, the social contract, individual autonomy, religious liberty and natural rights.”\textsuperscript{17} Some cultural analysts, such as

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 280-284.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 289.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 293.
Neil Postman, more specifically claim that the most enlightened parts of the United States Constitution are based, at least in part, on political principles drawn from the Iroquois.  

**Catholic and Protestant Missionaries**

Early motives for educating the Indians were to teach them religion and to civilize them. This is exemplified by both Catholic and Protestant educational efforts. Being Catholic nations, the Spanish, Portuguese, and French sent a number of religious orders to evangelize the New World, but the Jesuits became the most influential. Also known as the Society of Jesus, the Jesuit order was founded by a Catholic priest named Ignatius Loyola, a theologian during Spain’s Golden Age who was significant in the Catholic Church’s counter-reformation. Ignatius’ greatest desire was to be a soldier in the crusades. He became a commander, but his military career was ended when his legs were crushed by a cannon ball. In 1540, he created a new monastic order that was structured and run in a militaristic style but that also had a strong emphasis in evangelism and education. Ignatius—having been influenced by the medieval scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas—developed a three-part curriculum of (1) classical literature, (2) natural science, and (3) theology. This system of education was intended to teach Catholic doctrine and to help Catholics defend their doctrine apologetically.

In Lima, Peru, the Spanish Jesuits founded the University of San Marcos in 1551 and a printing press in 1584. By 1630, Lima established religious schools for Indians and welcomed wealthy Indians to enroll their sons into the same Jesuit boarding schools as did the colonists. Education, however, became a blatant weapon by the Spanish government as exemplified in its response to the rebellion led by Peruvian Túpac Amaru in the early 1780s. In a public statement

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condemning Amaru at his execution, the government declared, “We shall introduce more vigorously than we have done up to now the use of school, imposing the most rigorous and fair penalties on those who do not attend.” The declaration required Peruvian natives to speak Castilian and prohibited them from wearing “heathen” clothes.\(^{21}\)

When Portugal’s colonization of Brazil began in 1531, the king stated his main purpose for colonization as being “to settle the land of Brazil . . . in order that the people of that land might be converted to our Holy Catholic Faith.” To that end, he sent six Jesuits in 1549 and increased that number within a few decades to 125. Their work, however, was more as conquistadores than as missionaries. Jesuits created mission villages (aldeias) to house natives who allied themselves with the Portuguese against hostile Indians. At the villages, natives were required to assimilate to Spanish religion and customs and to grow food for the aldeias.\(^{22}\) Both Portuguese slave raiders and Jesuits eventually expanded into the interior of Brazil. The Jesuits built mission villages while the slave raiders captured Indian slaves. These conflicting interests set the two Portuguese groups at odds. In an effort to keep the raiders from capturing the Indians, Jesuits would at times lease out the labor of the mission Indians. To minimize this conflict, by 1600, the king of Portugal charged the Jesuits with the care and protection of the Indians. Indians in the Jesuit mission villages were never completely safe from slave raiders, and the tension between the raiders and the Jesuits became increasingly bitter. The Portuguese settlers resented the Jesuits for limiting their source of labor. When the missions were removed from Jesuit control in the eighteenth century, Indians abandoned them.\(^{23}\)

\(^{22}\) Benjamin, Atlantic World, 153, 155-6.
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 199, 203-4, 308-10.
In seventeenth-century New France, the French required their native partners to accept evangelization as part of the trade agreement. Therefore, along the St. Lawrence River, Jesuits created mission settlements where the Algonquians, Montagnais, Huron, and Iroquois were baptized and lived. Natives—having been weakened by disease—willingly agreed to these arrangements. For those natives who refused to move into the mission settlements, the Jesuits began to conduct “flying missions,” which were evangelistic expeditions into the Indian towns. The Jesuits learned the native languages and religions so they could better teach the Indians. Some Jesuits were martyred. Eventually, the Jesuits in New France abandoned their cause, concluding that the natives were savages so corrupt that they could not be redeemed. They were also discouraged by their observation that Indians who did convert to Christianity were more likely to die of disease than those who did not convert.24

In British North America, Protestants educated natives through their evangelistic efforts. In 1636, the Virginia Council of London informed colonial Governor Thomas Gates that he was responsible for educating natives in Christianity. While the council’s directions conveyed a sincere intent to uplift native children, it also revealed pessimism about native culture. It directed Gates to “procure from them some convenient number of children . . . by a surprise of them all and detain them prisoners.” The justification for this was that natives were “wrapped up in the fog and misery of their iniquity” and that without such measures there would be no eventual peace between the English and the natives.25 Two decades later, the Virginia colonial legislature outlined its own terms for the education of natives. Instead of encouraging the kidnapping of native children, it offered education as a voluntary option and provided parents a

choice of instructors. “If the Indians shall bring in any children as gauges of their good and quiet intentions to us,” the law stated, “... then the parents of such children shall choose the persons to whom the care of such children shall be entrusted.” It went on to promise to teach Christian civility, to prepare them for trades, and not to enslave them.26

Two examples of individual Protestant missionaries in the early eighteenth century were David Brainerd and Jonathan Edwards. During Brainerd’s second year as a student at Yale, a revival occurred, influenced by the work of George Whitefield. Joining the Great Awakening movement, Brainerd began a preaching tour through his home state of Connecticut. While preaching about life after death, he noticed that “some Indians cried out in great distress, and all appeared greatly concerned.” This incident contributed to Brainerd’s decision to partner with the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge. The Society assigned Brainerd to Kaunaumeek, New York, where he started a school for native children and began translating the Bible into the language of the Housatonic tribe. He later served native communities in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.27

Jonathan Edwards was a student of Brainerd’s ministry and wrote a biography of Brainerd’s life just two years before becoming a missionary to natives himself. After the death of the missionary to the Mohicans at Stockbridge, Massachusetts, Edwards accepted the open position, serving there from 1751 to 1758. The Massachusetts Commissioners for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Indians in New England had established the mission just a year before Edwards’ arrival. He continued good relations with the Mohicans and observed that parents were eager for their children to learn. The curriculum focused on agriculture, and—

because the Mohicans traditionally relegated agricultural activities duties to women—the English perceived Mohican men as lacking discipline. Edwards, though seeing great potential in native capacity to learn, was himself pessimistic about their culture. For example, while Brainerd valued the Housatonic language so as to translate biblical passages into it, Edwards was convinced that the Mohican language was insufficient for conveying Christian doctrines. He wrote, “Indian languages are extremely barbarous and barren, and very ill-fitted for communicating things moral and divine, or even things speculative and abstract.” For this reason, Edwards required Mohicans to become proficient in English.28

**Education of Natives by the United States Government**

The conflict in philosophies of education between Anglo-Americans and Native Americans was illustrated when—a year after the United States won its independence—Commissioners from Virginia offered scholarships for the youth of the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy to attend the College of William and Mary. Benjamin Franklin recorded the official response from the Six Nations:

> We are convinced therefore that you mean to do us Good by your Proposal, and we thank you heartily. But you who are wise must know, that different Nations have different Conceptions of things; and you will therefore not take it amiss, if our Ideas of this Kind of Education happen not to be the same with yours. We have had some Experience of it: Several of our Young People were formerly brought up at the Colleges of the Northern Provinces; they were instructed in all your Sciences; but when they came back to us they were bad Runners, ignorant of every means of living in the Woods, unable to bear either Cold or Hunger, knew neither how to build a Cabin, take a Deer, or kill an Enemy, spoke our Language imperfectly; were therefore neither fit for Hunters, Warriors, or Counsellors; they were totally good for nothing. We are however not the less obliged by your kind Offer, tho’ we decline accepting it; and to show our grateful Sense of it, if the Gentlemen of Virginia will send us a dozen of their Sons, we will take great Care of their Education, instruct them in all we know, and make Men of them.29

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The spokesmen for the Iroquois Confederacy had clearly differentiated between the two distinct philosophies of education.

Within four years of winning independence from Britain, the United States Congress passed legislation including its first philosophy statement of education with a specific reference to the Indian population. The 1787 Northwest Ordinance primarily served to set up the five states that would eventually become Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin, but—as part of this plan—it conveyed the significance of education within the territory:

Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged. The utmost good faith shall always be observed toward the Indians . . .

From the nation’s very beginning, the United States struggled with developing and practicing a philosophy of education that properly addressed the needs and culture of natives. Should they be “civilized” gradually and eventually granted citizenship? If so, what would be the best method? Since the sixteenth century, missionaries had been evangelizing and educating natives, and that effort gained momentum in the early national period. With the Civilization Act of 1819, education was stated as carrying out the following purpose:

. . . for the purpose of providing against the further decline of final extinction of the Indian tribes . . ., and that the means of instruction can be introduced with their own consent, . . . to instruct them in the mode of agriculture suited to their situation; and for teaching their children in reading, writing, and arithmetic.

The act began to finance some missionary efforts with federal grants, distributing funds to “capable persons of good moral character,” which, in practice, was for Protestant missionaries. Although the annual amount was only $10,000 for the entire program in 1819, in 2019 dollars it would amount to nearly a quarter of a million dollars each year. A noticeable shift in these

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government-funded programs was that many schools began using native languages as a medium for instruction, which contributed to the retention and growth of native languages. Shortly after the passing of the Act, Sequoyah created a written syllabary for the Cherokee that drastically increased literacy rates for the tribe.32

Some of these government-funded missionaries worked among the Iroquois of upstate New York and were disappointed to face resistance from some of the natives who were not as enthusiastic to receive their teachings as they had hoped. Chief Red Jacket of the Seneca nation was one of them. Known as an orator of great eloquence, Red Jacket voiced his resistance to the teachings of the missionaries in a famous speech. “Brother, you say that you have not come to get our land or our money, but to enlighten our minds,” Red Jacket said respectfully, and—in defense of the Seneca tribal religion—he continued,

Brother, if your white men murdered the son of the Great Spirit, we Indians had nothing to do with it, and it is none of our affair. If he had come among us, we would not have killed him; we would have treated him well, you must make amends for that crime yourselves.33

Red Jacket’s speech is just one of many examples of resistance. Another form of resistance was the use of knowledge gained from government education to inform the natives’ fight against cultural extinction. While some of the educated Indians assimilated into the dominant culture, others would return home to lead resistance efforts. Armed with a critical understanding of the motives behind their own schooling, graduates often returned to warn their tribes of the dangers of such education.34

After the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and after the Civil War, off-reservation boarding schools became a prominent means of educating natives. Boarding schools were nothing new and had been a method of educating natives from as early as Eleazar Wheelock’s colonial Indian charity school during the Great Awakening. Wheelock had also founded Dartmouth College to teach Indian men, especially to prepare them for ministry. The late nineteenth century movement was different in that it was sponsored by the federal government and focused on mass cultural assimilation. The movement’s first adult boarding school program began at Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia. In 1878, Captain Richard Pratt requested General Samuel Armstrong, founder of this institute for African American students, to enroll fifteen male hostages from the Indian Wars. The following year, Pratt began the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, which became a model for eventually 106 similar boarding schools. Like Carlisle, many of these schools were held in abandoned military barracks.35

Native children were frequently enrolled in boarding schools as young as six years of age and did not return home until after graduation over a decade later. While some graduates entered mainstream American society or stayed to work in the employment of the school, the majority returned home to the reservation. Having been disconnected from their families and cultures for so long, they struggled to adjust. Also, having been assimilated to white American ways, they seemed as strangers to their own people and had to regain the trust of the tribe before being fully accepted back into the community.36

For fifty years, the boarding school system continued in the same manner until the release of the 1928 Meriam Report, which brought about a turning point in government education of natives. Lewis Meriam investigated Indian education and wrote the report for the U.S.

36 Ibid., 764-6.
Department of the Interior. He described conditions as “grossly inadequate” in a number of areas. Food was insufficient and lacking proper nutritional value. Dormitories were overcrowded and poorly stocked with supplies for personal hygiene. Meager teacher pay and low standards resulted in weak classroom instruction, and the curriculum was excessively regimented. Beginning in the upper elementary grades, students worked half days performing duties that Meriam considered violations of child labor laws, and disciplinary procedures were developmentally inappropriate. Meriam recommended a practical curriculum more representative of the progressive educational philosophy of John Dewey—adapting learning experiences to the interests, needs, and culture of the students.37

A series of influences in the early twentieth century began to bring improvements to Native American education. In addition to the Meriam Report, the psychological research of G. Stanley Hall, founder of the child-study movement, and Dewey’s progressive education movement ushered in a more culturally sensitive curriculum in local schools within the native communities.38 Though the 1960s and 1970s were times of great tension between American Indians and the U.S. government, legislative action brought about significant reforms. Indian communities gained more control over government schools, and the curriculum included a stronger bilingual and bicultural approach.39

Even now, just decades after the quincentennial anniversary of European contact with American natives, educational policies and practices continue to be debated. A difference, however, in the twenty-first century from half a millennium ago is that critical theorists now remind Western culture of its injustices from the not too distant past, and the movement among

38 Urban and Wagoner, American Education, 214-5.
educators to promote cultural intelligence and to practice cultural proficiency has made great strides in the collective sensibilities of both educators and policy makers. Native autonomy and self-determination have been at least partially realized as the conversation continues as to how to move forward.
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