

**Education among Native Americans in the periods before and after contact with  
Europeans: An overview**

**By**

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## **Education among Native Americans in the periods before and after contact with Europeans: An Overview**

### **Abstract**

Before contact with Europeans, Native Americans had established an effective educational system which ensured a smooth transmission of their cultures to the next generation. This aboriginal educational system was composed of teaching the youth the knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, and dispositions required for successful functioning as adults in real world settings. Learning was underpinned by a reverence for nature and a sense of humans' responsibility to nature (Johnson et al., 2005). When Europeans arrived from 1492 onwards, they gradually imposed a Eurocentric educational system based on an Anglo-conformist assimilationist approach. This approach included educating Native Americans to be "less Native American" and more European American. The Anglo-conformist assimilationist approach in the formal education of Native Americans has left many of them miseducated and confused about their cultural identity. Fortunately, today, Native American leaders are successfully making efforts to reverse the adverse effects of the imposed Eurocentric educational system by synthesizing traditional Native American educational practices with European American practices.

The purpose of this article is to explore education among Native Americans before and after their contact with Europeans. The goals of Native American education, types of instruction, educational philosophy, what was required of educators and the essential components of Native American education before contact with Europeans are discussed. With regard to the period after contact with Europeans, the imposition of European education on Native Americans particularly from the 1830s onwards, the

miseducation of Native Americans to conform to Anglo-Saxon norms, the failure of American public schools to meet the needs of Native American children, and efforts by Native Americans to address their educational issues are also discussed. In the conclusion, recommendations such as adopting a celebratory attitude of and respect for Native American history, experience, culture, and contributions are made for addressing Native American educational issues.

### **Introduction**

It is believed by several authors who have written extensively on Native Americans such as Feagin and Feagin (2003), Schaefer (2004), Hildebrand, Phenice, Gray, and Hines (2000), Franklin (1979), and Josephy (1994) that Native Americans have lived in the Americas for more than 30,000 years. They are believed to have migrated from Siberia to the Americas through the Bering Strait in search of game. They migrated to South America through the Isthmus of Panama (Franklin, 1979). Before Europeans had contact with Native Americans, the Native Americans had developed simple to complex cultures; had built empires, cities, and roads; led in the agricultural revolution by domesticating plants and animals and developing about sixty percent of the foods consumed worldwide today; and practiced democratic forms of government in which women played significant roles (Franklin, 1979; Josephy, 1994).

Native Americans had developed over 1,200 languages from three hundred language groups before the arrival of Europeans. Though many of these languages are lost today due to European contact, Native American influence on the American English language has been in the form of over 2,000 Native American words being adopted in the

American English language (TMW Media Group; 1998). A matrilineal clan system had been developed and there was communal sharing of all means of sustenance including land and food. In sum, Native American peoples lived in relatively comfortable political, economic, and social conditions before the arrival of Europeans.

It is estimated that at the time of the first European contact with Native Americans in 1492, the Native American population in North America was between 10 and 15 million (Franklin, 1979; Schaefer, 2004). By the 1850s however, the Native American population in what had become known as the United States had decreased to about 250,000 (Feagin & Feagin, 2003; Schaefer, 2004; Stiffarm & Lane, 1992). The reasons for the sharp decline in the number of Native Americans included wars waged by Europeans against them. Europeans intentionally and unintentionally infected Native Americans with diseases such as smallpox and yellow fever. Massive destruction of Native American sources of livelihood and sustenance leading to starvation and death of thousands of Native Americans, enslavement, and incarceration of Native Americans in reservations particularly after the passage of the Indian Removal Act (1830) were other reasons for the decline. Also, introduction of Native Americans to alcohol, which led to widespread alcoholism and other diseases in Native American communities throughout the colonies and what has become known as the United States of America led to the decline in populations (Feagin & Feagin, 2003; Schaefer, 2004; Stiffarm & Lane, 1992).

The European groups that migrated to the Americas and almost annihilated the lives and cultures of Native Americans included the Dutch, the English, the French, and the Spanish. It is observed by historians that the groups that caused the most devastation were the Spanish and the English who, by the early 1800s, dominated most of North

America. Spanish dominance in North America came to an end in 1821 with the independence of Mexico from Spain. The English have dominated North America since 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which ceded most of what used to be Mexico to the United States (U.S.) government.

After gaining dominance in the U.S., the English employed several legal strategies to obtain more land. Those strategies included the Indian Removal Act (1830), which led to the forced migration of Native Americans to infertile reservations and the Trail of Tears from lands east to lands west of the Mississippi River and the Dawes Act (1887), which was supposed to introduce Native Americans to individual ownership of land but eventually freed more Native American lands for European occupation. The Indian Citizenship Act, by which Europeans finally recognized Native Americans as citizens in their own land, was passed in 1924. Other legal strategies were the Indian Reorganization Act (1934), which was designed to encourage Native Americans to revive their own traditions and manage their own political and economic affairs but has not been successful due to the inception of a reorganized Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) since the 1950s to oversee Native American affairs (Schaefer, 2004; Hunt & Colander, 2005). The Bureau of Indian Affairs has generally served as an oppressive tool of the U.S. government, which has been utilized not only to interfere in the political, economic, and social life of Native Americans, but also to dominate them in an indirect manner since the 1950s.

Today, there are over 2 million Native Americans who live in 558 reservations recognized by the United States government or in major cities throughout the United States (Hunt & Colander, 2005). Majority of Native Americans live outside of the

reservations and experience educational, economic, social, and political difficulties due to discrimination and racism in the United States. In spite of the difficulties they encounter today, historically Native Americans have contributed to all facets of life, including the field of education, in the United States and throughout the world (Yeboah, 2002).

The purpose of this article is to explore education among Native Americans before and after their contact with Europeans. The goals of Native American education, types of instruction, educational philosophy, what was required of educators and the essential components of Native American education before contact with Europeans will be discussed. With regard to the period after contact with Europeans, the imposition of European education on Native Americans particularly from the 1830s onwards, the miseducation of Native Americans to conform to Anglo-Saxon norms, the failure of American public schools to meet the needs of Native American children, and efforts by Native Americans to address their educational challenges are also discussed. In the conclusion, recommendations are made for addressing Native American educational issues.

### **Native American education in the period before contact with Europeans**

Before contact with Europeans, Native Americans developed an effective system of informal education or what Johnson, Dupuis, Musial, Hall, and Gollnick (2005) call aboriginal education. The system included transmitting knowledge, values, skills, attitudes, and dispositions to the next generation in real world settings such as the farm, at home, or on the hunting ground. Native American educational traditions passed on culture needed to succeed in society (Johnson et al, 2005). Education was viewed as a

way to beautify and shapen the next generation and prepare them to take over the mantle of leadership. The purpose of education was for an immediate induction of the next generation into society and preparation for adulthood. Education was for introducing society with all its institutions, taboos, mores, and functions to the individual. Also, education was intended for making the individual a part of the totality of the social consciousness.

Native American education delineated social responsibility, skill orientation, political participation, and spiritual and moral values. The cardinal goals of Native American education were to develop the individual's latent physical skills and character, inculcate respect for elders and those in authority in the individual, and help the individual acquire specific vocational training (Franklin, 1979). Native American education was also for developing a healthy attitude toward honest labor, developing a sense of belonging and encouraging active participation in community activities (Banks, 2003). Both boys and girls had equal access to education. Boys were taught by their fathers, uncles, grandfathers, and other male elders. Girls were instructed by their mothers, aunts, grandmothers, female elders and other members of their families. Sometimes, both boys and girls received instruction at the feet of either male or female elders (Mould, 2004). There were barely any dropouts and the community ensured that every child received a full education.

Youth appropriate information and knowledge was not hidden from any child. Several teaching strategies, including storytelling, were utilized to pass on knowledge and culture to the youth. In fact, Mould (2004) believed that storytelling was a sacred and vital part of a Native American youth's education. Knowledge and culture were passed

down orally, “crafted into stories that would instruct, inspire, provoke, question, challenge, and entertain” (Mould, 2004, p. li). Often, the youth would gather together to listen to the elders as they related the knowledge once entrusted to them when they were children (Mould, 2004).

The philosophy of education was that of the development of the individual as well as the whole society (Johnson et al., 2005). Educational philosophy also emphasized the importance of nature. The pursuit of knowledge and happiness were subordinated to a respect for the whole universe. According to Johnson et al (2005), knowledge was equated with an understanding of one’s place in the natural order of things and educators were encouraged to study and teach the physical and social world by examining the natural relationships that exist among things, animals, and humans. Studying ideas in the abstract or as independent entities was not considered as important as understanding the relationships among ideas and physical reality (Johnson et al., 2005; Banks, 2003). The essential components of an educational experience included hands-on learning, making connections, holding discussions, taking field trips, and celebrations of the moment (Johnson et al., 2005). These highly effective teaching methods were utilized by adults to transmit culture to or educate the next generation. The youth learned at their own pace and barely competed against one another. The youth were taught to be supportive and nurturing of one another in the learning process. As a result of the holistic education that all youth were exposed to in the period before their contact with Europeans, there were barely any miseducated Native American children.



## **Native American education in the period after contact with Europeans**

At the time of European contact with Native Americans (from 1492), an advanced system of informal/aboriginal education had been developed by Native Americans as noted earlier in this article. That system was misunderstood by Europeans who thus made efforts to impose their formal system of education on Native Americans. After contact with Europeans, formal education for Native Americans was initially conducted by missionaries and private individuals until the 1830s. There were increased European government efforts to formally educate Native Americans after the passage of the Indian Removal Act (1830) which forced Native Americans onto reservations (Feagin & Feagin, 2003).

The purpose of formal education of Native Americans, as far as Europeans were concerned, was forced acculturation or assimilation to European culture (Feagin and Feagin, 2003; Schaefer, 2004; Banks, 2003). The aim of the European system of education was to “civilize”, Christianize, and Europeanize the Native Americans in European-controlled schools. To achieve this purpose and aim, many Native American children were forcibly removed from their homes and enrolled in European-controlled schools. By 1887, about 14,300 Native American children were enrolled in 227 schools run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs or by religious groups (Feagin & Feagin, 2003). The schools were operated based on an Anglo-conformity assimilationist approach.

The Anglo-conformity assimilationist approach included the following: 1) Educating the Native Americans away from their culture due to the philosophy of Europeanization or Christianization or “civilizing” of the Native American through education; 2) Intensive efforts were made to destroy extant Native American cultures by excluding Native American cultures from the school curriculum; 3) Concerted efforts

were made to prevent Native American students from following their own culture; and 4) Native American students were punished for speaking their native languages (Feagin & Feagin, 2003). This approach motivated European American educators to force Native American students into boarding schools where it was believed that it would be easier and much more effective to Europeanize, Christianize, and “civilize” them. Students were forced to dress like Europeans, convert to Christianity, and take European names. Students who refused to conform were severely punished.

The effects of the Anglo-conformity assimilationist approach on Native Americans cannot be overemphasized. Many of them lost or became confused about their cultural identity. Some tended to know a lot more about European culture, history, philosophy, and languages than about their own culture, history, philosophy, and languages. Europeanization, Christianization and “civilizing” of Native Americans through formal education seriously undermined the very foundation of Native American cultures and alienated many Native Americans from their own cultures and environment. Formal education forced many Native Americans to absorb European lifestyles and led to individualism as well as serious weakening of traditional authority structure and kin group solidarity. Many Native Americans lost faith in their own cultures and civilizations and absorbed those of Europeans. Some have neither fully adopted European culture nor fully embraced Native American culture and consequently swing between the two in a state of cultural confusion. Eurocentric education has been a miseducation of Native Americans as has been for all minority groups in the United States. These and many other political, social and economic effects of formal education on Native Americans have permeated Native American cultures till today (Yeboah, 2004).

European American teachers and administrators have blamed Native American educational problems on cultural differences. This is known as cultural deficit theory. According to cultural deficit theorists, disjunctures or differences or deficits between the culture of the home and the culture of the school are the reasons for the poor academic achievement of non-European students (Johnson et al., 2005). European American schools focus only on the dominant culture and expect all students to operate as if they are members of the dominant culture, giving an advantage to students from the dominant group and a disadvantage to those from minority groups (Johnson et al., 2005). What cultural deficit theorists advocate is that students from minority groups, including Native American students, must reject their own cultural patterns and absorb European American cultural patterns in order to be successful in school. Thus, in an effort to assist their students to be high achievers in school, many European American teachers have attempted to make their students “less Native American” by educating them away from their own cultures and imposing Anglo-European culture on them. Many schools and textbooks exclude Native American experiences and their immeasurable contributions to this society and the rest of the world (Yeboah, 2002) and provide little to nothing to assist Native American children identify with their own cultures.

From the 1930s some boarding schools were replaced by day schools closer to reservations and a bilingual policy of educating Native American students in both Native American languages and the English language was discussed (Feagin & Feagin, 2003). Since the 1960s, organized protest has led to increased government involvement and aid for primary, adult, and vocational education for Native Americans on and off the reservations. Federal and local governments have focused more attention on local public

schools (outside the reservations) and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) schools in the reservations (Schaefer, 2004). For greater inclusion of Native Americans in their own education, Native American advisory boards have been organized in mainstream public schools. More Native Americans have been added to school faculty and staff. Native American art, dances, and languages have been included in the school curriculum.

The central curriculum taught in both BIA and mainstream schools have remained the same from colonial times until recently. The curriculum indoctrinates Native American children with the same European American values as in the past (Feagin & Feagin, 2003). In many reservations today however, there are efforts to reverse this by teaching students in Native American languages and culture from the early years of their education. In the Choctaw Reservation in Choctaw, Mississippi for example, students are taught in the Chahta and English languages in the first three years of formal schooling and in the English language from the fourth grade onwards. Throughout their schooling to the high school level, they are taught and exposed to Choctaw culture and encouraged to speak the Chahta language in and outside of school. One of the essences of the Annual Choctaw Indian Fair is to educate both the youth and adults in Choctaw cultural practices and traditions and to transmit Choctaw culture to the next generation. The author of this article, who happens to be an African and from a continent which has had similar experiences as those of Native Americans, greatly applauds the new forms of formal education among Native Americans on the reservations, which include an integration of the Native American system before their contact with Europeans and aspects of the European system as a way of preserving what is left of Native American cultures,

preparing contemporary Native American youth for their real world settings, and meeting the needs of Native Americans.

The large scale migration of many Native Americans to the cities since the 1950s has led to a decline in the number of children in BIA schools. By the early 1990s less than ten percent (10%) of Native American children attended BIA schools (Feagin & Feagin, 2003). Today, most Native American children attend mainstream local public schools due to the fact that majority of Native Americans live off reservations with their children (United States Census Bureau, 2001). The mainstream educational system has however failed to meet the needs of Native American students. The failure stems from the absence of a Native American perspective in the curricula, the loss of Native American languages, the shift away from Native American spiritual values, and the racist and discriminatory activities of many European American teachers and administrators (Feagin & Feagin, 2003; Schaefer, 2004). Perhaps, mainstream educators could borrow the new forms of formal education being practiced on the reservations which seem to much better meet the needs of Native American students rather than continually imposing the Eurocentric system which has not worked for Native Americans.

With regard to higher education, since the 1960s, many mainstream colleges have established Native American Studies centers to provide facilities for the study of Native American issues (Feagin & Feagin, 2003). By the late 1990s, more than 134,000 Native Americans were enrolled in colleges and universities throughout the United States (Schaeffer, 2004). Majority of the students attended predominantly European American public colleges and universities. Some of the students were not very successful due to the

ingrained racist and discriminatory practices in those institutions. Consequently, many Native American students dropped out of those institutions.

In general, Native American formal educational attainment has remained lower than that of the general population due to the Eurocentricity of the educational system. By 1990, less than two-thirds of Native Americans over the age of twenty-five were high school graduates compared to three-fourths of all Americans in that age range. Native American students in mainstream schools are disproportionately placed in special education classrooms. The proportion of Native American students who drop out after tenth-grade is 36%, the highest of any racial or ethnic group and more than twice that of European Americans (Schaeffer, 2004).

In view of the aforementioned issues in education among Native Americans, a Department of Education Task Force organized in the late 1990s recommended the following for addressing Native American educational issues: implementation of multicultural curricula that inculcate respect for Native American history and culture, and establishment of programs that guarantee that Native American students learn English well. The task force assumed that if Native American students learn English very well then they will be successful in school, an assumption which is traced to the cultural deficit theory discussed above. Today, many Native American students attend Native American-controlled community colleges. The community colleges integrate Native American history and culture into courses. More attention is given to students and their cultures in the Native American-controlled educational institutions.

## **Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations**

Native Americans had established an effective educational system which ensured the smooth transmission of their cultures to the next generation before their contact with Europeans. The system included passing on of knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, and dispositions required for successful functioning of every individual in real world settings. Access to education was denied neither to male nor female while all children were taught to support and nurture one another and not necessarily compete against one another in the learning process. Learning was undergirded philosophically by a reverence for nature and a sense of humans' responsibility to nature (Johnson et al., 2005). The arrival of Europeans from 1492 onwards led to the imposition of a Eurocentric educational system which was underpinned by an Anglo-conformist assimilationist approach discussed above. This approach included educating Native Americans away from their cultures as a way of rendering them "less Native American" and more European American. The Anglo-conformist assimilationist approach in the formal education of Native Americans has left many of them miseducated and quite confused about their cultural identity. The political, economic and social impact of the European aim of Europeanizing, Christianizing and "civilizing" Native Americans through formal education are discussed at length in a paper presented by the author at the National Association of Native American Studies Conference in 2004. Fortunately, today, Native American leaders are successfully making efforts to reverse the adverse effects of the imposed Eurocentric educational system by synthesizing traditional Native American educational practices with European American practices.

It is highly recommended that a study be conducted on reservations to investigate the effects of the new form of education on Native Americans. A comparison of the

academic achievement of students on the reservations and those in mainstream schools could be researched to find out how successful the educational system on the reservations is vis-à-vis the mainstream system. All educators must acknowledge the cultural variations in the lives and learning styles of Native American students and restructure the educational system to accommodate them. Native Americans traditionally teach students by oral directions and by expecting them to observe and learn. As a result, written instructions alone may not be adequate for some students who may require oral directions as well. Working with and incorporating the traditional values of Native American students into the curriculum will be enriching to both educators and students. Finally, a celebratory attitude of and respect for Native American history, experience, culture, and contributions are highly recommended for addressing Native American educational issues.



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