Indigenizing Public Education and Developing American Consciousness

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Abstract

The American educational system often either erases or misrepresents American Indian history in this country. History books paint a picture of Natives as savage, animalistic, antiquated, and childlike. These images, or lack thereof, leave American pupils with a misunderstanding of our nation’s past and an inability to reconcile it with the present. American Indian pupils are often left confused at best or definitively damaged at worst. To combat these misrepresentations and improve the collective American consciousness, it is proposed that a national model of comprehensive Indian education be adopted. This model involves collaborative partnerships with tribes, curriculum reform, teacher education, and American Indian teacher recruitment. The impacts of the program will reach beyond the classroom and into the polls and media, and will help to revise and correct the image of American Indians today. Further research should focus on the impacts of this educational reform to Native representation in the media, Native cultural identity and self-esteem measures, and American cultural sensitivity.

*Keywords*: American Indian, education, curriculum
Background

America has a sordid and shifty past in its dealings with American Indian nations and peoples. Since 1492, the country has waged wars and enacted policies to take Indian lands, carry out physical and cultural genocide, and force assimilation with White society (Spring, 2016). Our textbooks and K-12 curriculum, however, are often unreflective of this history, instead creating narratives supporting Anglo-colonialism and invasion rather than unraveling the bloodiness of it. Curriculum developers often purport, whether consciously or unconsciously, that for American Indian youth to succeed, the dominant culture’s ideals and knowledge should be put forth in the classroom (Stanton, 2014). However, research indicates that these youth fare far better in educational settings that value their cultural backgrounds and integrate their community’s teachings (Bosse, Duncan, Gapp & Newland, 2011).

By misrepresenting and in many cases erasing completely this country’s past, we egregiously ignore its very real Indian present. The pen belongs to the victor, but each day we produce a culturally ignorant populace unprepared to grasp America’s history and diversity. In these times, nothing could be more dangerous.

Subsequent Issues

Several issues have emerged out of America’s revisionist Indian history. A lack of teaching this history in the classroom has naturally resulted in either gross misrepresentations of Natives in media or their exclusion entirely. To give this some context, consider the following data: A review of newspapers in 1997 and major films made from 1999-2000 indicate only .2 percent representations of Native people or stories though they comprised 1 percent of the population (Rooney, 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). To put these numbers into more current perspective, consider the last time a Native film, television show, or news story was released.
When Native peoples are not erased from mainstream media, they are often caricatured or stereotyped in the form of mascots. A report by FiveThirtyEight determined that out of an existing database of over 46,000 schools, 2,129 of them had Native mascots (Munguía, 2014). These mascots often depict American Indians as savage, cartoonish, and as a part of the past (King, 2008). Therefore, in addition to being taught no curriculum about their own people and being nearly invisible in film and news, the only times Indian youth see “themselves” reflected in the media or at school is in the form of harmful and degrading misrepresentations of their people.

Native youth are imploring upon our legislators and policy makers to change the K-12’s system of neglecting Indigenous thoughts and perspectives. Native youth identify a need for learning about their own cultures, languages, and histories and identify the importance of cultural identity in improving social and educational outcomes across the board (Congress of the U.S. W.A, 1995). Educators and policymakers alike should be sensitive and responsive to these requests and should work to create an honest and culturally inclusive depiction of America’s past and present as it relates to American Indians.

Data

One of the major areas in need of revision to achieve this educational reform is our textbooks. Among five recent and popular history books used in public education, a very troubling picture of American Indians has been constructed. In these texts, Native history is primarily told through a White lens, neglecting to tell of their lives pre-invasion (Stanton, 2014). In addition, passive voice is often used in the rare instance that atrocities against Natives are cited, using language like Natives “were beaten” or were “forced to flee,” without identifying at whose hands, which is often if not exclusively White invaders (Stanton, 2014, p.661). These texts often refer to Natives in animalistic or patriarchal ways, using terms like “rounded up” or
“refused to obey” to describe them (Stanton, 2014, p.662). Even during periods when Natives were massacred by White settlers or government officials, textbooks often take a stance of blaming the Natives or using certain linguistic maneuverings to justify mass murder.

Coupled with these unfortunate findings are the demographics and backgrounds of the teachers passing down this information to Natives and non-Natives alike. Pewewardy (1998) highlights that most teachers grew up with assumptions of Natives as savage or inferior being drilled into them, making it difficult to correct these ideas and replace them with more culturally and historically sound knowledge.

Indian education in this country is problematic at best, but at its worst, it is propaganda and cultural erasure. American Indian youth are taught on a systematic level that their people were comparable to cattle and deserving of violence and their White peers are taught that their ancestors were justified in it. These texts ignore the significant and far-reaching contributions of Natives in this country, be it through land development, culture, food, science, literature and other areas. They also ignore the bloody truth of American barbarism and remove the government’s culpability in the American Indian genocide. Corrective measures need to be taken to be both historically and culturally sound in the teaching of history of this country.

**Stakeholders**

Those impacted by American mistruths in K-12 history education are not just Native American people. Carjuzaa, Jetty, Munson, and Veltkamp (2010) argue that ignoring or misrepresenting American Indian people “damages the integrity of our collective history” and state that the education of both Natives and non-Natives is eroded when this history is not articulated truthfully and extensively. Starnes (2006) also states that we cannot understand America without understanding American Indians and their history in this country. Therefore,
the impacts of potential curricular or overall educational reform would not just affect American Indian people, but American consciousness in totality.

**Recommendations**

A complete and total revisioning of how American Indian education is rendered need be created to correct the aforementioned ills. First, all teachers should be required to complete courses on American Indian history, particularly of those tribes within their own state, as well as courses on power, privilege, diversity and inclusion. Teachers should use the information in these courses to incorporate Indigenous knowledge in their lessons regardless of their discipline.

One such model to implement and expand upon is Montana’s Indian Education for All (IEFA) legislation. This program emphasizes aligning Common Core standards with Indigenous knowledge and history (Carjuzaa et al., 2010). The State’s Office of Public Instruction forms partnerships with both tribal members and instructors to create lesson plans that are culturally responsive and accurate. The curriculum design process includes representatives from each of the tribes in the state. Different from other school systems, this program does not focus on one-time Indian education events or teachings, but instead integrates this knowledge comprehensively throughout the school year.

This example of educational reform should be implemented on a national level, with other recommendations. In addition to training teachers, American Indian teacher recruitment should also be prioritized. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), the number of American Indian teachers dropped from 1 percent in 1987 to .5% in 2011, numbers that are incongruous with American Indian population statistics. Public universities with teaching programs should be charged with planning events in predominantly Native communities to
recruit students to their schools. Also, it could be hypothesized that the more Native education is emphasized in the classroom, the more Native students desiring to be teachers will emerge.

**Implementation**

Resources necessary for this process will include lesson plans, tribally produced histories, and funding for these materials when necessary. Each state should begin work on creating curriculum that tells their history with American Indian history included throughout its entirety. Accreditation standards for each district in each state should include standards for Indian education that all are required to meet. Revisions should take place each year to add new information or edit standards as recommended by tribal partners.

Schools should also forge partnerships with tribes, Native people, or urban Indian organizations in their area to provide guest lectures throughout the year. For instance, the closest urban Indian organization to Charlotte is the Metrolina Indian Association. Monies could also be allocated for American Indian liaisons to be employed by the school.

**Evaluation**

Evaluation can take place both in the short- and long-term. First, curriculum pre-change should be assessed for all occurrences, significance, and historical truth of information related to American Indians. This information should drastically change and increase post-Indian education infusion. In addition, levels of interaction between schools and tribes can be used to assess the efficacy of this program. In the long-term, questions to ask related to evaluation are: Will Native students test scores or self-esteem measures improve from increased cultural relevancy and accuracy in the classroom? Will there be an increase in Native film and media coverage? The implications for this proposed change to Indian education are necessary and we owe this to our youth to forge a more conscious and culturally astute American society.
References


