

TEACHING OTHERS, LEARNING OURSELVES NATIVE AMERICAN EDUCATION AND THE FORMATION OF IDENTITY

Rebecca Fabian

Historically, the United States has used education as a way to eradicate Native American cultural identity. Beginning with the assimilation era of the late 1800s/early 1900s, schools, both private and public, were devoted to the process of “kill[ing] the Indian to save the man” – an idea so prevalent throughout society and Indian public policy that it is unclear who first phrased it in this manner. Education as a method of assimilation and enculturation was a brilliant tactic, even permeating the mindset of Native American tribes themselves.

It has only been recently within the last 30-40 years, beginning most obviously with the American Indian Movement (AIM) of the 1960s/1970s, that Native American communities have become increasingly vocal about reclaiming an identity by salvaging the education of Native American youth. The U.S. government and policy makers have consistently failed to adequately recognize the unique and separate identities of the “560 Indian tribes and Native tribal organizations [that were] federally recognized” as of 2004.ⁱ Each Native American community has different issues regarding education and identity formation. Rather than adhering to one pan-American Indian policy concerning education, communities are coming up with creative individual solutions for solving problems within each particular community.

Increasing scholarship among Native Americans regarding education within their own communities has led to a call for non-Native researchers to step aside in the area of Native American education. Though I applaud the growing efforts of Native American communities to take matters into their own hands, I argue that it is more, not less, collaboration, that is needed to succeed in improving education both of and for Native Americans, and of non-Native Americans, to raise awareness of the problems created by American colonization that have yet to be solved.

The early research (1950s – 1970s) of non-Native pioneers in the field of educational anthropology, such as George and Louise Spindler, Murray and Rosalie Wax, and Ray Barnhardt, has done much to lay a solid foundation for the more contemporary research of Native American scholars such as Karen Gayton Swisher (Standing Rock Sioux), John Tippeconnic (Comanche), and Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux). Combining these two bodies of knowledge offer greater resources to examine what was not working in the past, evaluate what is being tried in the present, and consider possibilities for improvements in education within Native American communities in the future.

ⁱ Pevar, S. The Rights of Indians and Tribes. New York University Press: New York, 2004. 20.