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\* Read the article & be prepared to discuss. Answer ?s on Before-and-After photos on a separate sheet of paper

## IMPACT OF THE BOARDING SCHOOL MOVEMENT

The boarding school movement for Native Americans received its real impetus after the failure of the Native American resistance on the southern plains in the 1870s. By the end of the 19th century, the government supported about 81 boarding schools and 133 day schools. With government support for the boarding schools, the missionary schools began to decrease, and more Native Americans were brought under those forces that shaped education throughout the country. In the beginning of the 20th century the boarding school received greater attention and support from the government. In 1917, as a result of increased squabbling among the missionary groups, particularly Catholics and Protestants, Congress refused to continue to allow the use of federal funds by the churches for the education of Native Americans. As the churches reorganized to reduce operating costs, more missionary schools closed and the popularity of boarding schools increased. The aim of the government boarding school was not only to introduce Native Americans to new ideas but also to destroy their tribal customs and culture. This attitude is summed up by the motto of the founder of the Carlisle Indian School, Richard Henry Pratt: "Kill the Indian and save the man." Pratt believed that the transformation of the Native American child into a European American was for the benefit of the child, the Native group, and American society as a whole.

The policy of separating young children from the tribe, teaching them European topics, and forcing them to work with immigrant Christian families was seen at first as an experimental phase in the Native American boarding school movement. Although some continued to be interested in testing and developing new education methods to engage the young Native American, this experimental model became the norm of education for Native American children.

Conditions in the boarding schools were harsh. Students were immediately deprived of their cultural identity with changed clothing, hairstyles, and names. The more fluid Native American approach to learning with its ease of interactions between youth and elders was replaced with rigid routines governed by the clock. Specific subjects were taught at specific times, and students used textbooks, unknown in the customary learning styles and practices of tribal education.

Some practices that were typical of boarding schools for Native Americans across the country at this time were: basic common school education in reading, writing, and arithmetic; instruction in English and English-only rule for school life in general; coeducation; military cadet training, stressing patriotism and citizenship; rudimentary industrial training, emphasizing trades for boys, domestic arts for girls, and agriculture for both; arduous manual labor (students worked half of each day); Christianization; and many school officials resorted to corporal punishment to force students to conform. The practice of corporal punishment was virtually unknown among Native Americans, who held their young as sacred gifts entrusted to them. Restriction to "school jails" was also used as a method of control.

In many boarding schools, students were crowded into unhygienic living areas. They suffered dietary deficiencies, and medical services were substandard. As a result, contagious diseases were rampant in these living conditions and caused high morbidity rates among the students. The high death rate among the children was compounded by the most frequent response of officials: When children became infected with contagious illnesses, they were sent back to their families on the reservation. This practice resulted in the spread of diseases among tribal people, who had no natural resistance to European illnesses. Typical childhood diseases resulted in high death rates not only among children but also among Native American adults across the country.

The folklore of many tribes across the United States is replete with stories of resistance from young Native American students while at boarding schools. They endured mouth washings because they dared to use their tribal languages. They tried to run away. There are accounts of boarding school personnel attempting to instill feelings of shame in a student about his or her traditional family. As a result of spending a number of years at boarding schools, many Native American youth developed a sense of disconnection from family and friends.

One problem Native American youth who attended boarding school had to face was reentry into life on the reservation. Many students did not find it easy to fit back into the rhythms and customs of reservation life, whereas others were able to make a successful transition. Successful transitions were largely dependent on one's perspective. Many reentries were not successful from the government perspective. When some young people returned to the reservation, they began wearing their tribal dress, used their native languages, and returned to traditional customs and spiritual beliefs.

On the other hand, for some Native American students the boarding school was not so severe and even proved helpful. It provided them with opportunities to develop skills necessary to function effectively within the emerging society. In addition to the basic training in reading, writing, math, and other areas of education, some Native American youth received advanced training that provided them with the skills necessary to take up occupations apart from agriculture. A small number of Native Americans were prepared for careers in law, medicine, art, and other professions.

Over time a number of elders realized that Native Americans would not be able to succeed in this evolving society if they did not adapt to the new ways. With this in mind, in a number of instances, the elders supported young Native American youth being sent to boarding schools.

Many Native Americans managed to maintain their tribal identity and learn about the customs of other tribes with whom they lived in the boarding school. This knowledge of other tribes later aided in the formation of close, cohesive, activist Native American groups. Later, these groups were to work actively for Native American causes and issues. Also contributing to communication among tribes was the common language they learned in the schools. Many of the students developed a reasonable proficiency in English.

Some other young Native Americans developed leadership skills, which gave them confidence in taking up leadership roles when they returned to the reservation. As time passed, there emerged among many Native Americans a new collective Indian identity that was expressed in the Pan-Indian movement.

Thus an experience that was intended to strip the Native Americans of their culture had the opposite effect of building newer and stronger relationships among the different tribes. From bonds born in adversity grew the Pan-Indian movement, which espoused and fought for the rights of Native Americans. In 1911, it formed the Society of American Indians, which sought to advance the political rights of the indigenous people of the United States. This society fought against the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) because members perceived that this organization maintained a paternalistic approach instead of an advocacy role.

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#### **Further Reading**

Coleman, Michael F. *American Indian Children at School, 1850–1930*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993; Hamley, Jeffrey. *An Introduction to the Federal Indian Boarding School Movement*. Bismarck: State Historical Society of North Dakota and University of Mary, 1994; Reyhner, Jon, and Jeanne Eder. *American Indian Education: A History*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004; Reyhner, Jon. *Teaching American Indian Students*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.

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### EXTENSION ACTIVITY 3

## Before-and-After Photographs

Primary Sources: U.S. Army Military History Institute; Hampton University Archives

One of the first surprises awaiting Native American students at boarding school was the transformation of their appearance. Uniforms replaced their traditional clothing, which had distinguished them from members of other tribes as well as from white people. Many students (especially boys) were forced to have their hair cut short. The first set of photographs below shows Ziewie, a 15-year-old Sioux, upon her arrival at the Hampton Institute in 1878 and then four months later. The second set records a similar transformation in the appearance of Tom Torlino, a young Navajo, over the course of three years at the Carlisle Indian School.



Ziewie, a Sioux from the Crow Creek Agency



Four months after Ziewie's arrival at the Hampton Institute



Tom Torlino, a Navajo, upon his arrival at Carlisle Indian School



Torlino, at Carlisle three years later

\* Answer ?s on a separate sheet of paper.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think was the main goal of the school administrators who had students change their appearance so radically? Do you think the goal was achieved?
2. What do you think were the advantages and the disadvantages of the dress codes at boarding schools of Native Americans?
3. How do you think the changes in the appearance of the boarding-school students affected the way they thought of themselves?

