

Educational Challenges Faced by the Native Americans The Case of the Cherokee Nation

Tea CHUMBURIDZE*

Abstract

This article examines the educational issues facing Native American people, who have experienced a considerable amount of oppressive federal and state educational policies intending to assimilate them to the mainstream society and destroy their cultures and languages. The research aims to investigate the impact of educational policy of the U.S. government on the Native American population and culture with a particular focus on the Cherokee people.

Keywords: Native Americans, Indigenous, the Cherokees, Education, policy, American Indian

Introduction

Before the arrival of white settlers, Native American people educated their children according to their typical traditional manner, consistent with their culture, customs and traditions; they were adapted to their specific surroundings. Accordingly, Indian children had the information about their origin, their way of life, they knew how to support themselves, and how to preserve their culture, languages and rules of order (Fletcher, 2008).

With the arrival of white people (European settlers), challenges which they faced with them and later with the government of the United States, had a devastating impact on these indigenous people, their cultures and traditions.

Native American people were rich with natural resources, fertile land, food, and labor; white settlers realized the advantages of this wealth and did their best to possess it. As Fletcher points out, "The Europeans and Americans benefited from a wide variety of factors, including their superiority in military technology and resistance to certain kinds of disease, as well as a will to destroy, terrorize, mutilate, and conquer that most Indian communities found foreign and even incredible" (Fletcher, 2008, p. 1).

However, the U.S. government chose to try to assimilate the Native American people rather than exterminate them. As campaigns of extermination are quite expensive and dif-

ficult to maintain, the reason of this decision was connected to some economic and financial factors, U.S. government officials thought that more beneficial in this condition would be to initiate a long-term program of incorporating and assimilating Indian people into mainstream American society (Fletcher, 2008). The advantages of this program were the following: first, it was cheap and would not cause the loss of their lives and property; besides, by assimilating the Indian people into mainstream society, their cultures, traditions, and languages would disappear gradually. Secondly, religions and philosophies of white people were able to justify mass extermination of Native Americans, however, it would be difficult for any religion or philosophy to survive on this basis. They could be during the 19th century American social activist groups arose such as, the Friends of the Indian and the Indian Rights Association; they were dedicated to the acculturation of Native Americans. They were supporting the idea of assimilating the Native Americans into the mainstream culture in order to save them (Fletcher, 2008). The federal government of the U.S. intended to start this process through the education of the Native American people.

Throughout history, treaty negotiations between the federal government of the U.S. and the Indian people often included provisions for educating Native American children. Moreover, it is important to note that many of these treaty rights sought to educate Indian children, in exchange for Indian lands. American policymakers considered that it would accelerate the incorporation and assimilation of Native chil-

* Ph.D. Student, Faculty of Education and Humanities, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia
E-mail: tchumburidze@ibsu.edu.ge

Supervisor: Vasil KACHARAVA, Prof. Dr., Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia
E-mail: vasoamstud@gmail.com

dren into the dominant society. The government officials sent Christian Protestant and Catholic priests and nuns to conduct much of the education in Native American society. By implementing this policy, the government would be able to take away Native American cultures, customs, traditions and religion.

Those Indian families which did not sign a treaty (these treaties were actually signed by Indian tribes) with an educational component, the Congress and the President of the U.S. would reach them in all circumstances (Fletcher, 2008).

The policymakers of the United States predicted the destruction and disappearance of the Native American culture and traditions; the issues of reservation and separateness would be vanished (Fletcher, 2008).

Generally, the process intended the cultural annihilation of Indian tribes, however, the government officials failed to complete this task successfully. Despite oppression, the Native American people were able to begin the process of restoration of their population, native languages, beliefs, traditions, customs, and cultures.

The system of American Indian education, which existed from the early treaty times through the 1970s, included the boarding schools, which were established by the secular and religious organizations. The boarding school experience for Indian children began in 1860 when the Bureau of Indian Affairs established the first Indian boarding school on the Yakima Indian Reservation in the state of Washington.

The Indian boarding school system stands as one of the most offensive examples of the attempt to assimilate the Native American people into the dominant, white American society (melting pot society).

Some components of the Indian education system still exist, for example, the Haskell Indian boarding school which is located in Lawrence, Kansas; though, such schools are now operated by the Indian people and their organizations; however, American Indian people does not possess the full authority to establish and control a certain type of the education system, and it will continue to be a crisis until they take the full responsibility for educating their own.

Three Phases of the Cherokee Educational History

There are three crucial phases in the history of white efforts to assimilate the Cherokee through education. The first is characterized by missionary efforts to convert the Cherokee to Christianity and abandon their traditional ways of life. The second phase covers a forced departure of a large number of Cherokee people to the west in 1838-39; it was a period when the government of the United States established a unique self-maintained public school system, the aim of which was to continue the process of acculturation. And the third period starts from 1898 when the U.S. government took control over educational affairs and set about the dissolution of the government of Cherokee Nation. Managing the schools jointly with the Cherokees effected a number of reforms in the public schools which were finally absorbed into the public school system of Oklahoma (Knepler, 1942).

As noted above, the government intended to discour-

age the preservation of Native American culture to substitute it with the western lifestyle. Government officials strongly believed that such policy served as the cheapest and safest way for bringing Indians under their control, and providing a safe habitation for the white settlers. Moreover, the government policy wanted to help the white population of the country acquire desirable land and "civilize" (Knepler, 1942, p. 384) Indians; by changing their basic economy so they would be content to live with less land. Accordingly, the importance of education was highlighted.

Missionary attempts to Christianize Indians were not successful, and soon they realized that Cherokee traditions were deep-seated and resilient. As Knepler points out, "It had been a difficult matter for the missionary to begin working on the heathen Indian, only to have the Indian nonchalantly leave for the hunt when the season rolled around. It left the missionary with a keen sense of disappointment at seeing all of his preliminary labors come to naught, and at realizing that he would have to start all over again next time, should he be in a position to return at a later date" (Knepler, 1942, p. 385).

The government official concentrated on the education of the Cherokee people and attempted to adjust them to western civilization.

The government of the United States relied on the missionaries to convince the Cherokee people of the importance of education and civilization, which included the propagation of the Gospel as well. The U.S. government encouraged missionary endeavors and promoted the Indians to welcome the missionaries (Knepler, 1942).

During the Colonial Period, the British government initiated the policy which was later followed by the United States government. As Knepler identifies, In 1776, February 5, the Committees on Indian Affairs of the Continental Congress provided suggestions about the importance of having a friendly relationships between the white settlers of the United Colonies and American Indians; as the representatives of the Continental Congress asserted, the propagation of the Gospel, and the adjustment to the civilized life would be beneficial and advantageous for both sides (Knepler, 1942).

Steps towards assimilation of the Indian people through education had already been taken by the Continental Congress, when it appropriated five hundred dollars for the education of Native American children at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.

George Washington strongly supported the education of Indian children, particularly in having them learn to read and write, acquire the skills of art and husbandry.

In 1791, Secretary of War Henry Knox clearly expressed the attitude of President Washington regarding this issue, "the Governor of the Western territory will appoint you an interpreter whenever one shall be necessary. The president of the United States does not choose to interfere on this point.

The President of the United States thinks it will be the best mode of teaching you how to raise corn, by sending one or two sober man to reside in your nation, with proper implements of husbandry. It will, therefore, be proper that you should, upon consultation, appoint a proper place for such persons to fill the ground. They are not to claim the land on which they shall plough.

The President of the United States, also, thinks it will be the best mode of teaching your children to read and write, to send a schoolmaster among you, and not for you to send your children among us. He will, therefore, look out for a proper person for this business.

As soon as you shall learn anything of the intentions of the Western Indians, you will inform the Governor of the Western territory thereof, of the officer commanding at fort Washington, in order to be communicated to the President of the United States.

H. Knox, Secretary of War" (Congress, 1791).

In the third decade of the 19th century, the U.S. government's attempts to settle the Indians west of the Mississippi river became stronger. This idea implied that Native American people should be provided with education in the new homeland. However, these attempts did not gain much attention until the presidency of Andrew Jackson (1829–1837) Jackson began an outspoken campaign advocating Indian removal. Among his claims, Jackson asserted that if Native American people were transferred to an area west of the Mississippi, the Federal government of the United States would find it easier to promote the educational activities of missionaries among them.

James D. Richardson, who served as the U.S. Representative from Tennessee's Fifth Congressional District from 1885-1905, writes about the compilation of messages and papers of Andrew Jackson. On December 8, 1829, in his first annual message to the Congress, Jackson stressed the importance of Indian education, according to him it was necessary to teach Indians the art of civilization, promote union and harmonious relationship among them (Richardson, 1897). He was extremely confident in his decision to remove all Indians to the west. His third annual message (December 6, 1831) emphasized Indian issues, "The removal of the Indians beyond the limits and jurisdiction of the states, does not place them beyond the reach of philanthropic aid and Christian instruction. On the contrary, those whom philanthropy or religion may induce to live among them in the new abode, will be more free in the exercise of their benevolent function, than if they had remained within the limits of the states, embarrassed by their internal regulation. Now subject to no control but the superintending agency of the general government, exercised with the sole view of preserving peace, they may proceed unmolested in the interesting experiment of gradually advancing a community of American Indians from Barbarism, to the habits and enjoyments of civilized life" (Executors, 1839, p. 395).

Upon their removal to the west, the Indians eventually began or continued to receive missionary instruction along educational as well as religious lines, a component of education which has continued among the Cherokees and other Indian tribes to the present day.

The federal government of the United States exercised control over Cherokee education after the passage of the Curtis Act in 1898, which served as an amendment to the United States - Dawes - Act that brought about the allotment process of lands of the Five Civilized Tribes of Indian Territory: the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Muscogee, Cherokee, and Seminole. This act was strongly objected by the Cherokees'.

Before that the U.S. government regarded that the Five Civilized Tribes did not require any educational provision. Approximately a decade later, when the U.S. government started the dissolution of tribal governments (the governments of the Five Civilized Tribes), the transition from tribal to federal control of Cherokee education became an important phase of this process.

Until this transition, the government was involved in promoting mission education, both morally, financially, and providing funds for a national system of self-directed public education (Knepler, 1942).

Establishment of the Boarding School System

Massive invasions which occurred in the California Gold Rush,** resulted in the death of tens of thousands of Indians when their territories were incorporated into the U.S. Tens of thousands of American Indians and Alaska Natives, were forced to attend a residential school system during the 1850s?

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the state policy of the United States, forced the Native American children to leave their families, their homes and study at government and church operated boarding schools (Knepler, 1942).

This system originated in the 1600s when a Puritan Missionary to the American Indians John Eliot developed so called "Praying Towns", intended to separate Native American children from their communities and attempted to convert them to Christianity (Smith, 2004). Special schools for Indian children were established in the 1600s along the St. Lawrence River (Knepler, 1942).

During the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant (1869–1877), the boarding school system became more official. President Grant initiated Peace Policy (1869-1870), according to which the administration of Native American reservations had to be turned off to Christian denominations. This policy rested on the belief that Americans had the right to dispossess Native peoples of their lands, take away freedoms, and send them to reservations, where missionaries would teach them how to farm, read and write, wear Euro-American clothing, and embrace Christianity. If Indians refused to move to reservations, they would be forced off their homelands by soldiers (Trafzer, 2009). The Congress decided to finance such schools and provide them with the necessary equipment and facilities; these schools which were located on Indian reservations would be run by churches and Christian missionaries (Smith, 2004).

In 1879, a Lieutenant Richard Pratt established the first off-reservation Indian boarding school; it was known as Carlisle Indian Industrial School at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He thought that the existence of these schools on reservations would enable Native American children to escape from boarding schools easily, preventing quick assimilation into the mainstream (dominant) American society. He therefore proposed to take Indian children far from their homes at an early age, for four or more years, so that on returning they would be adults, presumably assimilated into mainstream

** The California Gold Rush (1848–1855) began on January 24, 1848, when gold was found by James W. Marshall at Sutter's Mill in Coloma, California

culture. Approximately 25 off-reservation boarding schools, 157 on-reservations boarding schools, and 307 day schools were in operation by 1909 (Adams, 1995). A well-known phrase "Kill the Indian in order to save the Man" (Prucha, 1973) was a motto of Richard Pratt; he believed that by transferring the savage-born infant into a civilized environment, he would be able to possess a civilized language and habit (Prucha, 1973). These separated children were forced to cut their hair and give up their traditional clothing. They had to give up their meaningful native names and take English ones. They were taught to speak English, and were not allowed to speak their own native languages. Their own traditional religious practices were forcibly replaced with Christianity. They were taught that their cultures were inferior. Some teachers ridiculed and made fun of the students' traditions. These lessons humiliated the students and taught them to be ashamed of being American Indian.

Indian boarding schools usually imitated military life. Children were forced to cut their hair, wear uniforms, and march in formations. Rules were very strict and discipline was often harsh when rules were broken. The students learned math, science, and other academic subjects. They also learned trades and practical skills, such as agriculture, carpentry, printing, and cooking. Athletics were encouraged and children also took arts classes, such as music and drawing.

The government of the United States had a strong desire of their assimilation, but due to the issue of racism this process could not be achieved so easily and quickly. The result of this policy was to assimilate them into the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder of the larger society. The workload for the Native American boys and girls was different; Indian boys were involved in manual work and farming, as for the Indian girls, they were prepared for the domestic work, the intention of the government was to transform these girls into middle-class housewives, they learned: ironing, washing, sewing, etc.

The main purpose of educating Indian girls was to instruct and teach them particular norms and desires. The fundamental reasons for choosing cultural rather than physical genocide was connected to economic factors. German revolutionary, American statesmen and reformer Carl Schurz, pointed out that the cost to kill an Indian in warfare would reach to a million dollars, whereas to educate an Indian child for eight years would cost only 1.200 dollars. According to the Secretary of the Interior Henry Teller, it would cost 22 million dollars to wage war against Indians over a 10-year period, but would cost less than one-quarter of that amount to educate 30.000 children for a year (Prucha, 1973). Accordingly, administrators of these schools ran them as inexpensively as possible.

While studying at boarding schools, the Native American children were not provided with adequate food and medical care; they were overcrowded in these schools, starvation and disease were resulted in the death of the mass number of children.

Many of the American Indians which were attended boarding schools had negative memories of being punished for speaking their languages. They also remembered how the schools were run like military organizations and how this later made it easier for them to adapt to life in the American military (Native Words, Native Warriors, 2015).

The boarding schools had a bad effect on the self-es-

teem of Indian students and on the well-being of Native languages and cultures.

Sexual, physical, and emotional violence among American Indian children was uncontrolled, when the teachers were charged with abuse, boarding schools did nothing to investigate such cases. For example, one teacher John Boone who worked at Hopi Schools, had been charged for sexual abuse, according to FBI investigations in 1987, he had sexually abused more than 142 boys, but the administration of that school refused to investigate this case. Furthermore, it is important to note that this situation was not disputed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs until 1987 and it did not issue a policy to strengthen the background check of potential teachers until 1987 (Smith, 2004).

Current Condition – The Boarding School Healing Project

In 2014, there was developed the Boarding School Healing Project in the U.S. with the intent of building a movement to demand reparations for boarding school abuses. Such project has an important implication for addressing sexual violence and for reparation struggles as a whole. Together with exploring these implications, it is important to outline some of the tensions that emerged between indigenous peoples and African descendent groups over the issue of reparations as the context for this project.

Pamela Kingfisher, a noted expert in the study of reparations, has analyzed the tensions, (Zelizer, 2015).

The tensions between Native American people and the people of African descent over the issues of reparation. American Indians oppose the demand which obliges the U.S. government to give land to African Americans and other minority groups (people of color) (LLC, 2015).

According to Kingfisher, Native people believe it is unfair to petition the U.S. for land because the United States has no land to give, this land belongs the indigenous population of America, that they were there the first, and white settlers took this land by force. This disagreement became more harsh in March of 2000, when there was held a non-governmental organization preparatory meeting for the United Nations Conference on Racism in Quito, Ecuador, where African-American minority groups demanded self-reliance and independence over their ancestral land bases in the Americas.

Furthermore, they called for financial compensation to individual victims of slavery or other forms of discrimination. The existing condition created a kind of an obstacle (barrier) for the American Indians. And the main reason of this dates back to 1940s and 1950s, when the government of the United States initiated a policy of "termination" against Native people; it aimed to remove the tribal status of Native Americans and therefore end the collective control over their lands. One policy element was compensation for outstanding land claims. In 1946, the U.S. government established the Indian Claims Commission (ICC); its mission was to resolve land claims. The ICC's bias was clear from the start, when it became apparent that the agency could take away money spent by the U.S. government to massacre that tribe, or kidnap its children and put them into boarding school, from that tribe's award. The primary goal of the ICC was to settle land

claims by providing financial compensation, thereby freeing the U.S. government from any ongoing treaty obligations with Native nations. Compensation only further consolidated U.S. government control over Native lands.

Accordingly, this is the reason why Native Americans are unwilling to join a movement in which a common demand is financial compensation on an individual basis. However, it is important to realize, that any amount of financial compensation can't solve the problem over the landownership between Native people and the U.S. government.

As the history of neocolonialism shows us, we cannot achieve political sovereignty without economic sovereignty. As Smith points out, one of the primary reasons why indigenous peoples in the U.S. often do not articulate sovereignty struggles in terms of political independence from the U.S. and this is because indigenous peoples know that without a solid economic infrastructure, which the U.S. government has systematically destroyed for most tribes, political independence in and of itself could contribute to further economic devastation for Indian people. A successful struggle for sovereignty must incorporate a struggle for reparations (Smith, 2004, p. 95).

It is important to shape reparations as a human rights issue rather than as a civil rights issue; human rights are recognized under international law and are considered to be inalienable and independent on any particular government structure.

The Boarding School Healing Project, a coalition documenting the abuses that Native people faced in boarding schools and demanding justice from the U.S. government and churches, contributes a feminist perspective to reparations struggles. That is, the sexual violence committed by slave masters and by boarding school officials constitutes, in effect, state-sanctioned human rights violations. As a result of this systematic and long-term abuse, sexual and other forms of gender violence have been internalized within Native American communities. The challenge of reparations activists is to create a strategy that addresses a dangerous colonial legacy - violence within American Indian communities. Moreover, it is important to generate an analysis that frames gender violence as a continuing effect of state-sanctioned human rights violations so we can, in turn, challenge the mainstream anti-violence movement to confront the role of the state.

The issue of boarding school abuses forces us to see the connections between state violence and interpersonal violence. Violence in the communities was introduced through boarding schools. It is important to continue to uphold this issue through violence against women, child abuse and homophobia. Similarly, much of the sexual violence in African American communities is the colonial legacy of slavery. That is, under the slavery system, Black women were suffered raping by slave masters, who could violate them with impunity. Black men were also often forced by their masters to rape Black women (LLC, 2015).

Conclusion

Nowadays, most of the Indian Boarding schools are closed, but some of them still exist and remain. In comparison to the past, the level of abuse is not the same, however charges of physical and sexual abuses still remain (LLC, 2015).

It is not strange that the existing policies in schools violate a number of human rights such as: The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

As a result of these policies, the Native American communities suffer devastating, continuing effects of racism.

Existing conditions requires an active involvement of the U.S. government in implementing some repertory policies in order to address the problem of human rights violations in boarding school policies. The problems and challenges include: an increase physical, sexual, and emotional violence in Native communities, increase suicide rates, increased substance abuse, loss of language and loss of religious/cultural traditions, increased depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, and increase child abuse.

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