

The Community Dynamic of Education: Changing the lives of the urban Chicago youth
of American Indian families through charter schools.

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Abstract

After the Bureau of Indian Affairs removed children from their parents in order to better educate and assimilate them, these parents no longer trusted the US government and feared losing their children to the boarding school education¹. Due to the history of the American Indian education movement, American Indian children lost the culture of their heritage and were forcibly assimilated into society. Notably, the decision to assimilate the children could have accomplished a quality education for them if discrimination did not play a role in their lives. Unfortunately, the schools American Indian children attended then and now discriminate against them and make them suffer from an education of lesser quality. While the Indian Bureau of Education as well as Congress made several attempts to better the education of American Indian children, there continues to be a failure in the quality of their education. I propose looking to the history of American Indian culture as well as the history of charter schools used with their culture in order to address how urban American Indian youth in Chicago may become better educated through mimicking Alaska's re-inventing schools coalition.

Background

Up through the 1920's, American Indian children lacked an adequate education. Due to their socioeconomic status², they were unable to afford the kind of education they deserved.

¹ During the latter half of the nineteenth century, off-reservation boarding schools expanded and students attending them were often ridiculed once they returned to the reservation, having learned nothing of reservation life. The government was criticized for its commitment to assimilation and for subjecting American Indian children to an education that did not prepare them for life on the reservation (Szasz 10).

² Despite the "special legal status" of the American Indian population shown through the federal agency overseeing them, the US Bureau of Indian Affairs, the socioeconomic status of the tribes remains low because of the poverty they endure. While the status is

Furthermore, the rest of the county was not concerned with the education of their natives until the late 19th century when they took it upon themselves to assimilate the children in order to better their education and chance of survival. Unfortunately, the assimilation backfired by taking away their cultural knowledge and by not in fact bettering their education (Connell Szasz 9). Through the use of constitutional power, Congress controlled the American Indian families. In order to assimilate the children, Congress gave them the option of attending public schools, boarding schools, mission schools, or reservation schools (Connell Szasz 11)³. However, none of the options prevented the inferior training of the students (Connell Szasz 12).

Despite the options available to Indian American children, none were ideal in educating the children in a way that would maintain their values and prepare them for life in America. Public schools focused on the education of white children and even when there was an adequate amount of Indian American students present, the environment in which the schools existed prevented adequate funding. Funding was also a problem for reservation schools. While students were best educated by their own cultural relatives, it was impossible to fund enough of the schools to create a foundation for educational success (Connell Szasz 11)⁴. Mission and boarding schools removed children from their families and culture in a way that created unrest in the parents. The parents who did not object still understood that “it represented the most dangerous of all attacks on basic Indian values, the one most likely to succeed in the end because it aimed at the children, who had known little if any of the old life” (Connell Szasz 11). The problem quickly escalated to a loss of culture and a fear of separation.

improving, it still remains too low in terms of developing an adequate education (Focus 25).

³ The choice between schools was present, though the Carlisle Indian Schools was founded in 1879 and encouraged parents to choose boarding school for their children.

⁴ Funding was made difficult by the lack of money available to the tribes.

While members of the community attempted to rectify the situation, the ultimate result remained and there continued to be a loss of culture and community involvement among the tribes and their children⁵. In 1952, Hildegard Thompson, the director of the branch of education, aspired to lower the American Indian drop out rates and to increase their enrollment in schools (Connell Szasz 123). Fifteen percent of American Indian children were not enrolled in school (Connell Szasz 124). However, her good will did little to encourage the “Indian culture or self determination” the students really needed to develop educationally (Connell Szasz 124). The consequences to Thompson’s attempts were both a failure to encourage traditions and parental involvement (Connell Szasz 126). Furthermore, while the government developed 5,000 new spaces for education, 8,600 children still went unschooled. While the purpose of the of the program was to aid American Indian children in their efforts towards education and to encourage their enrollment in schools, as history would indicate, the American Indian children still suffered.

Fast-forward to 2001 when President George W. Bush implemented the No Child Left Behind Act⁶. Generally, the act used the spending clause to encourage schools to test students each year and to report their scores to the government (Lee). While the act affected all schools in the nation, American Indian children in particular suffered a great deal⁷. By creating a standard based on standardized testing combined with the inadequacy of their education, the American Indian children did not fair well. The test results indicated “a continuation of negative

⁵ The Meriam Report developed in 1926, informed the public of the problems within American Indian Education in boarding schools. Despite the report, there was an increase in the amount of American Indian children in attendance at boarding schools (Szasz 16-18).

⁶ Visit the website, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-08-13/news/ct-met-american-indians-20120813_1_american-indians-indian-reservation-culture-and-history to see an analysis on the attempts of this act to improve education.

⁷ Visit the website, <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2012/03/07/no-child-left-behind-act-bust-indian-country-10159>, to gain more knowledge on the specific effects of the No Child Left Behind Act on American Indian Children.

trends among minority students that had been evident for years” (Lee). Therefore, along with the historical disparity, the recent changes in education continue to prevent American Indian children from accessing the education they deserve.

Through the history of the American Indian culture, we see the difficulties faced by American Indian youth that still continues today. This history reaches into the present by indicating the reasons for distrust that hinders educational growth for the community. Turning now to the movement of American Indians to urban areas, we will see how American Indians strived to increase their socioeconomic status and were willing to make changes in their lives to do so.

Urban History and Chicago

With nearly 49,000 American Indians in Chicago, the city has a responsibility to aid the families and their children in becoming more educated while still maintaining their culture (Glanton 1). As shown above, nationally, American Indian tribes and families had to cope with the changing atmosphere of their lives and the educational consequences to their children. The Bureau of Indian Affairs developed a relocation program in 1948 that sent many American Indians to surrounding cities to live, as a way to increase their earning capacities (Waddell and Watson 176). Chicago was one of the main cities to receive influx from the relocation program⁸. Currently, many tribe members still choose to move their families to what they believe would be a more lucrative area, the city, an example of which is shown in Chicago through the movement from the Great Lakes region to city.

⁸ The Bureau of Indian Affairs created the Branch of Relocation at this time to encourage aid in the relocation of many American Indians. The cities involved included: Phoenix, Los Angeles, Denver, San Francisco, and Chicago (Watson 116).

While members of the American Indian community moved because they needed work and more economic stability for their families, moving to the impersonal city environment ended up eliminating much of their close-knit community culture (Waddell and Watson 117, 171). Furthermore, interviews developed through Merwyn S. Garbarino's ethnography of American Indians in Chicago showed that when children did not grow up on the reservations they saw themselves as "normal city dwellers" instead of a part of their tribe (Waddell and Watson 173)⁹. While the relocation disrupted their cultural dynamic, it also gave their children a chance at a better future and a better education. According to Garbarino's study, many families felt the opportunity was worth the loss (Waddell and Watson 176).

Unfortunately, while the positive aspects of living in the city did and still do exist, many of the young students do not attend school and instead remain truant for much of their educational careers. Some face discrimination, while others refuse to go due to "dislike of school, boredom, and overcrowding at home¹⁰" (Waddell and Watson 184-185). True to this day, there is a 15 percent national drop out rate of American Indians versus a five percent drop out rate for white children. In Chicago as of 2010, there were only 7, 500 total American Indian children in the schools available (National Indian Education Association). This would be about 1/6 of the total American Indian population in the city, an unlikely representation of the total amount of American Indian children in the city. Chicago reacts to the lack of American Indians attending school through its two main focal centers for the tribes, the American Indian Center and St. Augustine's Center for American

⁹ Garbarino researched the movement of families from reservations to Chicago and questioned them about the changes in their lives as well as how their families adapted. See her article, "Life in the city: Chicago," to read more of her analysis.

¹⁰ In order to afford living in the city, multiple families coexisted under one roof.

Indians¹¹. Through clubs and activities, the centers further the opportunities available to the children but it still is not enough. The first Americans deserve more from us. They deserve all we can give them and a sufficient and equal education.

The Move to Charter Schools

Alaska's Re-inventing Schools Coalition, funded through the Center for Native Education's Early College High School Initiative, developed a creative move to charter school education that could also benefit American Indian students in Chicago¹². A report by graduate students at Harvard University showed the coalition's effect on education through its study a handful of schools that used the conclusions of the coalition to benefit their students. Of the schools mentioned in the report, Klamath River Early College of Redwoods in Klamath, California, will be the focus of this analytical comparison. Klamath created a school for grades six through twelve that only had 42 students total and six faculty members (Ewing and Ferrick 14). Due to the elements focused on in the school, the students received a successful education tailored both to advancing toward college universities as well as understanding the roots of their culture and reincorporating their native values into their lives.

As identified by the report, one of the main focuses of this type of charter school is a highly individualized experience that creates college readiness on a performance-based model (Ewing and Ferrick 17). By focusing on each student as a person, the charter school showed their devotion to individual students reaching their goals related to both the

¹¹ See the center's website for more information on the types of activities available at <http://aic-chicago.org/>.

¹² For more information on Alaska's re-inventing schools coalition see <http://www.reinventingschools.org/about/a-risc-shared-vision-is/>.

national tests as well as their individual interests. The Klamoth school specifically developed courses in the basic subjects¹³ such as math, science, reading, and writing as well as courses more unique to the American Indian cultural background such as cultural awareness and expression, and the Yurok language (Ewing and Ferrick 17-18). College readiness was merely one aspect to the educational growth of these students. An awareness of the benefits of focusing on a combination of the basic elements of education as well as focusing on personal growth would help Chicago to improve American Indian education as well.

Along with the individualized focus of the Klamoth's charter school, the school also centered its teaching styles on community. The staff defines their community approach as a "love and logic model" that engages students by asking them to "solve problems together" (Ewing and Ferrick 23). The community approach allowed students to feel safe to volunteer their opinions in their environment and to trust their teachers to listen to and respect them for who they are. To maintain a sense of community, Klamoth used its small school and intimate classes as a way to continue to give individual attention and to allow each student the chance to express their views and their own personal knowledge (Ewing and Ferrick 28). Furthermore, the close relationships between the teachers and their students lead to mentorships that continued to encourage students and that continued to incorporate a sense of capability within them.

The charter school followed through with its emphasis on community inside and outside of the school. At Klamoth, students hosted "foster grandparents" so that they could

¹³ While some public schools provide foreign language classes, these charter schools specify in re-teaching students the roots of their specific culture. The elements of a basic education, while important to the process, are not considered as more important than the over all process of developing a knowledge of the basic elements of reservation life.

create relationships with the elders of their tribe and further dive into the history of their culture (Ewing and Ferrick 25). After losing so many of the aspects of their tribal lives during migration and the assimilation after, all of the American Indian students deserve to re-establish their roots through relationships with the older members of their particular community.

Each of the elements illustrated in this section of the Harvard report on the reinventing school's coalition, evidences the benefits of the charter school environment to students individually as well as to the community. Addressing the benefits of each element in a new light will establish grounds for the future possibilities of education for all minorities as well as for the future possibilities of charter schools in urban areas. It is this kind of innovation that will lead to a brighter future for all students, especially those in disparate situations.

Using Charter Schools In Chicago

While Harvard's article indicates that Alaska's Reinventing Schools Coalition was tested in the more common rural areas where American Indians lived on reservations, the program could also be tested in Chicago as an innovative way to better educate urban American Indians and remove the disparity evident in their lives compared to other city dwellers. The report even indicated that there are several well-known urban pan-tribal charter schools (Ewing and Ferrick 10). This fact encourages the analysis that follows. Even with the two community centers that do exist, more can and should be done to ensure the equality of the students no matter their ethnicity. Since the charter schools based on

Alaska's innovation proved to encourage equality in American Indian education on reservations, using the same model in Chicago may prove to do the same.

Since the American Indian population of students in Chicago is a limited amount, it would be possible to create a small number of schools with a limited number of students to keep the classrooms small and the teaching on a one on one level. The relationship between the educators and students in these schools is a focus of the charter school curriculum, as discussed in the previous section. Due to the relatively low amount of American Indian students in Chicago, it is probable that development of the schools would be possible. Each of the positive elements that occurred in the charter schools would likely occur in the Chicago based charter schools as well.

With a community that stretches into 77 neighborhoods, some of which are in a condensed area, Chicago could even be said to be the ideal location for a test run of American Indian charter schools in urban areas. A combination of the activities provided by the American Indian Center and the activities that would take place through the charter schools would better the community of American Indians as well as the Chicago community as a whole. Students would be encouraged to develop relationships with members of their community and would have the opportunity to aid in taking care of their home. By making students feel more connected to their surroundings, they will feel more equal and thus will more actively participate in the community and their schools, benefiting the Chicago area and tying their families firmly to the successes and failures of the city. Also, by fostering relationships between American Indian students in Chicago and their surrounding communities, as well as with the older members in their own unique niche, the hope would

be that fewer American Indian students would drop out of school and more would receive a college education which would again better their community as a whole.

Further, developing positive relationships with all members of the community, including tribal elders in the area, would reestablish the lost connection between the younger generation and their roots. After the turmoil the nation of American Indians went through as described in the previous sections, fostering these relationships would benefit the tribe and in turn the community as a whole by establishing positive feelings and encouraging growth. The disparity in education indicates an issue within both the tribal and overarching community and by following the approach illustrated the community may begin healing and the disparity may dissipate. This would allow a better-educated society over all that is both knowledgeable about the current ways of the country as well as knowledgeable as to the traditions of their ancestors.

Although community is a large aspect of the charter school life, the point to this project is to give American Indians back their identity. The autonomy created by the program would allow for a sense of achievement that would improve the rest of their lives. Personal goals were a focus of the schools analyzed in the Harvard report and alluded to the idea that students would become better leaders and thus better members of both their individual communities and the American community at large. The hope is that by focusing the school system on a more individual level, the drop out rates, at least for the American Indian population, will decline. Through the self-determination aspect of the charter schools, students would develop a deeper understanding of their dreams and goals and would thus become beneficial community members.

By looking to the education of a specific group at a particular time, it will be possible to use the information to enhance future research in the educational world. Perhaps by considering the ways in which charter schools may help a particular minority, it could become clear how charter schools could benefit other minorities or all students in the future. Looking forward, there is much that can and should be done to rectify the behavior of the past toward the American Indian tribes and a small urban step in Chicago could help direct others toward an encouraging path.

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