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Behind The Native American Achievement Gap

By Celeste Headlee
2012

In this radio interview, Celeste Headlee discusses how Native Americans are performing academically today with Anton Treuer. Truer is an American academic and author who focuses on Ojibwe language and American Indian studies. In addition to talking about education of Native Americans today, he also discusses how the education of Native Americans has changed over the years. As you read, take note of how the education of Native Americans has changed, continues to change, and the effects of this on their academic performance.

- [1] Over five million people in the U.S. claim some form of Native American identity, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. For Native American Heritage Month, guest host Celeste Headlee checks back in with author Anton Treuer about historic education challenges Native Americans have faced and what's being done to close the achievement gap.¹

CELESTE HEADLEE, HOST: This is TELL ME MORE, from NPR News. I'm Celeste Headlee. Michel Martin is away. Coming up, we'll bring you some mobile shopping tips, so you don't have to go into the crowds of Black Friday. That's in just a few minutes.



"Male Carlisle School Students 1879" by John N Choate is in the public domain.

But first, it's Thanksgiving, and it's Native American Heritage Month, as well. All month, we've focused on different aspects of Native American identity, politics and pop culture. Today, we're going to end our month-long series by examining the state of Native American education.

Once again, we're joined by Anton Treuer. He's a professor of Ojibwe History and Language at Bemidji State University. He's also the author of several books. His latest is "Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians but Were Afraid to Ask."

- [5] Welcome back to the program.

1. the difference in academic performance between different groups of students

ANTON TREUER: Thanks for having me on.

HEADLEE: I think when you say education to many native people, they often immediately think about boarding schools. In the 1970s, of course, there were about 60,000 Native American kids in those schools. But for the listeners who don't know what these boarding schools were, could you kind of explain?

TREUER: Sure. For Native Americans, education was a tool used to assimilate² and acculturate.³ Starting in the late 1800s, the United States government engineered an education policy for native people, and it required Native American children to attend residential boarding schools, where they lived at the schools. And it was designed to enable the government to remove kids from their home, culture and language and immerse them entirely in mainstream American language culture and customs.

In spite of a separation of church and state in the United States, the residential boarding schools for Native Americans taught native people to pray in the Christian tradition. They also severely punished and beat children for speaking tribal languages. Even for...

[10] **HEADLEE:** They made them cut their hair, even if it was part of their culture or tradition.

TREUER: That's right. They'd get a makeover on day one. So the long braids would be chopped off. Their traditional clothes would be burned up, medicine bundles⁴ burned up. And it must've been quite a culture shock for the people who went there.

HEADLEE: And for many people — for many kids, at least, that I've spoken to — scarring. I mean, we're talking about something that went on from the late 19th century through most of the 20th century. So do you think it's had a real impact on now two generations of Native kids, it is an impact that's still being felt?

TREUER: Oh, absolutely. I, you know, my grandmother went to one of these schools. Almost all of the grandparent generation throughout Indian country have been to these schools, and it had a very deep impact. At the time of World War II, most of Indian country had a 100 percent fluency rate in tribal languages. That's over 500 distinct tribal languages being spoken in the United States and Canada.

Today, there are only 183 tribal languages spoken. Of those, only 20 are spoken by children. So you are likely — you know, if you have any listeners who are in their 20s, 30s and 40s, you

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2. **Assimilate (verb)** to conform to the customs, attitudes, and habits of a group or nation
 3. to modify a culture of an individual or group of people by adapting to or borrowing traits form another culture
 4. A "medicine bundle," also known as sacred bundle, was a wrapped collection of sacred items held by a designated carrier.

know, they are likely to see 163 tribal languages in the United States go extinct in their lifetimes. And of those remaining 20 languages, there are really only four that have large, vibrant populations of speakers where, you know, we're sure that they'll be here 100 years from now. And the others are — you know, could really go either way.

- [15] So the impact on tribal languages was profound.⁵ But imagine, too, the impact on human beings: tuberculosis⁶ was rampant.⁷ Schools like Haskell and Carlyle kept cemeteries for the children. I don't know how many of you could imagine sending your children to school and not even getting the bodies back for burial. But that was the impact.

HEADLEE: And I want to remind our listeners, A, that these were mandatory. They were compulsory. And B, we're not talking about ancient history. As I said, the largest number of Native American kids at these boarding schools was in the 1970s, the mid-1970s. And yet, Anton Treuer, many people will say well, look, that was 50 years ago. How can this possibly be to blame for any problems with education in tribal country?

TREUER: Well, on many different levels. First of all, if you could imagine children going to these schools, and after all of it, you know, they're supposed to provide economic opportunity. But hello, there was a, you know, racial barrier to gainful employment for people of color in the United States.

Upon graduation from these schools, the kids didn't fit in as adults in mainstream American society, in spite of their knowledge of English language, so they drifted back home to the reservations, where sometimes they couldn't even recognize or speak the same language as their own parents.

And although we are now reforming⁸ the way we do boot camp for adults who volunteer for the Armed Services today because, you know, being yelled at, sworn at, having poor nutrition or sleep deprivation are considered bad things, that's for adults who volunteer. What if it's little children? So a lot of the problems that we have in Indian Country are directly connected to our negative experience, being beaten by our educators.

- [20] **HEADLEE:** If you're just joining us, this is TELL ME MORE, from NPR News. I'm Celeste Headlee. On this Thanksgiving Day, I'm speaking with Anton Treuer, the author of "Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians but Were Afraid to Ask." He's our guest for a month-long series of conversations during Native American Heritage Month.

And this might be one of those things that people don't want to ask about, because we don't

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- 5. **Profound** (*adjective*) very great or intense
 - 6. an infectious disease that may affect almost any tissue on the body, especially the lungs
 - 7. **Rampant** (*adjective*) spreading unchecked
 - 8. **Reform** (*verb*) to make changes in order to improve something

want to think about it. And it's difficult now to even look at the statistics of how it's still affecting native country. I mean, Native Americans have a lower overall high school graduation rate than the rest of the country, and a much, much lower college graduation rate. I went to Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, and I know there were a lot of native kids that came in as freshmen and never finished as seniors. Why?

TREUER: What it really boils down to is that, in spite of it all, although the, you know, the residential boarding school system has been reformed, although not eliminated — believe it or not, there are still four Indian boarding schools run by the United States federal government today. They've been reformed, so they're not beating people for the speaking of their tribal languages anymore, but they've kind of survived as a vestigial⁹ remnant of this experience.

But in spite of all it, going to school native in this country really still means getting an assimilation. You go to school. You get a sugarcoated version of Christopher Columbus and the first Thanksgiving. And you get very few other opportunities, even if you're native, to learn about yourself. And it's not the intention of people who design curriculum standards or those who teach it to out or marginalize¹⁰ others, but it is the effect.

And I can share one counterexample, because we can point to a lot of things that don't work, like 50 percent of the Native population are failing state-mandated tests in English and math in this country — half. But I'll share a story about something that is working, because to me that really tells a lot.

- [25] On the Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation, which is located in Wisconsin, there's a public school system nearby in the town of Hayward. And their statistics for the Native population mirror the national average. Around half of the kids were failing state-mandated tests in English and math.

There's a group of people who created a tribal language immersion school. So they said: We will meet all state-mandated curriculum guidelines. We'll just use the tribal language to deliver the material to the kids. To make a long story short, because there are a lot of things that they did over there to make that happen. To make a long story short, for 13 years in a row, the tribal language immersion school has had a 100 percent pass rate in state-mandated tests in English, administered in English.

HEADLEE: Wow.

TREUER: And their teachers teach them in Ojibwe.

HEADLEE: You know, Anton, since you mentioned Thanksgiving and Christopher Columbus

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9. **Vestigial** (*adjective*) forming a very small remnant of something that was once much larger
10. **Marginalize** (*verb*) to assign someone to a powerless or unimportant position within a society or group

earlier on, and, you know, we're celebrating Thanksgiving, I've got to ask you: For the rest of the country — you know, Native Americans are a pretty small population of the America. How can we celebrate Thanksgiving, which honors the native half of that holiday?

- [30] **TREUER:** Yeah, it's a great question. You know, I think, really, the challenge for us, and the one that we should be trying to meet, is that Thanksgiving is one of those rare opportunities where there's a little bit of attention being directed at the native experience. So we can use that as an entry point to try to deliver a deeper understanding of the first people of the land.

Just to juxtapose¹¹ a couple of points, you know, we all know the kind of typical Thanksgiving story and scenario. And there are parts in the, you know, mythologized version of Thanksgiving that resonate and are true with the historical experience.

But it's also true that King Philip, who was a Native American chief in New England, was killed by the Puritans and his head was put on a pike outside the village of Plymouth, where it was kept for 20 years.

So when you take that one little fact, maybe at Thanksgiving, it provides an opportunity for us to dig a little deeper into exactly what happened and why, look at ways that native people have shared things with the rest of the world and helped make it a better place, and look at ways that, you know, all human beings of all races have been really hard on each other throughout history and acknowledging that part of the human experience and the particular experience of native people as victims of genocide¹² in many places, I think we can arrive at a deeper understanding that will make us all not only more knowledgeable, but able to lead a better life and hopefully make this country a lot better place.

HEADLEE: Can you tell us what you do for Thanksgiving, how you celebrate?

- [35] **TREUER:** Oh, you know, honestly, I have nine children, and we have a very large extended family. So we take the two days off from school and the long extended weekend and we, you know, we kind of do the, you know, like, the 12 days of Christmas, we kind of have 12 days of Thanksgiving to go around and take advantage of the opportunity to visit and meet with people.

I also do use that time to tell my children about different perspectives on history. And one of the things I really try to emphasize a lot with my own children are our own cultural values about expressing thanks and reciprocity.¹³ We have a lot of different ceremonies that revolve around our fall: harvest of wild rice and hunting, fishing and so forth. And so we try to do

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11. **Juxtapose (verb)** to place or deal with close together for contrasting effect
 12. **Genocide (noun)** the deliberate killing of a large group of people, especially those of a particular ethnic group or nation
 13. **Reciprocity (noun)** a relationship built on cooperation or exchange between two people or groups

Thanksgiving from, you know, a very Ojibwa-specific point of view.

HEADLEE: What is an Ojibwa menu?

TREUER: Traditional Ojibwa food would be wild rice, wild game, so ducks, geese, venison¹⁴ and so forth – moose meat. And then lots of different kinds of berries, maple syrup. And those are kind of traditional staples in this area. And we do practice harvesting all of those things with the children. So one of the nice things for them is that they get to see the fruits of their own labor put on the table, and we use those entry points to kind of develop the children from dependence to providers for the people.

HEADLEE: How do you say thank you so much in Ojibwe?

[40] **TREUER:** (Ojibwe spoken)

HEADLEE: Well, what you said, Anton Treuer. Thanks.

TREUER: Thank you.

HEADLEE: Anton Treuer, professor of Ojibwe at Bemidji State University. He's also the author of several books. His latest: "Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians but Were Afraid to Ask." He joined us from Northern Community Radio in Bemidji, Minnesota.

Thank you so much for speaking with us all this month of Native American Heritage Month.

[45] **TREUER:** Thank you. It's been my pleasure.

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14. deer meat

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. While education of Native Americans has improved over the years, Native Americans continue to be isolated from their culture and history in the classroom.
 - B. While the boarding schools of the 1900s were traumatic for Native Americans, it is unlikely that this is the reason the current generation is struggling in school.
 - C. While a majority of the Native American boarding schools have been eradicated, the few that continue to use violence to force assimilation negatively impact the whole community.
 - D. Native Americans often don't succeed in school because they have a drastically different perspective of historical events in America.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "And yet, Anton Treuer, many people will say well, look, that was 50 years ago. How can this possibly be to blame for any problems with education in tribal country?" (Paragraph 16)
 - B. "What it really boils down to is that, in spite of it all, although the, you know, the residential boarding school system has been reformed, although not eliminated — believe it or not, there are still four Indian boarding schools run by the United States federal government today." (Paragraph 22)
 - C. "But in spite of all it, going to school native in this country really still means getting an assimilation. You go to school. You get a sugarcoated version of Christopher Columbus and the first Thanksgiving." (Paragraph 23)
 - D. "To make a long story short, for 13 years in a row, the tribal language immersion school has had a 100 percent pass rate in state-mandated tests in English, administered in English." (Paragraph 26)

3. PART A: How do paragraphs 13-14 contribute to the development of ideas in the text?
- A. They show that despite past hardships, it is likely that Native American culture will fully recover.
 - B. They show how Native American culture continues to be impacted by forced assimilation that occurred in the past.
 - C. They show how older Native Americans continue to be impacted by past forced assimilation.
 - D. They show how Native American children of today are responsible for keeping their languages alive.
4. Part B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "Almost all of the grandparent generation throughout Indian country have been to these schools, and it had a very deep impact." (Paragraph 13)
 - B. "At the time of World War II, most of Indian country had a 100 percent fluency rate in tribal languages." (Paragraph 13)
 - C. "So you are likely — you know, if you have any listeners who are in their 20s, 30s and 40s, you know, they are likely to see 163 tribal languages in the United States go extinct in their lifetimes. (Paragraph 14)
 - D. "there are really only four that have large, vibrant populations of speakers where, you know, we're sure that they'll be here 100 years from now. (Paragraph 14)
5. How does the education of Native Americans today compare to their education during the late 19th century and 20th century?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In your opinion, how does this text emphasize the importance of knowing multiple perspectives of a historical event?

2. In the context of the text, how has American changed over time? How has America's treatment of Native Americans changed over time? In what ways does America need to further change in its approach to its history with Native Americans? Cite evidence from the text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. In the context of the text, what is the goal of education? How do the goals of educating Native Americans in the past compare to today's goals? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

4. In the context of the text, can you change your identity? What was the effect of forced assimilation? Cite evidence from the text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

5. What are the effects of prejudice? How were the boarding schools that Native Americans sent to a result of prejudice? Do you think prejudice against Native Americans continues to exist today? How could this be combatted?