Assimilation Through Education

The United States has a long-standing tension between preserving the cultural heritage of its diverse population and creating a homogenous "American" culture. Indian populations, however, have been outside such consideration. Indians have weathered conscious attempts to replace their traditional ways with those sanctioned by the U.S. government, such as federal programs removing them from their lands and the destruction of their livelihoods and way of life...

U.S. school for Indians, Pine Ridge, S.D.
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/99613795/

Historical Background

Education programs were instituted in the late 19th century to remove Indian children from the influence of tribal traditions and offer them a proper education. To make Indian children patriotic and productive citizens, government-run boarding schools, reservation boarding schools and day schools were introduced. These schools strictly adhered to the speaking of only the English language. They were conducted with military-like schedules and discipline, and emphasized farming and other manual skills. The daily schedule was split between academics and vocational training. By 1893, such education for Indian children was mandatory.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs ceased to support this form of education in the 1920s. Complaints about costs, substandard living conditions, poor medical care, and poor teaching practices contributed to the demise of this strict, mandatory program. The 1930s were a time of shifting educational philosophy that corresponded to other changes in federal Indian policy. Many Indian children were enrolled in public schools and, as the states assumed control of their education, classroom lessons began to reflect the diversity of Indian cultures.

Suggestions for Teachers

Teachers may use these Library of Congress primary source documents to present viewpoints on the education and assimilation of Indian peoples from the 1880-1920s. Students can learn the perspective of government officials by reading their annual reports and analyzing the Indian schools' population statistics.

Students can observe photographs of the Indian students, and consider both what they objectively see and what they subjectively feel about these images. They can study the movie depicting declining Indian Territory, as well as the map of the resulting reservation system.

Elementary school class of Indian students
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/90705751

Students can hear a musical Indian performance and see the pageantry of a demonstration Indian battle presentation. They can compare and contrast the mixed messages in these materials: the desire to eliminate Indian culture and a public fascination with a romanticized version of this culture. Magazine articles and the short story from the Federal Writers' Project provide first-person views that enhance an understanding of beliefs of the time.

Additional Resources

The Changing Face of America: Immigration - Presentation

http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/

http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/native_american.html

American Indian Reservation Controversies

http://www.loc.gov/classroommaterials/lessons/reservation/

Indian Boarding Schools

http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/indianschools/

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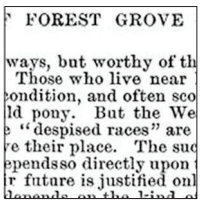
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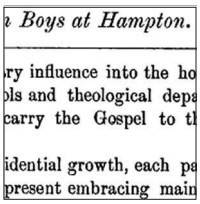
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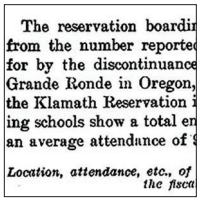
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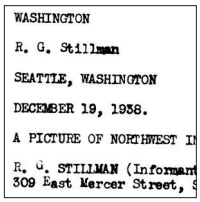
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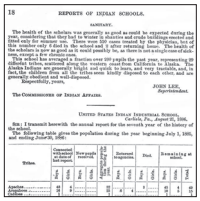

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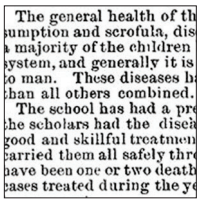

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