

Diné (Navajo) Youth Experiences in Education from 1928 to 1946

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A preliminary research report

“The real goals of education are not ‘reading, writing, and arithmetic’ – not even teaching Indians to speak English, though that is important – but sound health, both mental and physical, good citizenship in the sense of an understanding participation in community life, ability to earn one’s own living honestly and efficiently in a socially worthwhile vocation, comfortable desirable home and family life, and good character. These are the real aims of education.”¹

In 1928, a group of researchers from the Brookings Institution released *The Problem of Indian Administration*, popularly known as the Meriam Report. This report heavily criticized the Bureau of Indian Affairs (B.I.A.) and its insufficient supervision of Native American matters. Along with other critical topics on U.S. and Native American relations, this report examined the disturbing conditions of boarding schools intended to assimilate Native American youth. This report led to significant changes in U.S. federal policies for Native Americans between 1928 to 1946. During the 1930s, newly appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier and other progressive officials believed they understood how to accurately fix the “Indian Problem.” Their new policies, however, greatly troubled some Native American communities, including the Diné community. Although the Meriam Report praised some of the educational efforts made on the Navajo Reservation, the new policies were assimilationist and continued to hinder Diné youth education because officials still wanted to “civilize” Native Americans. Drawing mainly on research in archival primary documents, this initial paper seeks to uncover and interpret Diné youth experiences during this change. These primary sources place Diné experiences within the context of Native American education from boarding school periods through changing U.S. federal policies between 1928 to 1946.²

¹ *The Meriam Report on Indian Administration and the Survey of Conditions of the Indians in the U.S. Archives Unbound*, [Electronic Resource] (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale, a Part of Cengage Learning, 2012), 393.

² Since I am neither Native American nor of Diné decent, I benefited from the scholarship of Diné historian Jennifer Denetdale and scholar Lloyd Lee about Diné and other Native American cultures. Both discuss how non-Native American scholars have and should

The Diné and Education-Based Assimilation Efforts

Native American history within the United States has been shaped by colonialism and the racist idea that these communities need to be “civilized.” Diné have been both the continuous victims of colonialization and activists who have challenged its effects. Distrust of U.S. federal policies lingered in the aftermath of Diné’s nineteenth-century experiences, especially the Long Walk, which included horrible mistreatment of the Diné community, and the Treaty of Bosque Redondo of 1868.³ This treaty agreement with the U.S. government, which allowed the Diné community to return to their homeland and establish the Navajo Reservation, included provisions for education. Such treaty provisions along with the appealing lands of the Diné became ideal ways for Anglo Americans to control Native American communities and “civilize” these “savages” into the American society.⁴ The reservation system also led Diné and other Native American groups to rely on the U.S. government for necessities, which was a major goal of Native American assimilation.⁵

Although the reservation system colonized Native Americans, this effort at control did not assimilate them into the American society. Faced with this failure, which federal officials called the “Indian problem,” the U.S. government increasingly realized that it would be cheaper to “civilize” Native Americans through a pedagogical approach as they also realized their previous methods were not working.⁶ As part of the Treaty

write about Native American pasts in order to provide thorough information. Following this guidance, I will be using Diné rather than Navajo throughout my research, since Diné is preferred term used to identify the people of Navajo descent. See also Jennifer Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History: The Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007); Peter Iverson, *Diné: A History of the Navajos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002); Lloyd Lee, "Navajo Cultural Identity: What Can the Navajo Nation Bring to the American Indian Identity Discussion Table?" *Wicazo Sa Review* 21, no. 2 (2006): 79-103.

³ The Long Walk in 1864, a forced deportation of the Diné community from their land in Arizona to Bosque Redondo, New Mexico, was a horrific tragedy led by Indian agent Kit Carson. This event caused an immense distrust against Anglo Americans, which is heavily noted in the shared stories of Diné. For more information on Diné history and the Long Walk, see Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History*, 11-12, 62-74, 77-78, 85; Thomas E. Sheridan, *Arizona: A History* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012), 78, 308.

⁴ David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 16-21.

⁵ Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 16-17.

⁶ Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert, *Education beyond the Mesas: Hopi Students at Sherman Institute, 1902-1929* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 34-35; Robert A. Trennert, *The Phoenix Indian School: Forced Assimilation in Arizona, 1891-1935* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 4-5, 22, 57.

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of Bosque Redondo, the Diné agreed to send their children (age 6-16) to school to receive an American education. In doing so, the U.S. government agreed to provide one teacher for every 30 students.⁷ In 1887, the General Allotment Act – widely known as the Dawes Act – was established and included a reform in Native American youth education.⁸ This reform included assimilationist pedagogies for the youth which would allow them to easily join mainstream America and rid them of their cultural identities.

These education-based assimilation efforts built on the boarding school system. Army General Richard Henry Pratt popularized the concept of boarding schools by establishing Carlisle Industrial School in Pennsylvania in 1879.⁹ After Pratt spent time with imprisoned Native Americans in Fort Marion, Florida, he believed he could teach Native American youth to become proper American citizens and completely remove them from their cultures.¹⁰ This off-reservation boarding school provided an ideal structure for other U.S. boarding schools that demonstrated how to properly assimilate Native Americans. Pratt sincerely believed that the U.S. government could “kill the Indian in him and save the man.”¹¹ His strong belief that Native Americans could be assimilated into modern society was thoroughly approved of by Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas J. Morgan, (1889-1893).¹² Morgan had a key role in developing boarding schools once the Dawes Act was

⁷ "Treaty with the Navaho, 1868," Charles J. Kappler, *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties*, Vol II, *Treaties* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1904), 1017; Brayboy, Bryan McKinley Jones and K. Tsianina Lomawaima, "Why Don't More Indians Do Better in School? The Battle between U.S. Schooling & American Indian/Alaska Native Education," *Daedalus* 147, no. 2 (2018): 82-94, 86.

⁸ Sheridan, *Arizona*, 306-307. The Dawes Act was created to distribute land allotments located on reservations to Native Americans. Although this act seemed to be beneficial for Native Americans, it was ultimately created to sell or give the remaining, superior land for agriculture and farming to Anglo-Americans, who were greedily seeking valuable land from reservations. "The Crisis in Indian Affairs," Radio Address by John Collier, 7 May 1934, AZ 132, Box 6, Folder 4, Berard Haile papers, 1893-1961, University of Arizona Libraries Special Collections, Tucson, Arizona.

⁹ Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 36-59; Trennert, *Phoenix Indian School*, 4-8.

¹⁰ Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 36-51; Clifford Trafzer, Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert, and Lorene Sisquoc, *The Indian School on Magnolia Avenue: Voices and Images from the Sherman Institute* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2012), 2-3.

¹¹ Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 52; Lorene Sisquoc, Jean A. Keller, and Clifford E. Trafzer, *Boarding School Blues Revisiting American Indian Educational Experiences* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 1; Trafzer et al., *Indian School on Magnolia Avenue*, 21.

¹² Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 61-63; Diana Meyers Bahr, *The Students of Sherman Indian School: Education and Native Identity since 1892* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 9.

enacted, including the Arizona Territory's Phoenix Indian School, which opened in 1892.¹³ The Dawes Act solidified the idea that education was the path for all Native Americans to achieve proper assimilation.¹⁴

Although some Diné youth attended off-reservation boarding schools, most pursued education on the reservation at well-established missionary schools and day schools.¹⁵ There, they faced similar assimilationist efforts – regimented schedules, English language, gendered education – and an emphasis on “Americanized” religious practice and beliefs.¹⁶ For example, at St. Michael's Missionary School and Protestant Fort Defiance School, Diné youth were forbidden from practicing their native religion and were forced to conform to a Catholic or Protestant religion.¹⁷ Both off-reservation federal boarding schools and on-reservation missionary schools shared the essential goal to “civilize” Native American youth and join the Anglo-American society. To complete this transformation, most Native American boarding schools followed similar rules for implementing the American way of life, which included military-style training and teaching of the English language.¹⁸ This militaristic structure was intended to provide the youth with good manners, proper etiquette, good hygiene, and discipline, characteristics which prejudiced U.S. officials believed Native Americans did not possess.¹⁹

Pratt and Morgan vehemently believed Native American youth must be wholly removed from their culture for complete assimilation.²⁰ The boarding schools quickly stripped the youth of their physical and cultural identities once they entered: cutting their hair to fit an American style, removing their traditional clothing, and banning any use of their

¹³ Trennert, *Phoenix Indian School*, 33, 37-38.

¹⁴ Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 18-21.

¹⁵ These types of schools varied by how they educated Native American students, but all had the same goal of assimilating the students into an American culture. By 1900, there were 153 boarding schools and 154 day schools in the United States controlled by the federal government, with a majority of Native American adolescents located in off-reservation boarding schools, Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 58.

¹⁶ Trennert, *Phoenix Indian School*, 6.

¹⁷ Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 23, 164-173.

¹⁸ Sakiestewa Gilbert, *Education Beyond the Mesas*, 39; Trennert, *Phoenix Indian School*, 6, 115-119.

¹⁹ Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 117-124; Trafzer et al., *Indian School on Magnolia Avenue*, 5, Trennert, *Phoenix Indian School*, 47-48.

²⁰ Donna Deyhle emphasizes how Diné culture and their individual success is based around family and cultural networks. Donna Deyhle, "Navajo Youth and Anglo Racism: Cultural Integrity and Resistance," *Harvard Educational Review* 65, no. 3 (1995): 403.

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native languages.²¹ Morgan believed that boarding schools should be located off reservations to separate Native American youth from their culture and their families.²² Historian Sakiestewa Gilbert states that “the education at Sherman Institute aimed at transforming Indian pupils to think, behave, work, and look less like Native people, and more like white Protestant Americans.”²³ Once the youth were taken away from their parents, either by force or in agreement, their former cultural identity was forcefully replaced by an American identity.

After years of forcing Native American youth to assimilate into the American society through education, U.S. officials realized that this strategy was not actually converting them to have an American identity. The failure of boarding schools contributed to the creation of the 1928 Meriam Report.²⁴ The progressive group of researchers and reformers who crafted the report performed a two-year study, initiated by Secretary of the Interior Hubert Work, on government Indian policies.²⁵ Specifically, this dense report uncovered how the B.I.A. failed to properly solve the “Indian problem” that was thought to have been resolved by the Dawes Act. One key component that arose from the report was the failed education system in boarding schools. Will Carson Ryan, Jr., a leader in the committee on assessing boarding schools for the Meriam Report, and later Director of Education for the B.I.A., noticed that “the most fundamental need in Indian education is a change in point of view ... [to be] less concerned with a conventional school system and more with the understanding of human beings.”²⁶ Ryan concluded that the biased curricula taught to Native American youth needed to be drastically changed with courses that incorporated their culture, which

²¹ Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 100-112; Trafzer et al., *Indian School on Magnolia Avenue*, 25.

²² Trennert, *Phoenix Indian School*, 10.

²³ Sakiestewa Gilbert, *Education Beyond the Mesas*, xxi.

²⁴ As noted earlier, this document was published by Lewis Meriam and a group of researchers from the Brookings Institute, previously known as the Institute for Government Research. James Stuart Olson and Raymond Wilson, *Native Americans in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 100-103.

²⁵ Olson, et al., *Native Americans*, 108; Margaret Szasz, *Education and the American Indian: The Road to Self-determination Since 1928*, 3rd ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 16.

²⁶ *Meriam Report*, 366. For more information on Ryan and his contributions to the Meriam Report and Native American education, see Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, 16-17, 23-55.

would allow them to advance in education and ultimately American society.²⁷

This momentous research led to a significant change in Native American policies, specifically with the help of John Collier, appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1933 to 1945 by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Within the Native American education system, Collier, along with Directors of Education W. Carson Ryan, Jr. (1930-1935) and Willard Beatty (1936-1951), wanted to incorporate Native American cultures into pedagogical settings by allowing the practice of their traditions, religious beliefs, and languages.²⁸ While Pratt and Morgan believed Native American youth should be removed from their reservations and cultures to assimilate them into society, Collier and Ryan believed Native Americans should stay on their reservations and openly practice their culture to aid in the growth of their communities.²⁹ As historian Kevin Whalen argues, Collier “sought to preserve indigenous cultures by keeping indigenous peoples tied to their reservation homelands.”³⁰

New Commissioner of Indian Affairs Collier gained the trust of both the President and Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes to make these significant changes, which Collier believed Native American federal policies desperately needed.³¹ In 1934, Collier proposed the Wheeler-Howard Act, generally known as the Indian Reorganization Act, which laid out changes intended to replace the Dawes Act of 1887.³² Educational reform was a significant part of Collier’s “Indian New Deal.” He advocated integrating Native American traditions, arts and crafts, music, languages, and the teaching of Native American history into their school curricula. Collier believed incorporating their heritage into their education system would enable Native Americans to prosper in their education.³³ Collier pursued the Meriam Report’s suggestion by replacing boarding schools with day schools which would also act as community

²⁷ Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, 23.

²⁸ Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, 3; Kevin Whalen, *Native Students at Work: American Indian Labor and Sherman Institute's Outing Program, 1900-1945* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 23, 61-62.

²⁹ Whalen, *Native Students at Work*, 121.

³⁰ Whalen, *Native Students at Work*, 128.

³¹ Lawrence C. Kelly, *The Navajo Indians and Federal Indian Policy, 1900-1935* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1968), 155; Olson, et al., *Native Americans*, 108-109.

³² Collier referred to this act as the Indian New Deal. Olson et al., *Native Americans*, Chapter 5.

³³ Whalen, *Native Students at Work*, 127.

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centers for reservations.³⁴ On the Navajo Reservation, these centers would be the hub for Diné communities and would contain various educational initiatives, including vocational skills for Diné adults.³⁵ Collier required day schools on the reservation to teach Diné how to properly raise their livestock and to practice soil erosion control.³⁶ Collier also hired anthropologists to understand and teach Native cultures, and individuals such as Father Berard Haile to teach Collier's concepts to the Diné in their own language.³⁷

Although Collier, Ryan, and other progressive U.S. officials during this period believed they were aiding Native Americans by integrating their cultures back into their education system, problems remained. One problem was the continuing belief that assimilation into U.S. culture remained the overall educational goal. John Collier firmly disagreed with aspects of the assimilationist pedagogy that the U.S. government had been forcing on Native Americans and the removal of the youth from their communities to boarding schools. He realized that Native Americans were losing their cultural identity and claimed that "if their and the President's plea be not granted, these tribes cannot continue to exist."³⁸ Unfortunately, Collier seemed to have included Native Americans' cultural identities into federal policies with the intention of more easily introducing American ideas into Native American societies. It was merely another way of "civilizing" Native Americans.³⁹

³⁴ Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, 23-24.

³⁵ Whalen, *Native Students at Work*, 130.

³⁶ In the 1930s, the Navajo Reservation had forty to fifty government day schools constructed. Yet by 1940, only about one-third of Diné youth were attending school, Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, 63.

³⁷ Father Haile was heavily involved with Diné and was respected by the community. He learned about their culture and the Navajo language in order to share Collier's ideas, with Diné individuals who could not properly read and write in Diné. For more information on Father Haile and his involvement with Collier and Diné, see Berard Haile papers, 1893-1961, AZ 132, University of Arizona Libraries Special Collections, Tucson, Arizona. For more information on Collier's push for Native American languages into new Native American federal policies and education, see Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, 73-76. For more information about Collier's hiring and use of anthropologists, see "Anthropology and the Indian Service Program," packet, 1934-1935, Berard Haile Papers, AZ 132, box 6, folder 4, University of Arizona Libraries Special Collections, Tucson, Arizona; "The Crisis in Indian Affairs," 7 May 1934, Berard Haile papers, University of Arizona Libraries Special Collections, Tucson, Arizona; Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, 55-59. 73-76.

³⁸ "The Crisis in Indian Affairs," 7 May 1934, Berard Haile papers, University of Arizona Libraries Special Collections, Tucson, Arizona.

³⁹ As a generalized term, cultural identity is defined as an individual's sense of belonging to their culture. Although this term cultural identity is often used, especially in the

Another problem was the continuation of the off-reservation boarding schools. Although one of the main objectives for the Meriam Report and Collier was to abolish the concept of boarding schools, the highest enrollment rate for boarding schools was seen in the early 1930s, during the Great Depression.⁴⁰ This high enrollment was largely due to the economic circumstances of the period, such as decreased financial stability for most American families. Native Americans also felt this devastating loss. Although many Diné protested boarding schools, some also recognized that sending their children to boarding schools during this time was necessary for their children's survival since these schools had proper facilities and food.⁴¹ In the end, Collier's plan to abolish all boarding schools was unsuccessful and by 1941, there were still 49 operating boarding schools.⁴² Many of these schools, such as the Sherman Institute in Riverside, California, became active again during the Special Navajo Five Year Program enacted in 1946, which reasserted off-reservation boarding schools for Diné.⁴³

reviewed literature, feeling a sense of belonging to a certain culture varies for different groups of people. Lloyd Lee, who identifies as Diné, defines cultural identity among Diné to mean an individual's connection to their culture through learning their history by understanding their native language, traditions, and most importantly stories. Adding stories as a form of identity to one's culture may seem out of place, yet the telling of stories hold an immense value for the Diné community. See Lee, "Navajo Cultural Identity." As a Diné woman, Jennifer Denetdale shares how valuable stories are for her culture, as doing so passes down histories and cultural values to future generations. See Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History*.

⁴⁰ Bahr, *Students of Sherman Indian School*, 35; Tsianina K. Lomawaima, *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 6.

⁴¹ Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, 118.

⁴² Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, 60.

⁴³ In 1946, the federal government proposed an educational reform called the Special Navajo Five Year Program, due to pressures from the Diné tribal council who felt obligated to properly educate their children after many of their young boys and men fought in the WWII. There were complaints of inadequate government schools that were either too far, too crowded, or impossible to reach considering a significant portion of the roads on the Navajo Reservation were unpaved. This program repurposed off-reservation boarding schools and, once again, Native cultures were restricted. The Special Navajo Five Year Program had exact characteristics of traditional boarding school curriculums by removing Diné youth from their reservation, restricting their use of cultural identity, and assimilating them into urban communities. This program offered Diné courses that were sufficient enough to allow them to work in industrial or domestic settings, but not enough education to enable graduates to be admitted into colleges or advanced trades. On the other hand, Peter Iverson argues that Diné leaders wanted this program in order to teach their youth American ideas that would allow them to compete with mainstream America while also helping their people and the Navajo Reservation. The program ran from 1946 to 1961 and enrolled over 50,000 Diné students in eleven different off reservation boarding

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Although Collier did create significant changes that benefited several Native American communities, his reputation among Diné weakened greatly due to the Navajo Livestock Reduction program which began in 1933.⁴⁴ Collier assumed he knew the changes Native Americans desperately needed and imposed his beliefs on their policies by refusing to understand their traditions and cultural values.⁴⁵ For the Diné community in particular, the Navajo Livestock Reduction program fostered great distrust between the federal government and the Diné.⁴⁶ Although this program appeared to have nothing in common with the changes Collier implemented for Native American education, this devastating event caused the Diné community to resent Collier and reject any changes he insisted on establishing for them, including education reform.⁴⁷

Diné Voices in the Midst of Educational Reform

What impacts did these changing U.S. federal policies of Native American education have on Diné youth from 1928 to 1946, and how did Diné youth experience those changes?⁴⁸ Based on my preliminary

schools. Unfortunately, this educational reform, just like the previous changes in Native American education, failed to properly educate Diné students. These radical education beliefs imposed on Native Americans since the nineteenth century is still largely felt today. For more information on this program, see Bahr, *The Students of Sherman Indian School*, 49-60; Iverson, *Diné*, 190-194; Trafzer, et al., *The Indian School on Magnolia Avenue*, chapter 6.

⁴⁴ Jessica L. Bertolozzi, "Environmental Programs and Material Culture: The 1934 Livestock Reduction Program and Weaving Among the Navajo," *Research Papers*, paper 195. http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/gs_rp/195. 2012; Iverson, *Diné*, Chapter 5.

⁴⁵ Historian Peter Iverson understood that the Diné "would have to summon new courage and new determination to confront yet another man who thought he knew what was best for them. His name was John Collier." Iverson, *Diné*, 136, 144-151, 174; Whalen, *Native Students at Work*, 127.

⁴⁶ Bertolozzi, "Environmental Programs;" Iverson, *Diné*, 144-151.

⁴⁷ In 1934, after Collier's plea to remove livestock from the Navajo Reservation was rejected by the Tribal council in 1933, the Diné councilmen reluctantly accepted the livestock reduction. Howard Gorman, a Diné individual believes "what John Collier did in livestock reduction is something the [Diné] people will never forget." Iverson, *Diné*, 153. To learn more about the Navajo Livestock Reduction and its politics, see Lawrence C. Kelly, *The Navajo Indians and Federal Indian Policy, 1900-1935* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1968). To learn about the impact the Navajo Livestock Reduction had on the Diné community, see Bertolozzi, "Environmental Programs;" Iverson, *Diné*, 166-168.

⁴⁸ Previous research on the assimilation of Native American youth within education focuses largely on the boarding school experience during the late 19th century to the early 20th century. See Adams, *Education for Extinction*; Lomawaima, *They Called It Prairie Light*; Sakiestewa Gilbert, *Education beyond the Mesas*; Trafzer, et al., *The Indian School*; and Robert A. Trennert, *The Phoenix Indian School: Forced Assimilation in Arizona, 1891-1935* (Norman:

research, I argue that the changing education systems that affected Diné youth from 1928 to 1946 did not facilitate the growth that federal Native American reformers believed the new federal policies would create. These new policies still focused on assimilating Native Americans into U.S. culture, albeit with a different emphasis. The reformers and policymakers believed that incorporating Native American cultures, such as traditions and languages into education, would enhance Native experience and thus better their performance in education and properly assimilate them into mainstream society. For Diné youth who weathered these reforms and policy changes as students, the experiences were decidedly mixed. Whether in on-reservation missionary schools, at off-reservation boarding schools, or other federally funded education programs, Native American students found it challenging to maintain their Diné identity and to assimilate to twentieth-century cultural norms, especially as those norms were expressed through the reform curriculum.

To illustrate these points, I have selected three sets of documents from the archives.⁴⁹

All three examples portray unique experiences of Diné youth and the Diné community from various perspectives and educational settings. These sources include a hand-written letter from a Diné student that portrays a first-hand account of a rather positive experience of attending an off-reservation boarding school, report cards and correspondences of two Diné sisters while attending college in New Jersey from 1936 to 1937, and a pageant with embedded assimilationist stories of Diné histories from the Education Division of the Navajo Service in Window Rock, Arizona.

When Cornelia Mark Begay sat down to write to her Anglo-American friend Sam Day in St. Michaels, Arizona, she revealed her

University of Oklahoma Press, 1988). Hardly any research on Native American education and boarding schools in the 20th century solely focuses on the Diné community, who are currently the largest group of Native Americans in the United States. Limited research focuses on Diné youth experiences of the immense modifications done to Native American education during the 1930s after the release of the Meriam Report and the newly appointed Commissioner John Collier, whose new policies created an immense distrust between Diné and the U.S. government. See Iverson, *Diné*, Chapter 5; Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*.

⁴⁹ For my larger project I will draw on a broader set of archival and published materials. These documents, which include correspondences between U.S. officials and school coordinators, letters and reports of Diné students, school curricula, and legal documents, reveal the voices of Diné youth and their experiences during this time frame. See, for example, Peter Iverson, ed., *For Our Navajo People: Dine Letters, Speeches, and Petitions, 1900-1960* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 77-110.

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feelings of detachment from and longing for her family and community. Addressed December 3, 1932, Cornelia wrote that she is happy at Theodore Roosevelt Indian Boarding School located in Fort Apache, Arizona.⁵⁰ From reading the letter, however, it is understood that Cornelia misses her hometown located on the Navajo Reservation.

Cornelia's colloquially written letter reveals her fears that her parents and others in her community may forget her, and it expresses her desire to sustain her links to her home. This is evident as she composed: "how's my folk getting along at our home...I hope she'll remember me also I alway every body remember. You to and our home."⁵¹ Cornelia ended the letter by asking Sam to "answer soon please."⁵² Her continued connections are also visible in the way she frames her letter to constantly reference back to her home. For example, she outlines differences between Theodore Roosevelt School at Fort Apache and St. Michael's, the missionary school she had attended on the Navajo reservation.

Nonetheless, Cornelia's letter also displays signs of further assimilation, which is noticed from her broken English writing. Cornelia writes how much she is enjoying herself and how happy she is to communicate with Sam even though her writing is weak, as she mentions "this poor, hand English write to you."⁵³ The exclusion of Native American languages in boarding schools to assimilate Native youth into mainstream America is apparent in Cornelia's letter. Cornelia wrote this letter in English instead of writing in her native Diné language. It was specifically addressed to her friend, Samuel Day, an Anglo American who grew up in a missionary family on the Navajo Reservation. Yet it appears that Sam did understand the Diné language. Another letter located in the Day Family Collection from an unknown priest to Sam requests Sam's help along with that of his two brothers to assist Father Haile in writing out the Diné language.⁵⁴

This archival document displays how unique and diverse Diné youth experiences were in education, specifically youth receiving an

⁵⁰ Correspondence from Cornelia Mark Begay to Samuel Jr. Day, 3 December 1932, NAU.MS.89, NAU.PH.120.1-88, Series 3, Box 2, Folder 16, Day Family Collection, 1858-1977, Northern Arizona University Cline Library Special Collections, Flagstaff, Arizona.

⁵¹ Begay to Day, 3 December 1932, Day Family Collection.

⁵² Begay to Day, 3 December 1932, Day Family Collection.

⁵³ Begay to Day, 3 December 1932, Day Family Collection.

⁵⁴ Correspondence from unknown priest belonging to a Catholic missionary school to Samuel Day Sr., (n.d.), NAU.MS.89, NAU.PH.120.1-88, Series 1, Box 2, Folder 47, Day Family Collection, 1858-1977, Northern Arizona University Cline Library Special Collections, Flagstaff, Arizona.

education from off-reservation, federally-funded boarding schools. Cornelia's experience appears to be a positive one filled with joyful times. The only regret noted in Cornelia's letter is her worries that her family, located on the Navajo Reservation, may forget about her. As noted in the letter, Theodore Roosevelt School was located in Fort Apache, Arizona, some distance from the Navajo Reservation. Although the Meriam Report, released in 1928, denounced boarding schools for Native Americans, they were still heavily used despite Collier's encouragement of their abolition in 1934. Cornelia's letter, written in 1932, shows that Native American youth still faced an assimilationist education and were still being enrolled in off-reservation boarding schools.⁵⁵ During this time, it was understood that the idea of sending Native American youth to boarding schools to become "civilized" was a "successful failure."⁵⁶ While boarding schools were built to "de-Indianize" Native Americans, almost no students fully assimilated into an American identity.⁵⁷ In fact, most students were able to maintain their cultural identity despite their boarding school experiences, while others regained their cultural identity once they returned to their reservation.⁵⁸

Not only was there a loss of cultural identity among Native Americans, but it was becoming evident that boarding schools were not successful in assimilating the youth.⁵⁹ Once students received a boarding school education, most had no choice but to return to their reservation.⁶⁰ Some adjusted well and returned to their previous lifestyle, whereas others struggled.⁶¹ The education system at Sherman Institute, an off-reservation boarding school located in Riverside, California, taught skills meant to prepare Native American youth for reservation living rather than urban life, although assimilation into the American society was still

⁵⁵ Historian Margaret Szasz agrees that "the curriculum [in the 1930s] had improved, but often it lacked the cohesiveness that might have given the child the security that comes from simply knowing who one is." Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, 80.

⁵⁶ Trafzer, et al., *Indian School on Magnolia Avenue*, 1; Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 336; Trennert, *Phoenix Indian School*, 144; Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, 80.

⁵⁷ Trennert, *Phoenix Indian School*, 49, 115, 141-147.

⁵⁸ Trennert, *Phoenix Indian School*, 75, 143-147.

⁵⁹ Bahr, *Students of Sherman Indian School*, 10.

⁶⁰ According to historian Robert Trennert, once Native American students were finished with their studies at Carlisle would return home to their reservation. "If this trend continued, some suggested, the cause of assimilation might be more effectively served by training the Indian children to return home and lead their people into 'civilization.'" Iverson, *Diné*, 9.

⁶¹ Sakiestewa Gilbert, *Education Beyond the Mesas*, 21; Trennert *Phoenix Indian School*, 124-133, 148-149.

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the ultimate goal for boarding schools. These schools taught Native American youth vocational skills to show them how to work American jobs; however, these skills were often useless once students tried to find jobs both off and on the reservation.⁶² According to historian Robert Trennert, “no one believed that large numbers of Indians were destined to live permanently in Phoenix as equals.”⁶³ These thoughts were largely a product of racist beliefs that Native Americans would never be equal to Anglo Americans no matter how thoroughly they had been assimilated.⁶⁴ Although some Native students were successful after attending boarding schools and thrived in urban communities, others were rejected due to a belief that Native Americans were taking jobs away from Anglo Americans.⁶⁵ During the Great Depression, these beliefs were widely accepted and boarding schools began to teach skills that Native Americans would be able to use on their reservation rather than in urban communities.⁶⁶

This struggle is also apparent in the experiences of two Diné students, Ethel Yazhe and Lillian Begay, who were enrolled at the College of Saint Elizabeth in Convent Station, New Jersey. Archival documents include two sets of report cards from both Ethel and Lillian, and letters discussing their educational performances in college circa 1936 to 1937. The correspondences expose mixed feelings about both students from Dean Sister Marie Jose and Sister Rose de Lima to Reverend Arnold Heinzmann. The first letter found within the primary documents hold a set of report cards from Lillian and Ethel released February 29, 1936.⁶⁷ In the letter, Sister Marie Jose discloses to Reverend Heinzmann that the Diné girls have been failing college and were never qualified to receive a higher education. A close examination of the letters reveals that Reverend Heinzmann, an educator at St. Michaels Missionary School in Arizona, was an important mentor for both students. In a response to Dean Sister Marie Jose, the reverend asserts that the students were ready to attend

⁶² Trennert, *Phoenix Indian School*, 141-147.

⁶³ Trennert, *Phoenix Indian School*, 31.

⁶⁴ Trennert, *Phoenix Indian School*, 31, 59.

⁶⁵ Trennert, *Phoenix Indian School*, 53-54, 70-71.

⁶⁶ According to historian Kevin Whalen, “boarding schools would no longer train their students to become farm hands, mechanics, and maids. Instead, they would teach students the skills at which many Indigenous families and communities were already proficient: gardening, subsistence farming, hunting, fishing, and gathering.” Whalen, *Native Students at Work*, 130; Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, 65.

⁶⁷ Correspondence from Dean Sister Marie Jose to Reverend Arnold Heinzmann, 29 February 1936, AZ 500, Box 40, Folder 8, Records of the Province of St. John the Baptist Franciscans, 1868-1978. University of Arizona Special Collections, Tucson, Arizona.

college. Sister Marie Jose suggests the girls stop attending St. Elizabeth's at the end of the semester and believes the girls "have obtained sufficient training to enable them to take up work among their own people."⁶⁸ Sister Marie Jose addresses Ethel and Lillian as "special students" because they are unable to keep up with their studies.⁶⁹ It is clearly apparent in the letter to Reverend Heinzmann that Sister Marie Jose is adamant about getting rid of the Diné students because she asks specify the location that is best to purchase train tickets for the girls.⁷⁰

On March 17, 1936, Reverend Heinzmann received a letter from Sister Rose de Lima in which she shares her frustration with the Dean's quick conclusion to remove the Diné students from her college. Sister Rose de Lima criticizes Sister Marie Jose and believes she "has no very special interest in the Indians."⁷¹ Both Sister Marie Jose and Sister Rose de Lima separately address Reverend Heinzmann and how they understand that the students were not ready to take regular college courses. Sister Rose de Lima suggests the students should have attended their previous school longer before attending college, as she writes "they have not the background for college work and, of course, their marks are low."⁷² This remark implies that both Diné students did not receive appropriate skills from St. Michael's Missionary School to suitably advance them into a university education.

The first report cards of Ethel and Lillian show that both students studied various levels of English, hygiene, two courses in political science, religion, and physical education, with Ethel also taking a course in chemistry. Both report cards reveal low letter grades of C's and D's. Lillian received a B in physical education and Ethel received a B in both religion and physical education. Sister Rose de Lima provides comfort in the letter to the reverend and assures him that the school will keep Ethel and Lillian for the remainder of the year and teach them courses that will

⁶⁸ Jose to Heinzmann, 29 Feb. 1936, Records of the Province of St. John the Baptist Franciscans.

⁶⁹ Jose to Heinzmann, 29 Feb. 1936, Records of the Province of St. John the Baptist Franciscans.

⁷⁰ Jose to Heinzmann, 29 Feb. 1936, Records of the Province of St. John the Baptist Franciscans.

⁷¹ Correspondence from Sister Rose De Lima to Reverend Arnold Heinzmann, 17 March 1936, AZ 500, Box 40, Folder 8, Records of the Province of St. John the Baptist Franciscans, 1868-1978, University of Arizona Special Collections, Tucson, Arizona.

⁷² Lima to Heinzmann, 17 Mar. 1936, Records of the Province of St. John the Baptist Franciscans.

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prepare them for office work, specifically stenography and typewriting.⁷³ Reverend Heinzmann replies back to Sister Rose de Lima on March 23, 1936 and is pleased the girls will get an opportunity to continue their education. He mentions that “it was understood from the beginning that they were to receive a more or less special course that would adapt them for a future on the Reservation. As a stenographer or typist, these girls will command a very good salary in the Indian Service.”⁷⁴

The next semester report cards released June 11, 1936, reveal that Ethel and Lillian were still receiving low letter grades. Ethel’s grades improved as she received more B’s, but still received a C and two D’s. Though, both report cards show that they both succeeded in the suggested courses, stenography and typewriting by receiving a B in each class. Because of the students continued weak grades, Sister Rose de Lima sent Reverend Arnold Heinzmann a letter on May 11, 1937 stating the girls would not continue their education at the College of Saint Elizabeth next year. Sister Rose de Lima believes the school has “done everything possible to fit them to earn a living.”⁷⁵ Sister Rose de Lima wrote another letter to the reverend dated June 11, 1937 and discusses how she believes it would be uncomfortable for the girls to stay at the college and not be able to receive a degree after four years.⁷⁶ Both Sisters hope Reverend Heinzmann will be able to support the girls with jobs at St. Michael’s Missionary School. Sister Rose de Lima justified the removal of the Diné students from the college by noting Lillian had won a typewriter, which the Sisters hope would benefit her in finding employment on the Navajo Reservation.⁷⁷

These sets of letters and report cards show how an assimilationist education hindered educational performances of two Diné students, Ethel Yazhe and Lillian Begay, even though Collier pushed for the advancement of Native Americans into colleges in the Indian

⁷³ Lima to Heinzmann, 17 Mar. 1936, Records of the Province of St. John the Baptist Franciscans.

⁷⁴ Correspondence from Reverend Arnold Heinzmann to Sister Rose De Lima, 23 March 1936, AZ 500, Box 40, Folder 8, Records of the Province of St. John the Baptist Franciscans, 1868-1978, University of Arizona Special Collections, Tucson, Arizona.

⁷⁵ Correspondence from Sister Rose De Lima to Reverend Arnold Heinzmann, 11 May 1937, AZ 500, Box 40, Folder 8, Records of the Province of St. John the Baptist Franciscans, 1868-1978, University of Arizona Special Collections, Tucson, Arizona.

⁷⁶ Correspondence from Sister Rose De Lima to Reverend Arnold Heinzmann, 18 June 1937, AZ 500, Box 40, Folder 8, Records of the Province of St. John the Baptist Franciscans, 1868-1978, University of Arizona Special Collections, Tucson, Arizona.

⁷⁷ Lima to Heinzmann, 11 May 1937, Records of the Province of St. John the Baptist Franciscans.

Reorganization Act.⁷⁸ Missionary schools located on reservations, like St. Michael's, believed in a different way of educating Native Americans, although their purpose was to assimilate the youth into a modern society and, ultimately, to baptize them into the Catholic Church.

Instead of completely removing Native American cultures from their education, missionary schools believed it was necessary to incorporate Native cultures, which would benefit the youths' conversion to Catholicism. Specifically, Catholic priests sought to learn the Diné language in order to translate necessary materials, such as the Bible and catechism, so Diné youth could better understand religious materials.⁷⁹ By the 1930s, as Father Heinzmann's correspondence reveals, St. Michael's educators also sought to help students gain English language skills and technical training necessary for local employment – often with the Navajo Service – enabling them to stay on the reservation. Despite the efforts to incorporate Diné culture into the schools, students from missionary schools, like Ethel and Lillian, clearly faced challenges as they pursued higher education and employment options.

Alongside the efforts of the missionary schools, the Bureau of Indian Affairs struggled to incorporate and portray Diné culture within the federal schools. A third archival document, created in 1940 by the Education Division of the Navajo Service in Window Rock, Arizona, reveals these struggles. *A Pageant of Navajo History* was written for various Navajo Reservation schools to reproduce and included a script, the needed materials to construct the play, and a character list. The pageant covers the history of the Diné by introducing the Long Walk, The Treaty of Bosque Redondo, and the making of trading posts on the Navajo Reservation which enabled Diné to sell their traditional arts and crafts. In this pageant, some of the language that is used to describe Diné viewpoints of these events seem to downplay the biased and racist motives of European Americans. The relationships acted out between certain Diné individuals and Anglo Americans show them having a

⁷⁸ John Collier addressed the public about the Wheeler-Howard Bill through the radio and said "finally, the Bill would bring to an end the denial of technical, business and professional education to Indians and would enable them to qualify for the world's work in the colleges, engineering schools, law schools, nursing and medical schools of the United States." "The Crisis in Indian Affairs," 7 May 1934, Berard Haile papers, University of Arizona Libraries Special Collections, Tucson, Arizona.

⁷⁹ Father Berard Haile worked with Diné to create their first written language and alphabet. Berard Haile papers, 1893-1961, AZ 132, University of Arizona Libraries Special Collections, Tucson, Arizona; Correspondence from unknown priest belonging to a Catholic missionary school to Samuel Day Sr., (n.d.), NAU.MS.89, NAU.PH.120.1-88, Series 1, Box 2, Folder 47, Day Family Collection, 1858-1977, Northern Arizona University Cline Library Special Collections, Flagstaff, Arizona.

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respectful relationship, with Diné leaders seeming to cower from Anglo Americans, showing them great signs of respect. During a scene that is supposed to depict life on the new Navajo Reservation in 1868, after the Diné tribe were allowed to go back to their land, Diné leaders like Manuelito and Ganado Mucho lecture to their people on following European leadership and integrating into its society. The script includes Ganado Mucho stating: "My people! We now return to our land. Let us remember that Washington is kind to all of us. Look at that old bill goat. He butts against something he can never conquer. We must realize that we were doing that - butting against something that we could not break. Let us never do that again."⁸⁰ The script holds biased viewpoints which favor the history of Anglo Americans.⁸¹

As historian Peter Iverson argues, the schools were still teaching Diné youth inaccurate viewpoints of their history.⁸² Although the intentions of progressive U.S. officials were to integrate Native American cultures into newly established federal policies in order to release them from assimilationist constraints, educational curricula still consisted of teaching Native American youth Anglo-American values.⁸³ Diné youth, parents, and schools located on the Navajo Reservation were hesitant to accept the sudden changes Collier endorsed.⁸⁴ This hesitation was not only due to a mistrust in Collier's philosophies for Native Americans because of the Navajo Livestock Reduction program, but also because the Diné had concerns about the school curricula.⁸⁵ Moreover, Diné parents were still cautious of sending their children to federal government schools since Diné values consists of teaching their culture and traditions at home, which was more beneficial than their children learning Anglo-American beliefs. This script demonstrates how assimilationist views

⁸⁰ Navajo Services Educational Division, Pageant of Navajo history, presented by Navajo schools, Navajo Tribal Fair, Tribal Fair Grounds, Window Rock, Arizona, 1940, 812 P133, Arizona Historical Society Archives, Tucson, Arizona.

⁸¹ Historian Peter Iverson noticed "many Navajo parents were suspicious of too rapid a transition away from what they had known...So, Navajo schools continued to present holiday programs that seemed to belong to another time." Iverson, *Diné*, 174.

⁸² Iverson, *Diné*, 174.

⁸³ Bahr, *The Students of Sherman Indian School*, 43.

⁸⁴ Iverson, *Diné*, 174; Diné historian Jennifer Denetdale observed interviews that were conducted from Diné individuals during the 1960s to the 1980s. Denetdale found that "central to their narratives [were] the Long Walk, the Bosque Redondo Experience, and the livestock reductions of 1930s and 1940s, all of which are historical watersheds" for the Diné community. Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History*, 41.

⁸⁵ Iverson, *Diné*, 174.

continued to dominate Native American education even after John Collier introduced cross-cultural education in 1934.⁸⁶

Based on the archival documents analyzed, this preliminary paper unveils the challenges Diné youth faced in education during an era of changing U.S. federal policies from 1928 to 1946. The changing education system did not facilitate the growth that progressive U.S. officials believed would stem from the new federal policies implemented. The Diné experiences reveal that even though new federal educational policies incorporated Native American cultures, the policies continued to be assimilationist. The primary documents reveal how assimilation within Native American education played a significant role in the educational development of Diné students and its community, even though these archival documents originated during the period of educational reform from 1928 to 1946 that was the result of the Meriam Report and progressive U.S. policymakers such as John Collier.

Although these findings are significant, additional research is necessary to uncover Diné youth perspectives. There is also more information that should be found out about these archival documents, especially regarding the Diné students such as Lillian Begay, Ethel Yazhe, and Cornelia Mark Begay. Although the primary documents show their experiences in assimilationist education, their past and future educational experiences should be understood as well. For Lillian and Ethel, it would be helpful to find more information on their previous education experience at St. Michael's Missionary School, as well as what they were able to learn at these schools to prepare them for a future in education. Considering Sister Rose de Lima believed the girls did not receive adequate training before attending college, it would be important to understand their previous schooling. It is also important to understand if these Diné students felt any loss of cultural identity while receiving an education with assimilationist curricula, even during the addition of cross-cultural education of Native American culture into Native American federal policies.

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⁸⁶ Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, Chapter 6.

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