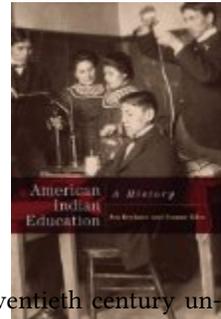


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jon Reyhner, Jeanne Eder. *American Indian Education: A History*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. x + 370 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3593-9.

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Published on H-Genocide (December, 2006)



## U.S. Indian Policy and Cultural Genocide?

*American Indian Education: A History*, by Jon Reyhner and Jeanne Eder, presents a conundrum to the reader depending, perhaps, on his or her discipline. The authors clearly aim their book at educators and educational policymakers who work in reservation-based schools. Their main point is to alert educators to policies or practices that have “failed” in the past and to inform them about which “educational reforms” might succeed in the future. To this end, the text contains numerous useful facts and information about colonial, state, and federal attempts to “educate” (read “civilize”) American Indians and Alaska Natives over the past four hundred years of Euro-American presence in North America (including brief bits about Canada and a few paragraphs on Mexico). In this sense, it accomplishes what any good survey text should do— present a broad overview of the field. That said, viewed through the more critical lens of a historian of American Indians and Alaska Natives, the text is primarily descriptive in nature and offers scant interpretation of those aforementioned numerous useful facts and information.

There is much to like about this book. The authors’ first chapter describes colonial missions and schools over a broad geographical range, from peoples of the Eastern Woodlands, to Mexico and Canada, to Alaska Natives. Subsequent chapters look at the educational perspectives of nineteenth-century treaties and removal policies, the development of the reservation system and the educational goals of that system, the allotment process (splitting tribally held reservation lands into individual landholdings) and the creation of dependency, descriptions of various mission schools on reservations, and government boarding schools. The final seven chapters concen-

trate on Indian education in the twentieth century under the various phases and changes in U.S. governmental policy. It considers policies through the New Deal, the termination era of the 1950s, the movement toward self-determination as well as a look at higher education and trends in contemporary thought about education and Indian people. Learning or teaching English is the subtext of the book—it is the pedagogical glue that binds the entire work together. This glue, in fact, becomes the main thrust of the final chapter and essentially asks: how can we teach English, respect the importance of the survival of native languages and culture, and still get Indian children to achieve parity with other children in America in measures of reading, writing, math, and science? This question receives greater attention below because it draws into question the greater issue of “cultural genocide” and what can be done to facilitate a revitalization of native culture while maintaining some parity.

Reyhner and Eder are certainly aware that the efforts to assimilate Indians via forced education can be labeled cultural genocide, but they shy away from really exploring this assessment. For example, they open a section on pre-removal Cherokee schools with this statement: “The Cherokee tribe of the southeastern United States was one of the most successful in accepting civilization” (p. 52)—an opinion open to criticism regarding the definitions of both “successful” and “civilization.” Their next sentence contradicts what they just wrote as they quote from William McLoughlin’s 1984 treatise, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, wherein the author cites Cherokee resistance to Christianity and their desire that Cherokee children learn English to use as a defense of Cherokee culture. Reyhner and Eder end the paragraph with an unsubstantiated statement that “mixed-blood Cherokee were more in favor of education and more accepted by missionar-

ies” (p. 53). The next few pages then explore the nature and structure of missionary programs among the Cherokee and lead into the removal era. Absent in all of this is further exploration of the tensions inherent in Cherokee desires to learn English in order to deal more effectively with ever-increasing numbers of white settlers onto their homelands, the process of forming a more centralized government in order to ward off the removal threats of the United States, and then, once removed, organizing a school system of their own to maintain the Cherokee language and culture in the face of U.S. pressure to abandon traditional practices.

The sections covering U.S. Indian policies certainly describe their basic premises—from early attempts to kill the Indian and save the “man,” to the post-1900 and pre-1940 decades of resurrecting respect for Indian culture because whites feared it would be lost (enter the “noble savage”), to the post-World War II experiments of reservation termination and annihilation of the Indian land base that often sustained the heart of tribal identity and Indianness. In most of these descriptions, however, Indian people are acted upon, with very brief passages that show Indians as actors, as resisters to the attempts to destabilize their traditions. Moreover, almost all of the cogent examples from these chapters draw on Reyhner’s knowledge of the Navajo Reservation; the broad-based focus on Indian education almost morphs into a history of Navajo Indian education

A pedagogical overview of attempts to teach English throughout the centuries, as stated above, is the strength of the book. This theme is developed with early colonial missionary attempts to incorporate English into their lessons and carries into the task of educating Indians in the twenty-first century. The authors themselves advocate using a modern approach called “English Plus” that they state “involves mutual accommodation and a two-way exchange between Indian and white societies” (p. 13). Their hope, as stated in the introduction, is that the centuries of language and cultural repression will end and that education will truly serve Indians. This system would support Indian self-determination and invoke community-based teaching methods. But herein lies the major problem that is not addressed by the authors and one where the potential for continuing attacks on culture looms large. The foundational assumption of *American Indian Education* is that it is still appropriate to “educate” American Indians and Alaska Natives to “succeed” in the dominant culture. Is this assumption still not a form of cultural genocide in that success is defined and determined by the larger dominant, white community stan-

dard (or the U.S. Department of Education) and not defined and determined by the community standard of each tribal group? Must learning English be more important than learning one’s traditional language? They ask this question themselves, but only in the final chapter and with little grounding in the literature (the extent of which is unknown to this reviewer). Furthermore, Reyhner and Eder fall into another trap—they write about reservation education to the virtual exclusion of the larger numbers of urban Indian children who also face serious challenges when they enter public school systems that offer little support for or cognizance of their Indian identity. Thus, the very strength of the book—tracing the attempts to teach English (insensitively or with respect for Indian culture)—also points to its biggest flaw. The book is truly one about the history of education as designated by Euro-Americans and aimed at transforming American Indians and Alaska Natives, rather than tracing native wisdom, educational precepts, and transference of knowledge from one generation to another within an American Indian/Alaska Native context(s).

To be sure, the factual information contained in *American Indian Education* certainly can lead readers to draw fairly strong conclusions about the horrors of the educating/civilizing process that most scholars of American Indian and Alaska Native history would find familiar. One is curious why the authors do not emphasize these conclusions more vigorously. Instead, they tend to overwhelm the reader with long, extended quotes and the aforementioned plethora of “useful facts and information.” They concentrate more on reciting historical-to-contemporary policies and programs than on the well-documented effects of educational experiments on American Indians and Alaska Natives, or on reactions and resistance to these policies and programs. I wonder, in fact, why the generally fine editors of the University of Oklahoma Press did not exert stronger pressure on the authors to revise their manuscript, strengthen the writing, make clearer the implications, and reduce the mind-numbing block quotations. What is left is a lengthy book that eschews good historical analysis for a compilation of facts about educational programs and policies. My first impression, as I read the early chapters, was that Reyhner and Eder could not resist the temptation to include every last note and quote on their index cards. Unfortunately, this impression did not leave me as I finished reading. Somewhere in this mass of organized notes is a great book that could challenge educational assumptions and excoriate the perpetrators of an ongoing, if now subtle, attack on the cultural traditions of a minority population

within the United States. That book has not been written yet. In the meantime, the assembled notes do, as I first suggested, offer useful facts, information, and a broad, if shallow, overview of the attempts of a dominant society to mold other societies, unsuccessfully, to its liking.

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**Citation:** Henry Stamm. Review of Reyhner, Jon; Eder, Jeanne, *American Indian Education: A History*. H-Genocide, H-Net Reviews. December, 2006.

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