

# How It Might Have Been

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## Abstract

In this short opinion piece, Devona Lone Wolf suggests that the holistic approach to learning that typified Indigenous cultures was a threat to the colonizing interests of the United States federal government. She suggests that our world might not be facing so many global crises if instead of designing boarding schools to force assimilation into the Western worldview, the holistic Indigenous approaches to education would have been invited into American school systems.

**Keywords:** *Holistic approaches, Indigenous education, Western education, Indigenous worldview*

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After the end of the treaty-making between the United States and Native Americans in 1871, the U.S. government began an aggressive movement to “civilize” the natives. This time was called the “boarding school era.” Lt. Col. Richard Henry Pratt led the effort for off-reservation boarding schools with the goal of forced assimilation. Native children were separated from their families and placed in government- or church-sponsored schools that were funded by the government. The Indian boarding schools were one of the primary weapons used to break down Indian identity during this period by forbidding Native languages and culture at every turn. Native American children were forcibly removed from their families and communities and sent to these schools. They were required to learn English, adopt European-American cultural practices, and convert to Christianity.

Most people know about the tragedy of the boarding schools in the U.S. and Canada, so I will not say more about the horrors that we have learned about them. Rather, I want to assert that Pratt’s well-intended goals were really ultimately an attack on the holistic education that made the Indian an Indian. I describe his goals as well-intended because his speech at the National Conference of Charities and Correction in June of 1892 reveals that he believed previous treatment of the Indians was inhumane. I offer a

few quotes from the speech that show this, as well as his foundational belief in the inferiority of traditional Indigenous ways of understanding the interconnectedness of all. The title of his speech was “The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites” (Carlisle Indian School Resource Center).

Pratt opens his presentation saying: “A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man....” He goes on to describe George Washington’s original policy of “association, equality and amalgamation-killing the Indian and saving the man.” He refers to the sadness and inhumanity of government troops killing Indians, but says it is “a far sadder day for them when they fall under the baneful influences of a treaty agreement with the United States whereby, they are to receive large annuities, and to be protected on reservations, held apart from all association with the best of our civilization.” He then criticizes Indian schools because they are:

“...well calculated to keep the Indians intact as Indians...we shall not succeed in Americanizing the Indian... It is a great mistake to think that the Indian is

born an inevitable savage. He is born a blank, like all the rest of us. Left in the surroundings of savagery, he grows to possess a savage language, superstition, and life. We, left in the surroundings of civilization, grow to possess a civilized language, life, and purpose. Transfer the infant white to the savage surroundings, he will grow to possess a savage language, superstition, and habit. Transfer the savage-born infant to the surroundings of civilization, and he will grow to possess a civilized language and habit. These results have been established over and over again beyond all question; and it is also well established that those advanced in life, even to maturity, of either class, lose the already acquired qualities belonging to the side of their birth, and gradually take on those of the side to which they have been transferred.”

Besides Pratt’s ignorance of the interconnected, holistic, and nature-based perspective of the Native American was demonstrated by most of the Indian agents of the U.S. government. For example, consider the words of John S. Ward, an Indian agent for the Mission Agency in California:

“The parents of these Indian children are ignorant, and know nothing of the value of education, and there are no elevating circumstances in the home circle to arouse the ambition of the children. Parental authority is hardly known or exercised among the Indians in this agency. The agent should be endowed with some kind of authority to enforce attendance. The agent here has found that a threat to depose a captain if he does not make the children attend school has had a good effect” (Bear 2008).

How different might our world be today if Pratt and the missionaries and the Indian agents understood the Indigenous worldview approach to education? What if the hierarchical, materialistic, anthropocentric orientation of the European colonizers was seen as the foundation for education that needed to take on the attributes of the Indian? A foundation based on the following characteristics of teaching and learning:

- Education is a holistic process that encompasses academic knowledge and physical, emotional, spiritual, and cultural development.
- Education is about transmitting cultural values, traditions, and practices relating to the interconnectedness of all, from one generation to the next.

- Indigenous education is grounded in respect, responsibility, and reciprocity.
- Indigenous education is structured with a strong emphasis on community involvement and the role of the community in shaping and guiding the education of its members.
- Indigenous education also strongly emphasizes experiential learning, with a focus on hands-on, place-based learning rooted in the local environment and culture.

My own teaching philosophy at Oglala Lakota College is based on the Lakota concept that we are all equal, but each is on their own path for gaining knowledge and skills. I imagine land stretching in all directions with some valleys and mountains. There are many paths going in all directions. Some zigzag back and forth, others go in a straight line, and some even turn sideways and backward. On these paths, there is darkness and light, storms and sunlight. These represent each individual's path traveled throughout the life journey. On these paths, everyone gains knowledge that can be shared ultimately for the greater good. From this perspective we all have the opportunity to learn from another because the knowledge gained in life experiences gives way to wisdom.

No one person can experience all the paths, and this is why everyone in a group or community contributes to the learning process that includes an equal emphasis on mind, body, emotions, spirit, community, place and “all our relations.” Such holistic education is proven sustainable in all ways and there were some unbiased European observers of Native Americans who recognized this, without romanticizing them. If instead of trying to “kill” this perspective to “Americanize” the “savage,” the U.S. government would have set up schools that taught Indigenous holistic ways of being and merged them with some of the “good paths of experience” that came from Europe, perhaps we would not be facing the many crises that all people, not just Native Americans, are started to suffer.

In recent years, there has been a growing movement to acknowledge and address the harm caused by Indian boarding schools and to honor the resilience and strength of Native American communities. However, few understand how we have managed to walk in both educational worlds. I close this piece by offering four perspectives that will help

the reader better understand how the Lakota and other First Nations perceived boarding school education. historically.

The first perspective was, of course, negative and led to resistance efforts. Families hid the children five years or older to protect them from the government officials who came into the villages and forcefully took the children. Following this, the next perspective was about survival. It was born from the hardships the Natives suffered from the forced removal from their lands and from being put into what essentially were prisoner of war camps (reservations). In 1899, the U.S. government named my reservation, Pine Ridge, POW Camp 334. Families continue to this day struggling to provide for their children, but then food was completely inadequate and often spoiled. During this time many families saw boarding schools as a way for their children to receive food, shelter, and clothing. They understood their children would lose their language and culture and would not receive the nurturing they would get at home. It was a tough decision that many of them had to make.

The third perspective was based on the eventual realization and acceptance that to survive in the white man's world, children needed to learn how to live in that world. Boarding schools were viewed as a way for their children to learn the white man's ways and come home and help the oyate (people) to adjust to the ways of the white world. Sadly, many children who attended boarding schools and lost their "Indianness" came home to find out they no longer fit or were accepted back into the tribe. As more and more of them attended boarding schools and returned, it became easier to adjust and be accepted. Over time the boarding school boarded students and had day students who lived at home but attended schools.

The fourth and current perspective might be that we are sort of continuing the "day" school attitude but beginning to challenge the hegemony with efforts to restore cultural relevance and save our original languages. Other non-Indian individuals attempt to help with this with critical pedagogy, holistic education and decolonizing education. While education has improved in many ways, it nonetheless remains hegemonic and violates the deep holistic approach to learning that truly allowed people to recognize everything is related and important.

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## Author Bio

**Ms. Lone Wolf** was born in Pine Ridge in 1953 to Flora Curry (Glenn) and Albert Curry Sr. She was orphaned at 11 months when her mother was killed in a car accident. She attended boarding schools thereafter. In 1984 she became a counselor at Oglala Lakota College. Continuing her education, she became a faculty member and Vice-President for Instruction. She currently is a faculty member at Oglala Lakota College in the Social Work Department. Devona has been at the college since 1984.