

BUILDING A MORE PERFECT UNION

PART II



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NHD
NATIONAL
HISTORY DAY

THE LANGUAGE OF RESISTANCE: NATIVE AMERICAN BOARDING SCHOOLS

Author: Erin Sullivan, Cab Calloway School of the Arts, Wilmington, Delaware

GUIDING QUESTION:

How did students at Native American boarding schools use language to resist assimilation both during their time as students and after?

OVERVIEW

American Indian boarding schools, or residential schools, were created to “civilize” American Indians by assimilating students into American culture. One of the unexpected outcomes of these schools was the development of a pan-Indian identity, as students from various tribes were able to meet each other and develop a shared identity. In this lesson, students will explore the role of language in these schools and how it was used to oppress and, later, empower Native American students.

OBJECTIVES

At the conclusion of this activity, students will be able to:

- > Explain how students at Native American boarding schools used language to resist the dehumanizing effects of the schools and to advocate for their communities; and
- > Analyze primary sources to determine the ways in which language was essential to boarding school students.

STANDARDS CONNECTIONS

CONNECTIONS TO COMMON CORE

- > CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- > CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.7 Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person’s life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

CONNECTIONS TO C3 FRAMEWORK

- > D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

- > D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

DOCUMENTS USED

PRIMARY SOURCES

Newspaper article, Stephen K. White Bear, “Speak Only English,” January 1882

The School News [Carlisle Indian School, Carlisle, Pennsylvania], January 1882
https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/sites/default/files/docs-publications/SchoolNews_v02n08_0.pdf

Oral History Collection, Carlisle Indian School History Cumberland Valley Historical Society
<https://carlisleindian.historicalsociety.com/resources/oral-histories/>

Photograph, John N. Choate, *Slate showing student work with names R. B. Hayes and John Williams* [version 1], 1880
National Anthropological Archives, Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center (NAA_73365)
<https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/images/slate-showing-student-work-names-r-b-hayes-and-john-williams-version-1-1880>

SECONDARY SOURCES

Article, Sarah Klotz, “How Native Students Fought Back Against Abuse and Assimilation at US Boarding Schools,” August 12, 2021
The Conversation
<https://theconversation.com/how-native-students-fought-back-against-abuse-and-assimilation-at-us-boarding-schools-165222>

Online exhibition, “Struggling with Cultural Repression: The Boarding School Tragedy,” 2020
Native Nation 360, National Museum of the American Indian
<https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/code-talkers/boarding-schools/>

TEACHER-CREATED MATERIAL

- › Speak Only English Debriefing Questions

ACTIVITY PREPARATION

- › Prepare to share the link to the online exhibition, “Struggling with Cultural Repression: The Boarding School Tragedy,” with all students.
- › Prepare to project the photograph of the slate.
- › Read the article “How Native Students Fought Back Against Abuse and Assimilation at US Boarding Schools” for background information.
- › Arrange the classroom for group work.
- › Organize students into groups of two or three students each.

PROCEDURE

ACTIVITY ONE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT (60 MINUTES)

- › Explain to students the history behind the development of Indian Boarding Schools. Using the online exhibition for context, help students understand the goals of the schools, their mission, and the ways in which these goals often harmed the students enrolled there.
- › Ask students to read the text, “Struggling with Cultural Repression: The Boarding School Tragedy,” from the National Museum of the American Indian.
 - › **Teacher Tip:** This website includes several photographs and also has a feature to have the text read to students.
- › Lead a class discussion:
 - › *How did the boarding schools attempt to “civilize” their American Indian students?* Responses should include restrictions on Indian culture, religion, and language. As language is this lesson’s focus, make sure to address language restrictions if students do not generate that as part of the discussion.
 - › *Why do you think language was such a critical focus for these schools?* Responses should include that learning English would allow American Indian students to assimilate and that restricting speaking or fluency in their native language would separate them from their original culture.
 - › *Can you predict any potential benefits of learning English for American Indian students?* Responses might include ideas related to being able to communicate more effectively with white society and government officials.

CONNECTIONS

This book includes several lessons that stress the ways in which people have advocated for the social, political, cultural, and economic rights in a quest to make the United States a more perfect union. Ask students to make comparisons between these groups of people, their tactics, and their successes.

- › Distribute the link to the oral history collection from the Cumberland Valley Historical Society (or assign oral histories to students if preferred).
- › Tell students that we are going to focus on one boarding school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. This collection of oral histories can give us interesting perspectives about the students who attended the school.
- › Allow students time to explore the collection and read at least one oral history.
- › Ask students:
 - › *To what extent did the students have power or agency?*
 - › *In what ways was that agency limited or curtailed?*
- › Explain that this lesson will focus on how Native American students used their native languages and English to advocate for themselves both at the boarding schools and throughout the rest of their lives.
- › Organize students into groups of two or three students each.
- › Project the photograph of the slate used by students at the Carlisle Indian School. Explain that this is a slate, or small chalkboard, used by students during the 1880s at the Carlisle Indian School.
 - › **Teacher Tip:** Project the photograph or give students access so they can zoom in to see the slate in more detail.
- › Ask students to list their observations of the primary source.
- › Ask students to generate a list of questions they have about the primary source.
- › Share and discuss this quotation by Dr. Sarah Klotz: “I argue that these pictographic records show how some students understood their time at school in the context of their developing warrior identities, underscoring their desire to act bravely and return home to recount their stories for their nations’ collective memory.”
- › Ask students, *How does the slate provide evidence that American Indian students could use both Indigenous culture and language and English to advocate for themselves and their communities?*

ACTIVITY TWO: LANGUAGE AS A FORM OF RESISTANCE (20 MINUTES)

- > Tell students that a common punishment for students who were observed speaking their native language was to write a composition about their infraction. Stephen K. White Bear wrote “Speak Only English” as his punishment, which was published in the school’s newspaper in January 1882.
- > Distribute a copy of the article to each student. Direct them to read it independently and complete the debriefing questions in their groups.
- > Lead a class discussion:
 - » *This article shows us that students at the Carlisle School regularly resisted speaking English. What were some of the reasons explicitly stated by the article? Are there other possible reasons for this?*
 - » *White Bear mentions that everyone wanted to learn Sioux. We know that this was also true at other boarding schools. Why would Native students want to learn languages other than their own? What are the advantages of learning a common language?*
 - » *White Bear said that he wanted to learn English. Do you believe him? How could learning English be a form of resistance? How might it benefit students beyond their time at the boarding school?*

ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

- > Students can research the Society of American Indians, an organization formed in 1911, to understand their legal and political advocacy for Native Americans.
- > Students can explore the effects of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 or the 1968 Indian Civil Rights Act.
- > Students can research how states are attempting to recognize the impact of these boarding schools, specifically on language revitalization.

STUDENTS INTERESTED IN THIS TOPIC MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN RESEARCHING THE FOLLOWING FOR AN NHD PROJECT

- > Indian Citizenship Act of 1924
- > World War II Code Talkers (1942–1945)
- > Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968
- > Black Student Union & Third World Liberation Front Strike at San Francisco State College (1968–1969)
- > Occupation of Alcatraz (1969–1971)
- > Occupation of Wounded Knee (1973)

To access a PDF containing all of the sources and materials to complete this lesson plan, go to:

[NHD.ORG/250](https://nhd.org/250)

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RELATED RESOURCES

Lesson Plan, Not “Indians,” Many Tribes: Native American Diversity

<https://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plans/not-indians-many-tribes-native-american-diversity>

Lesson Plan, Who Belongs on the Frontier: Cherokee Removal

<https://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plans/who-belongs-frontier-chokeee-removal>

Media Resource, Reimagining Sitting Bull, Tatanka Iyotake

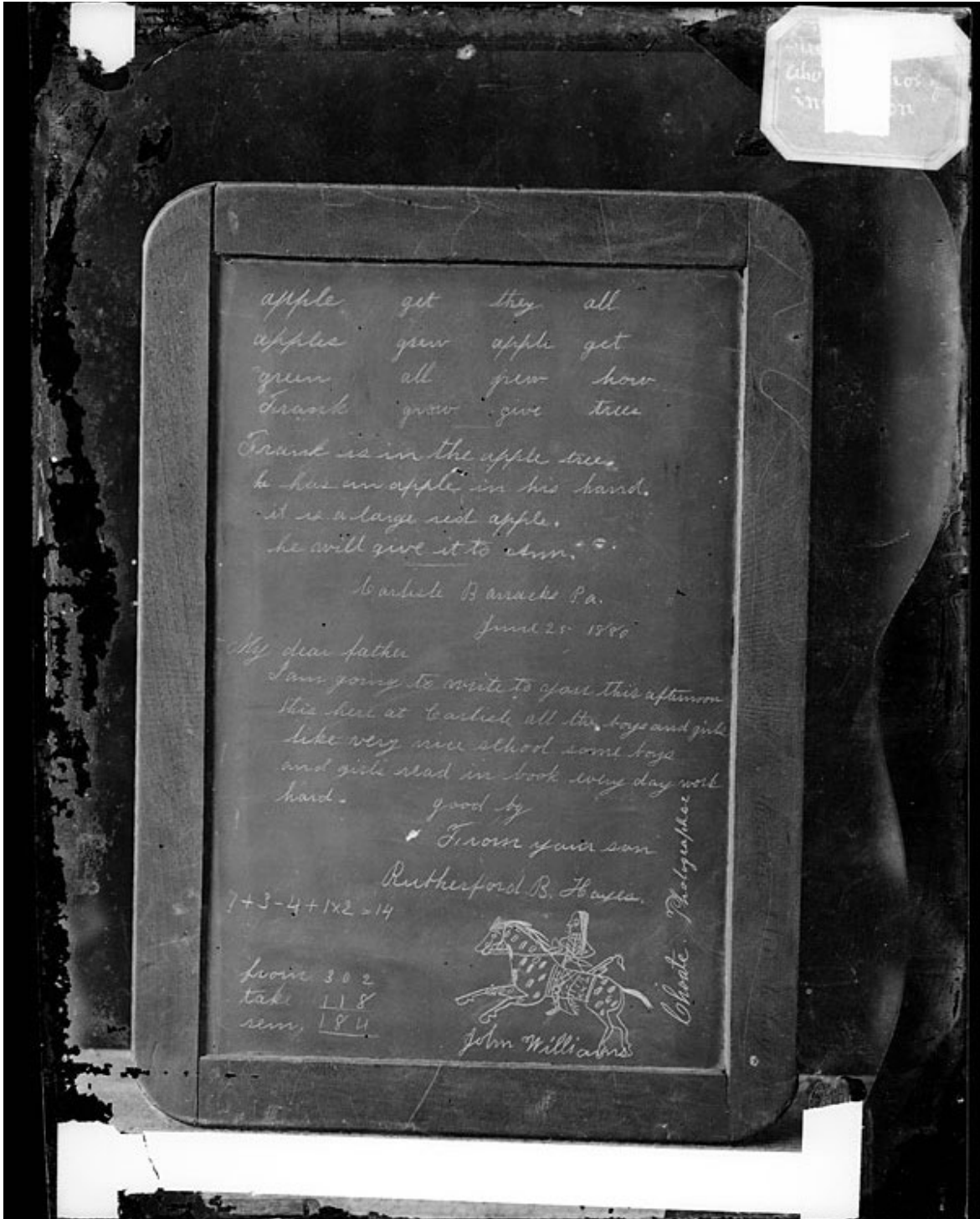
<https://edsitement.neh.gov/media-resources/reimagining-sitting-bull-tatanka-iyotake>

Student Activity, U.S. Civil Rights Movements of the 20th Century

<https://edsitement.neh.gov/student-activities/civil-rights-movements-late-20th-century>

PRIMARY SOURCE PACKET

Photograph, John N. Choate, *Slate showing student work with names R. B. Hayes and John Williams* [version 1], 1880
National Anthropological Archives, Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center (NAA_73365)
<https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/images/slate-showing-student-work-names-r-b-hayes-and-john-williams-version-1-1880>



PRIMARY SOURCE PACKET (CON'T)

Newspaper article, Stephen K. White Bear, "Speak Only English," January 1882

The School News [Carlisle Indian School, Carlisle, Pennsylvania]

https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/sites/default/files/docs-publications/SchoolNews_v02n08_0.pdf

SPEAK ONLY ENGLISH.

I hear every body talk Indian. So I suppose that is the reason I have been talking my own language but great many of the boys say only the Sioux boys talk Indian continually but I don't believe them because I hear the other tribes talk Indian too but every boy and every girl would like to know how to talk Sioux very much. They do not learn the English language they seem to want to know how to talk Sioux and I know some of them have been to school about eight years or six years but they do not learn so very fast and they do not want to speak English they just want to know how to talk Sioux. And now I take this opportunity to talk about our Sioux boys. All the Sioux boys are trying very hard to do just as some white men can do and I think some of the boys and girls know how to talk English very well not many a few boys and a few girls too. So if we try very hard we could not speak only

English so we must talk English and when we come to hard words we can not say the words. We will talk Indian again. If we talk English continually we do not pronounce very well yet. So many boys who are trying to speak only English they do not speak out in the English. They just use signs to each other and they looks like a sick man they don't hold their heads up they hold their heads down continually. So I think the English language is hard for us but if we will try very hard we will get it after while it is to a hard for us but we must keep on continually. Of course Capt. R. H. Pratt has talked to us a good many times about English. I do not say I like to talk Indian. I like to speak English very much and I am very anxious that the other boys and girls should try very hard to speak only English just as very hard as they could do. I want to remember what our minister talked to us he said now boys and girls I want you to remember what I said but some boys and girls they don't listen to him they have just been sleeping in the chapel. I think I will stay here three more years but I am not sure whether I can or not but I think I will try to stay here three more years at this Carlisle Indian school any how, because I want to try to get a good education and the knowledge too for myself so I told my home people but they did not respond to my letter yet.

Now, we have learned something so we must keep it what we have learned at this Carlisle school. Now that is all I have to say to you to day. Respectfully,

STEPHEN K. WHITE BEAR, SIOUX.

Stephen could not speak any English when he came to Carlisle school. —Editor.

DEBRIEFING QUESTIONS

According to White Bear, it was very common for students to speak their own language. Why do you think this was?

Based on White Bear's writing and your own assessment, how did the English-only rules affect students' mental health?

White Bear wrote this as a punishment for speaking Sioux, and it was published in the school newspaper. Does this impact the source's trustworthiness? Use textual evidence to support your claims.
