

LEARNING THROUGH THE LANGUAGE:  
A CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A NON-NATIVE AMONG TWO INDIGENOUS  
LANGUAGE COMMUNITIES

by

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LEARNING THROUGH THE LANGUAGE:  
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This dissertation features a personal narrative of a Non-Native researcher learning two Indigenous languages, Ho-Chunk and Omaha, in northeast Nebraska. Presented in the three publishable pieces format, the first manuscript features an argument for expanding Critical Language and Race Theory (LangCrit) to encompass the unique circumstances that have contributed to the current context of Indigenous languages. After problematizing the three reified concepts of race, language and identity, the author argues that three key factors differentiate the experiences of Indigenous language communities: colonization, dual-citizenship status, and the perception of (dis)appearing languages. The second manuscript focused on the complexities of the research process. Provided the historical trends of dehumanizing research in Native American communities, the researcher illustrates the efforts she took to address the complexities of interactions that underlie research between Non-Native and Native communities. Drawing on the five tenants of Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies (Brayboy, Gough, Leonard, Roehl & Solyom, 2012), she discussed her experience with the research process as it revolved around three key themes: ongoing negotiations, getting it wrong, and adapting the research process. Within this work, the author attempts to provide a transparent lens into the research process by naming the privileges she has within this context and working towards transcending this power. The final manuscript featured in this dissertation was a critical autoethnography of the author's own experience as a Non-Native researcher learning two Indigenous languages. Using LangCrit (Crump, 2014) as the theoretical lens, the author explored the complex intersections of her visible and audible identities in the context of

colonization. Together, this dissertation yields social and educational implications. First, schools, teachers, and teacher education programs should consider language as a way to develop culturally sustaining pedagogical methods, particularly for those serving Indigenous youth. Second, by reframing our understanding of individuals' unique idiolects (rather than bounded languages), we may be more likely to recognize, and appreciate, the translanguaging practices that occur within the classroom, the home, and the community. This paradigmatic shift has the potential to move beyond the terminal narrative of Indigenous language death and affirms the linguistic survivance occurring within Indigenous language communities.

PREVIEW

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## DEDICATION

To Wagigų Hara, Wago<sup>n</sup>ze Wiwita i<sup>n</sup>thi<sup>n</sup>ge,  
and the Ho-Chunk and Omaha language communities

I will forever remain your student.

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PREVIEW

## INTRODUCTION

*“I wasn’t allowed to talk my native tongue or practice my native ways. Numerous times I put on this big ol’ white [...] cone that said on there... ‘dunce’. I didn’t know what it meant. I didn’t know English. They put it on me, made me wear it all over. Kids would laugh at me. (Pause). They took me away from all of that and punished me for talking in what was my first language. I didn’t know any other language. So whenever I would talk, it came out... Cree would come out. Whenever I would talk, I would get hit. (Pause- shedding tears). I got hit so much that.... I lost my tongue. I lost my native tongue.”*

This interview excerpt, taken from the documentary *Our Spirits Don’t Speak English*, features the story of Andrew Windy Boy, a Chippewa Cree who attended two boarding schools during his childhood in the mid 1960s to early 1970s (Heape & Richie, 2008). Andrew Windy Boy’s experience is just one example of the historical linguicism and linguistic genocide that occurred for many Native Americans in the United States. As Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) argue, “[w]e cannot understand the present divorced from the past” (p. 10). Some of these traumatic experiences from the past are still lived today, and can be illuminated through the lived experiences of language policy.

In this introductory manuscript, I will first define language planning and policy and more specifically educational language policy. Then, let us navigate through the different waves of policy that have impacted Indigenous languages at the macro-level. These fluctuations of Indigenous language policies can be more fully understood through the lens of Safety Zone Theory (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; McCarty, 2013a). The anguish experienced by Andrew Windy Boy in the excerpt above has also been endured by other Indigenous communities, but in unique ways dependent on their own sociopolitical histories. Therefore, the specific sociopolitical context of the Ho-Chunk and Omaha language communities will be explained. Following this, I will provide a rationale for my dissertation format, which is different than the

conventional model. Finally, a road map will be provided for the three publishable pieces featured in this dissertation.

## **Language Policy Defined**

Drawing on the contributions of several scholars (Cooper, 1989; Haugen, 1959; 1965; Johnson, 2013; McCarty, 2011; Tollefson, 1991), I have reconceptualized language planning and policy (LPP) to consist of “the complex sociocultural processes which influence the function, use, structure, and/or acquisition of language varieties” (Sudbeck, 2015, p. 76). There are three core LPP activities (i.e., status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning) that occur through a variety of means (e.g., top-down and bottom-up, overt and covert, explicit and implicit, as well as *de jure* and *de facto*). Here, policies are conceptualized as a verb, which involves the agency of multiple actors at multiple levels through the processes of creation, interpretation, appropriation, and instantiation.

Educational language policy, in particular, consists of the official and unofficial policies that are created across multiple layers and institutional constructs (Johnson, 2013). These official and unofficial policies may be practiced in formal classroom and school settings (e.g. medium of instruction or subject) as well as informal venues. As Johnson (2013) notes, these educational language policies are then “interpreted, appropriated, and instantiated in potentially creative and unpredictable ways that rely on the implementational and ideological spaces unique to that classroom, school, and community” (p. 54). These have the potential to impact language use and the formation of students’ language ideologies.

Historically, educational language policies have been utilized in order to eradicate, subjugate, and marginalize Indigenous languages (as well as other minoritized languages). Therefore, they have become “instruments of power that influence access to educational and economic resources” (Johnson, 2013, p. 54). More recently, educational language policies have

also been used to develop, maintain, and promote Indigenous languages. That is, educational LPP can be used as a mechanism for dominant groups to establish and maintain a hegemonic language hierarchy, or as a tool for individuals/groups to use their agency to resist such hegemonic structures. As McCarty (2013a) notes, “[e]ducation represents the most extensive- if contested- public domain for contemporary Native American language use” (p. 28). Together, the past and present educational language policies also contribute to shaping the future for generations to come.

## **Historical Linguicism**

To better understand Native American language planning and policy (LPP) necessitates one to first, and foremost, recognize the unique legal and political status of Indigenous peoples<sup>i</sup> in what is now considered the United States (McCarty, 2013a). At the core of the Native American identity, from a legal-political perspective, is the principle of tribal sovereignty: the “right of a people to self-government, self-determination, and self-education”, including the right to linguistic and cultural expression abiding by local languages and customs (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006, p. 10). Similar to the sovereignty of U.S. states and the federal government, “tribal sovereignty is not absolute” (McCarty, 2013a, p. 2). That is to say, “competing jurisdictions, local histories, circumscribed land bases, and overlapping citizenships” co-exist with one another and in turn constrain the exercise of sovereignty that each recognized tribe has (Wilkins & Lomawaima, 2001, p. 5). It has been argued that this relationship is unlike that of any other U.S. ethnolinguistic group (Lomawaima, 2003).

In what is now considered the United States, there are 4.5 million people who identify as having American Indian and Alaska Native ancestry and 1,118,00 who identify as having Native Hawaiian lineage, who together constitute 1.5% of the total population (DeVoe, Darling-Churchill & Snyder, 2008; Romero-Little, 2010). Linguists estimate that of the estimated 750

languages prior to European contact, only 169 distinct languages indigenous to the U.S. are still spoken, each with varying degrees of vitality (McCarty, 2013b; McCarty & Zepeda, 2014; Romero-Little, 2010; Siebens & Julian, 2011). This dramatic language shift has left every remaining language characterized as endangered, with 90% spoken by only the parent generation or older (Krauss, 1998). The number of speakers of these 169 distinct languages numbers less than half a million, and the size of Indigenous language users is “dwarfed by the 60 million people speaking a different non-English language and the 227 million people who speak English only” (Siebens & Julian, 2011, p.1). Provided this harsh reality, it is vital to investigate the historical trends and shifts in LPP as it pertains to Native American language communities. These shifts in Indigenous LPP can be categorized as (1) the expedient tolerance era, (2) the restrictive-repressive era, (3) the null-tolerant era, and (4) the possibility of a promotion era.

### ***The Expedient Tolerance Era***

Prior to European invasion, the North American continent regarded multilingualism as both common and necessary. It was used as a mechanism for trade and intertribal communication among Indigenous peoples, as well as a tool for the diffusion of Christianity and European ideals (McCarty, 2013a).<sup>ii</sup> While Native American languages flourished, several colonial languages were introduced and thrived as well (e.g. Spanish, French, English, Dutch, German, and Russian).<sup>iii</sup> Due to this multilingual landscape and the need for communication across language varieties, regional *lingua francas* were widely used both among Native American peoples and between them and settlers (Silverstein, 1996 as cited in McCarty, 2013a).

Print literacy then became a colonizing tool of conquest. One of the earliest examples of this comes from the ruling principle of the Spanish Catholic Church, which Spicer (1962) asserts was the “obligation to civilize” (p. 281 as cited in McCarty, 2013a, p. 49). The “indoctrination of children” was a large component in the missionaries’ efforts, through teaching reading, writing

and arithmetic in Spanish; however, Indigenous languages were also considered an essential element for Spaniards. Significance was placed on missionaries' ability to acquire Native American languages, particularly among Jesuit missionaries (McCarty, 2013a). Utilizing Indigenous languages as media of instruction and creating writing systems for Native American languages to translate religious texts became common practice, which was continued by the English and French Jesuits in regions inhabited by Algonquian-speaking communities.<sup>iv</sup> The language policies from initial invasion to the early 1800s, therefore, can be characterized as those of *expedient tolerance* (Kloss, 1998; Wiley, 2013), a weaker version of promotion laws that are designed to meet the needs of the government (not the needs of the minoritized language speakers) and include short-term allocations that do not actively promote the maintenance and/or development of the minoritized language.

It would be a distortion of lived experience to not consider the complexities of the larger colonizing agenda. After two centuries of contact with European settlers and the ongoing legacy of Manifest Destiny, Native American communities were greatly impacted. For example, Sandy Grande (2015) purports, "The United States is a nation defined by its original sin: the genocide of American Indians" (p. 49). Sometimes the impact came even before seeing the European settlers, as unfamiliar diseases spread quicker than the Europeans themselves. "Corruption and brutality among state and church officials was rampant" (McCarty, 2013a). For that reason, language policies were but only one aspect of a much larger, complex project of cultural transformation from multiple layers and sources of competing colonial forces.

### ***The Restrictive-Repressive Era***

This era of expedient-tolerance policies was followed by that of "explicit policies intended to eradicate Native languages" (McCarty, 2013a, p. xxv). As Joel Spring (2013) reflects on the role of missionaries, he notes the power the missionaries held in this context for using Indigenous languages for their own gains: "Missionaries wanted to develop written Native



American languages not as a means of preserving Native American history and religions, but so they could translate religious tracts to teach Protestant Anglo-Saxon culture” (p. 26). Similarly, Warren (1998) notes the continuum of linguistic researchers present in the Pan-Mayan region, critiquing members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (also referred to as the Wycliffe Bible Translators) whose goal was to provide bible translations as “part of a power structure bent on alienating Mayas [in this case] from their own communities, religions and forms of authority” (p. 81). The work of missionaries often moved beyond evangelization, extending to educational institutions.

In addition to the role of missionaries, the U.S. government also recognized a sense of responsibility in the education of Indigenous peoples. These restrictive, repression-oriented policies (Kloss, 1998; Wiley, 2013) emerged from efforts made by Indigenous activists and later through members of Congress in 1802, which provisioned for the expenditure of funds not to exceed \$15,000 per year to promote “civilization among the aborigines” (as cited in Leibowitz, 1971, p. 67). These provisions became a catalyst for the Civilization Fund Act of 1819 (Leibowitz, 1971; McCarty, 2013a; Spring, 2013), which authorized the president to “employ capable persons of good moral character, to instruct them [Indians] in the mode of agriculture suited to their situation; and for teaching their children in reading, writing and arithmetic” (as cited in Spring, 2013, p. 24). English is not explicitly mentioned in either of these provisions; however, both attempt to promote “civilization”. As Leibowitz (1971) notes, “That the English language is the ‘civilized’ tongue and the Indian language ‘barbaric’ is implied in these provisions, but not stated” (p. 68).

However, the explicit mention of the English language in federal legislation was soon to follow. Educational policy was seen as a means to civilize the “savage” as well as permit the taking of his land (Leibowitz, 1971). Derived from the initiative of President Andrew Jackson, Congress adopted the Indian Removal Act in May 1830, which “authorized the president to set

aside lands west of the Mississippi for the exchange of Indian lands east of the Mississippi” (Spring, 2013, p. 28). In addition, the president was to provide assistance to the tribes for this removal and resettlement. During this time, personnel instructed by the federal government forcibly removed entire nations of people from their homelands with many dying along the journey. Some took this infamous act in human history (commonly referred to as the Trail of Tears) to become the impetus for tribal-controlled governments and school systems, some of which experienced great success (e.g., Choctaw and Cherokee Nations) (Spring, 2013).

Manifest Destiny (i.e., the perceived God-given right for White settlers to take over Indian lands) drove land-hungry settlers to push beyond the Mississippi, the border from the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The Homestead Act was passed in 1862, opening the advancement of White settlers to the Great Plains region. Following this legislation, the Indian Peace Commission explicitly mentioned the role of the English language. In its report of 1868, it states, “Schools should be established which children should be required to attend; *their barbarous dialects would be blotted out and the English language substituted*” (as cited in Leibowitz, 1971, p. 70, emphasis added). Motivated by a combination of humanitarianism, militarism, and expansionism, Leibowitz (1971) notes that the Indian Peace Commission’s report “sparked a heated controversy on the use of English in schools” (p. 71). Many religious educational institutions promoted bilingual practices; however, as a result of this report, all Native American school instruction was required to be in English. After the Appropriation Act of 1871, government schools, conducted exclusively in English, were established (Leibowitz, 1971), gradually displacing a large number of mission schools and their bilingual approach.

The replacement of Indigenous languages with English became one of the major repressive educational policies of the U.S. government toward Indigenous peoples during the latter part of the nineteenth century (Lee & McCarty, 2015; Spring, 2013). During this time, off-reservation boarding schools were perceived as the “ideal facility to Americanize Native

individuals” (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006, p. 47). Lee and McCarty (2015) affirm the trauma experienced by Indigenous children who were “forcibly removed from their families and compelled to attend distant residential schools where they faced physical and psychological trauma for speaking their mother tongue” (p. 410). The first off-reservation boarding school was built in Carlisle, Pennsylvania in 1879. Conceived by former Army officer Richard Pratt, the school was to provide “equal educational and vocational opportunities in order [for Native children] to excel as American citizens” (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006, pp. 48). Pratt was noted for perceiving Native capabilities to be equal to those of White Americans (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006), while also attacking the Native way of life as “socialistic and contrary to the values of ‘civilization’” (Spring, 2013, p. 33). Carlisle Indian School directed the future of Indian education for the next five decades (Leibowitz, 1971).<sup>v</sup> In addition, the federal Indian school system constructed on-reservation boarding schools, as well as day schools. A minute proportion of Indigenous children attended public schools during this time.<sup>vi</sup> As the vignette of Andrew Windy Boy at the beginning of this manuscript illustrated (Heape & Richie, 2008), these deculturalization efforts stripped many children of their native tongue (see also Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Suina, 2014).

While the “language issue” was noted earlier as having received little attention in legislation, Leibowitz (1974) recognized that it had transformed to being “mentioned in almost every [federal] report concerned with Indian education” (p. 17). This became even more apparent in 1887, when the Commissioner of Indian Affairs John D. C. Atkins asserted “There is not an Indian pupil... who is permitted to study another language than our own” (as cited in McCarty, 2013a, p. 53). He further articulated the ‘one nation- one language’ policy, which remained influential for six more decades. These repression-oriented policies during the boarding school movement illustrate active efforts to remove Indigenous children from their families and prepare them in such a way that they would never return to their people (Leibowitz, 1974). Language, therefore, became a critical element in educational policy. Instruction in the

colonial English language and abandonment of one's native tongue, as Leibowitz (1974) notes, "became complementary means to the end" (p. 17).

### ***The Null-Tolerant Era***

Following some of the most restrictive and repressive language policies in Native American LPP history, was an era that has been characterized as "benign promotion of now-endangered Indigenous mother tongues" (McCarty, 2013a, p. xxv). One of the first recognitions of the abuses undergone by Native Americans in the boarding school movement came in 1928<sup>vii</sup>, when *The Problem of Indian Administration*, also known as the Meriam Report, was published (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; McCarty, 2013a; Meriam et al, 1928; Spring, 2013). This independent survey publicly scrutinized the boarding school conditions as "grossly inadequate" (Meriam et al., 1928, p. 11). The team of investigators argued that those who wished to "merge into the social and economic life of the prevailing civilization of this country should be given all practicable aid and advice in making the necessary adjustments", while also recognizing that those who wish "to remain an Indian and live according to [their] old culture should be aided in doing so" (Meriam et al, 1928, p. 86). This team of researchers, which included Winnebago educator Henry Roe Cloud, "rightly grasped the principle of choice—the ability 'to remain an Indian' as an essential human right" (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006, p. xxii).

In the next few decades to follow, the Bureau of Indian Affairs relaxed restrictions on the use of Native languages in schools, allowing for the development of some teaching materials in Indigenous languages. Drawing on the work of Indigenous activists, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs under Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency (1933-45), John Collier, facilitated the development of the Indian 'New Deal' (McCarty, 2013a; Spring, 2013). This served as a catalyst for corpus planning activities, as well as tribal economic development, self-government, and cultural freedom (McCarty, 2013a). At the spawn of larger events going on in the nation (i.e.

Civil Rights Movement, Bilingual Education Act), Indigenous peoples were inadvertently allowed more flexibility in teaching/learning native tongues in school settings.

### ***Are We Entering The Promotion Era?***

In the midst of other global recognition for minority language rights, a paradigm shift took place in 1990 when the *Native American Languages Act* was passed by Congress (NALA, 1990/1992). In 1991, the United Nations Declaration on Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic Minorities, Article 4 stated that “States should take appropriate measures so that, whenever possible, persons belonging to National or Ethnic minorities may have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue” (as cited in Spring, 2000, p. 31). This policy was “unprecedented” for a variety of reasons (Warhol, 2012). First, much of the previous federal LPP had attempted to eradicate these same languages; second, it affirmed “the connection between language and education achievement and established an official, explicit federal stance on language” (Warhol, 2012, p. 236). This legislation was amended in 1992 to encompass a larger spectrum of Native American LPP activities, including provisions for community language programs, training programs, material development and language documentation (NALA, 1990/1992). Overturning more than two centuries of Native American LPP in the U.S., NALA established the federal role in preserving and protecting Indigenous languages. In 1996, federal legislation extended to include Native American language survival schools and language nests as well as other language restoration programs (Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act, 2006).

In 2007, the United Nations General Assembly officially recognized the universal linguistic human rights of the world’s 370 million Indigenous peoples. However, two of the Assembly’s “most powerful member states, Canada and the United States- both with abysmal records of treatment of indigenous peoples- rejected the Declaration” (McCarty, 2012, p. 544). While neither of these federal governments took the initiative to sign the supranational

Declaration, the United States has continued to take steps within their own national legislation. More recently, the Native American Languages Reauthorization Act and the Native Language Immersion Student Achievement Act have been brought to vote in Congress. Both were unanimously approved by the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on June 18, 2014, and these pieces of legislation have “gained bipartisan support in both houses of Congress” (Linguistic Society of America, 2014). It should be noted, however, that there currently are no congressional representatives from the state of Nebraska that support either of these bills.

Some may perceive that with the passing of NALA (1990/1992) and the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation (2006), and the recently introduced Native American Languages Reauthorization Act and the Native Language Immersion Student Achievement Act, that we have entered the promotion era of Indigenous languages (Wiley, 2013). *Promotion-oriented policies* are those in which “the government, state or agency allocates resources to support the promotion of specific languages” (Wiley, 2013, p. 71). That is, federal legislation now exists to support the maintenance and revitalization efforts that are taking place within Indigenous communities.

However, McCarty (2013a) purports that from the federal perspective, “NALA might be considered merely symbolic” (p. 61). She continues to argue that this perception is “buttressed by the legislation’s meager funding”, with approximate allocations averaging at “2-3 million per year, an amount that, if distributed equally among the 565 federally recognized tribes, would represent between \$3500-\$5300 annually—hardly sufficient for the task at hand” (p. 61). Beyond funding disparities, these potential promotion oriented policies continue to face other challenges. For example, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2001 has had a negative impact on Indigenous language education. Wilson (2014) notes “NCLB recognizes the right of Puerto Rico to use Spanish as an official language of education, but does not recognize the right of states, territories, or Native American governments to declare Native American languages

official and use them in education” (p. 226).<sup>viii</sup> Now with the passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015 by the Obama Administration, Native American language schools are grouped together with those in Puerto Rico. Despite this, Native American language schools are still not able to provide standardized assessments in their own languages, even though Puerto Rican schools can test in Spanish (NCNALSP, 2016).

Additionally, Evans and Hornberger (2005) note that since NCLB legislation, there has been a shift in how to perceive the role of the learner’s native language:

“In the No Child Left Behind Act, English language development is taken as the *sine qua non* of academic achievement and a child’s native language is assigned less of a facilitative role in promoting English language development. Indeed, it may be viewed as a crutch in subject area study that prevents children from making adequate progress toward English language proficiency” (p. 89).

The paradigmatic shift that took place with NCLB legislation emphasizes solely on the development of English literacy, without taking into account the documented cognitive advantages of additive bilingualism (e.g. metalinguistic awareness, divergent thinking, communicative sensitivity, and the ability to learn multiple languages) (García, 2009).

Further, Wilson and Kamanā (2014) recognize the incongruence apparent between the goals of the federal government under NCLB for students to graduate from school ready for college and work, yet the high stakes standardized testing that occurs as a result of NCLB reinstitutes the forced assimilation of Indigenous students. They continue, “Such forced assimilation has historically led to negative academic outcomes in the very goals that the federal government is claiming to seek” (p. 194). Therefore, despite the fact that the seemingly promotion-oriented policies of NALA (1990/1992) and the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation (2006) have been passed, the NCLB legislation has restrained these

Indigenous language promotion policies from meeting their full potential over the past fifteen years. With the ESSA legislation passing two months prior to the writing of this manuscript, the impact of this new legislation on Indigenous language policies has yet to be determined.

## **Safety Zone Theory**

These historical and current shifts in Indigenous LPP (i.e., (1) the expedient tolerance era, (2) the restrictive-repressive era, (3) the null-tolerant era, and (4) the possibility of a promotion era) can be more fully understood through the lens of Safety Zone Theory (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; McCarty, 2013a) (*See Figure 1*).<sup>ix</sup> In other words, the changes in Native American LPP have been conceptualized as “contests over what constitutes as ‘safe’ vs. ‘dangerous’ difference is human social life” (McCarty, 2013a).<sup>x</sup> Examining the sociopolitical history of LPP development in the United States overtime, Leibowitz (1974) posited that language policies are implemented “when an ethnic group [is] viewed as irreconcilably alien to a prevailing concept of American culture” (p. 1). Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) support this notion with regard to Indigenous languages, as when Native languages are perceived by dominant groups as instrumental or non-threatening (i.e. safe), those differences have been tolerated and even supported. An example of this might include the passing of federal legislation such as NALA (1990/1992) and the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation (2006) during a time when the dominant society considers Indigenous peoples as non-threatening. However, when ‘dangerous’ expressions of Indigenous difference are manifested throughout dominant society, Native languages have been systematically suppressed (McCarty, 2013a, p. 43). This was apparent during the boarding school movement as a result of settler-colonialism, especially during the stages of early contact and westward expansion.