

## *Original Paper*

# The Indian Student Placement Program: An Assessment of Mormon Theology and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Contribution to 20th Century Indigenous Child Removal Trends

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### ***Abstract***

*This paper examines the 20th-century Indigenous child removal trends in the United States with a specific focus on Mormon involvement and influence. Due to the important role Native Americans played in Mormon prophecy, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints created programs that aimed to academically and spiritually educate Native youth. More specifically, programs such as the Indian Student Placement Program (ISPP) housed Native children with predominantly Mormon families during the school year from 1954 to 1996. However, shifts in Church leadership and attitude throughout this period strongly suggested mental and physical abuse and destruction of tribal identity. By weighing scholarly arguments and referencing the Book of Mormon, this paper will evaluate the extent to which the ISPP can be justified by theology and to what degree the LDS Church contributed to 20th-century assimilation and acculturation trends.*

### ***Keywords***

*Indian Student Placement Program, Indigenous child removal, Native Americans, assimilation, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Mormons, acculturation, Lamanite salvation*

## **1. Introduction**

Assimilation has long existed as a solution for social cultures and races that don't conform to the dominant identity. As 20th-century naturalist Charles Darwin argues, the individuals most adaptable to change in their environments survive—survival of the fittest. Those who fail ultimately lose footing and existence in the world (Fields & Johnston, 2010). This theory can be applied to Native American

assimilation practices in the US. Stemming from the belief that Indigenous groups harnessed underdeveloped cultures and methodologies, and were subordinate to white settlers, the federal institutions forcibly removed thousands of Native American children across the US from the beginning of the 19th century to the late 20th century. The result was the placement of thousands of Native children into organized systems, including the adoption of Indians by non-Indians, assimilation programs, boarding schools, indentured servitude, kidnappings, and enslavement. Children were specifically targeted across these programs due to the belief that civilizing and transforming the younger generation would be more effective than Native adults. In other words, assimilation focused on children because they had less-developed cultural identities; it was thought of to be easier to convert them religiously and ideologically.

Regardless of the methodology used to disconnect these children from their tribes and reservations, these actions supported the mainstream American ideology of assimilation. Specifically, the US government held the common “settler trope” that they were rescuing children from abusive homes or unstable upbringings. Ironically, the new environments the Native youth were placed in were later reported as physically and mentally abusive and damaging. The reports of violence in the Natives’ new institutions raise many questions among scholars. How were these assimilation programs permitted? Was acculturation the solution to the perceived savagery of Native Americans? These questions lead to this essay’s overarching research question: to what extent was the Indian Student Placement Program by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints justified by Mormon Prophecy and how did it contribute towards 20th century Indigenous child removal trends?

This paper focuses on one of the lesser-known spheres of Native child removal: the Mormon context and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints involvement in the Indian Student Placement Program (ISPP). It will begin by introducing the concept of Mormonism and the founding of the LDS Church by the Prophet Joseph Smith. Through stories from Native students, statistics, and scholars’ arguments, the extent to which this program can be categorized as an assimilation program will be measured. Additionally, Mormon involvement in earlier child removal trends, which may not necessarily have been classified as formal child removal, is assessed. By looking at the physical and psychological effects on the children, this paper argues that the LDS church cannot justify the motives of the ISPP solely due to the crucial role that Native Americans play in Mormon theology. This is because there was a change in the LDS Church’s attitude towards Natives and a difference between the intention of the program and its actual impact. Regardless of the rationale behind structuring the ISPP, the Native participants reported instances of abusive households and processes of “civilizing” their physical appearances, all of which replicate US government structured systems throughout the same time period. To this end, this paper lastly makes the argument that the ISPP was another acculturation program in the US, whose damaging effects on the Native identity were shielded by its categorization under the LDS church.

## **2. Founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints & Mormonism**

The following recounts the story of the founding of Mormonism as explained by the LDS Church. In 1820, after experiencing confusion due to “conflicting claims of various faiths,” Joseph Smith turned to the Bible to ask for guidance and God (“The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” 2016). According to the story, God and his son Jesus Christ appeared before Joseph and told him not to join any “existing churches” and stated that “God would restore to earth the Church originally organized by Jesus Christ, with all of its truths and priesthood authority” (“The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” 2016). In 1823, an ancient prophet visited Joseph, who directed him to Palmyra, New York, where the religious history of an ancient American civilization was buried (“The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” 2016). This sacred text was later translated by Joseph and published in 1830, officially titled *The Book of Mormon*. After a series of revelations, the LDS Church was recognized in 1830.

The *Book of Mormon* is used concordantly with the Bible by LDS Church members. The most common title for these followers, Mormons, as explained by the Book itself, comes from the Land of Mormon where the Nephite prophet Alma established the Church (Nephi 5:12). Mormonism is viewed as a category under Christianity; the majority of Mormons view themselves as Christians (Pew Research Center, 2012).

The LDS Church members were persecuted mainly due to their practice of polygamy. As a result, in 1847, successive leader Brigham Young led the Latter-day Saints on an exodus to the southwestern United States and settled near the Great Salt Lake in modern-day Utah.

## **3. Early Mormon Interactions with Native Americans & Theological Motivation for Child Removal**

Before understanding why the LDS Church founded the ISPP in 1947, prior interactions between Mormons and Natives in the surrounding area need to be considered. Scholars often study the ISPP while confined to the parameters of existing 20<sup>th</sup>-century assimilation programs in the US, often without referencing the existing slave trade of Native children in the surrounding Utah area. One exception is historian Margaret D. Jacobs. She explains, “Early Mormon settlers took part in an already existing slave trade by purchasing enslaved Indian children from Indian or Mexican slave traders,” demonstrating that the first interactions between Natives and Mormons involved some form of removing and relocating Indigenous youth (Jacobs, 2016). These interactions proved to be increasingly destructive of Native agency because they separated families, normally without consent. In fact, Brigham Young justified the trading and indenturing of Native children by arguing that “it is essentially purchasing [Indigenous children] into freedom instead of slavery; but it is not the low servile drudgery of Mexican slavery” (Jones, 2000). Framing the action as “purchasing them into freedom” presents two issues. Firstly, the idea that Natives would be entering a new environment with freedom suggests that their previous life on reservations with their families was somehow restrictive. The assumption that the environments the

Native children came from were unstable or “backwards” was a theory generalized from the reduced resources and poor living conditions for some Natives. While reservations may have been underdeveloped in comparison with urbanized settings, the environments certainly didn’t foster abusive environments. Secondly, Young’s characterization of handling Natives as a “purchasing” process strips Native agency and automatically places them into the power of the slave traders. This paradox in the phrase—freeing Natives by purchasing them—shows the beginning traces of the hero complex that many later Church leaders and proponents of child removal used as a means for justifying their actions. Specifically, they believed that the removal of Native children was a way of rescuing or salvaging them from their tribes, supposedly resulting in an improvement in their upbringing and education.

In comparison to these unofficial and often undocumented instances of child removal, the Church’s ISPP was a systematic program whose original intent was for schooling purposes. Founded by Mormon women, the Relief Society developed the ISPP in 1947 immediately following World War II (Arrington, 1990). From 1947 to 2000, this program placed 30,000 to 50,000 Indigenous children from the surrounding Utah area with predominantly white Mormon foster families during the school year (“The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” n.d.). This placement was seen as an opportunity for Mormon Indian children to “deepen their spiritual commitment while attaining a better education” (Jacobs, 2016). While the program welcomed many different tribes, Navajo children composed the majority of the participants (Morgan, 2009). This paper uses the term “foster” or “host” families to signify Native children living with LDS families. This is the general term used by the program itself and scholars and doesn’t mean that Native parents lost any legal rights to their children during this process. Prime motivation for the establishment of the ISPP was the underlying role that Native Americans played in Mormon Prophecy. Specifically, the Book of Mormon discusses the history of political and social conflict between Nephites and Lamanites. Although both groups began as “descendants of Israelite brothers,” the Lamanite group expanded to include many different ethnic groups; the term Lamanite grew to describe “cultural and religious distinctions, as well as ethnic differences” (“The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” n.d.). Lamanites who didn’t believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ destroyed the Nephite nation. Yet, in predicting this future, Nephite Prophets prayed that “the Lord God would preserve a record of [their] people” and that one day the Lamanites would be “brought into salvation” (Enos 1:11-14). The Book of Mormon introduces this concept of divine obligation and suggests a potentially justifiable reason for why LDS leaders established the ISPP in the first place. The Book also explains that the Lord God caused “a skin of blackness to come upon [Lamanites],” presumably being “cursed” after their fall from grace (Boxer, 2015). These descriptions further solidify the belief that Native Americans were modern-day descendants of Lamanites.

#### **4. The Indian Student Placement Program**

With theological history and original intent explained, the following is a short recount of the “first” ISPP participant. Already informally employed as a laborer in the Avery family beet fields, Navajo Helen John

requested to remain resided in Richfield, Utah, to finish her education. Despite initial hesitation from the Averys and Golden Buchanan, a local mill and lumber owner, they granted her accessibility and ability to stay in Richfield. After seeing Helen and a few other girls living in tents, just for the sake of education, Buchanan believed that the LDS Church had the resources and ability to “[save] hundreds of Indian children [who] would have the privilege of living in LDS homes where they not only could be taught in school but they could be taught the principles of the gospel” (Boxer, 2015). The sincerity of Buchanan’s proposition alludes to the argument that the ISPP was established out of goodwill and was supposed to be unlike its other 20th-century assimilation program counterparts.

Yet, this positive light shielded many assimilation tactics that host families would use on the adoptees. In the process of moving in with the Buchanans, the wife, Amy Avery, bathed Helen’s body, washed and cut her hair, and dressed her in American clothes (Boxer, 2015). This physical transformation mentally damaged Helen’s perception of her own image and identity. Despite the ISPP’s well-natured intentions, it’s this evidence of physical transformations, like Helen’s, and losses of tribal identity during the move-in process that undermine arguments that the ISPP was an effective and ambivalent program towards Native children. The larger issue is that these transformation “rituals” were common to hundreds of 20th-century federally-funded boarding schools across the US. Thus, the question becomes, can the ISPP be distinguished as a program dissimilar to its predecessors and 1900s counterparts, or was it another assimilation institution, categorized under the LDS Church and defended by Mormon prophecy?

## 5. Justification of the ISPP

To answer this question, the extent to which Mormons were obligated to bring the Gospel to American Indians needs to be evaluated. Theologically speaking, since Native Americans were recognized as Lamanites in the Book of Mormon, Latter-day Saints obeying God’s plan should thus uphold this paternalistic ideology towards Native Americans. Historian Brandon Morgan explains how the program was “intended to provide [the Native participants] with educational and spiritual growth that would allow them to undertake leadership positions, both secular and ecclesiastical, as adults” (Morgan, 2009). The importance of Morgan’s argument is the intention of the program, compared to its outcome. Discerning between intention and impact of the ISPP produces two different scopes on this situation. In concordance with historian Jacobs, who argued that LDS church leaders likely find the term Indigenous child removal as “discordant” and viewed the hospitality as a “spirit of goodwill and compassion,” both scholars identify the ISPP’s original intention as good-natured, benevolent, and opportunistic for Native youth (Jacobs, 2016). They also disassociated the ISPP from other 20th-century assimilation missions. To this end, Lamanite salvation defended original ISPP intentions from critics and proved that the operation was justified.

Helen John’s story also sheds light on the sacrifices that Native children had to make—homes, families, and support systems—in order to obtain an education. When boiled down to the desire for education, the LDS church had the chance to offer Native Americans their resources through part-time housing while

simultaneously fulfilling the Mormon prophecy's call to convert and integrate Indians under the Church. In conclusion, the establishment of the ISPP can be justified through its motivation and offerings as a way to religiously and academically strengthen Native American education. Importantly, this perspective illustrates how it wasn't sole belief in Lamanite salvation that led the LDS church to form the ISPP. While the simultaneous process of converting Natives was a side benefit for the Church, the prioritization of education frames the main reason for establishing the ISPP.

However, a basis for justifying the operation of ISPP by the LDS Church cannot solely rely on the intentions before initiation. Since the effect on the Native youth participants is a strong measure of justification, the extent to which Native families were willing to participate in the program needs to be considered. During WWII, thousands of Navajos left reservations to either fight in the war or find employment in a "war-accelerated" economy (Pavlik, 1992). In his journal article *Of Saints and Lamanites: An Analysis of Navajo Mormonism*, author Steve Pavlik argues that the reason for Navajo attraction to Mormonism was the desire to continue these lifestyles in the post war period (Pavlik, 1992). This change in the Natives' environment and perspective ultimately led to further desire for conversion and alignment with the LDS Church. In addition, the post war period also introduced the expansion of roads and subsequent de-isolation of Navajo reservations as these lands were more frequented by visitors and government officials. Navajo exposure to the dominant culture combined with a weakening control over their land and lives contributed to increased conversions to Christianity.

It is clear that numerous scholars have argued that LDS Church leaders supported ISPP operation due to the Native American role in Mormon prophecy; since Natives were Lamanites, it would be appropriate for Church leaders to bring the gospel teachings to them. However, author Pavlik suggests a new perspective: Native Americans, specifically Navajos, saw conversion to LDS faith as desirable because they believed *they* were fulfilling this integral role in the church doctrine. He also asserts that "this [aspect] [was] extremely important to a people who are just as inherently excluded from many other aspects of white American society" (Pavlik, 1992). The difference between these two arguments is that Natives saw themselves as capable of fulfilling the Lamanite role in Mormon theology independently; in other words, Church leaders didn't need to manage this connection. Conversion also introduced Native Americans to a community that "provided a sense of acceptance, belonging, and importance within a powerful segment of white American society," unlike colonial settler groups who consistently separated Natives from mainstream identity (Pavlik, 1992).

Pavlik also declares that LDS Church leadership used these offerings of inclusion and integration into mainstream white society as a "selling point" when addressing Indian people" (Pavlik, 1992). This is the point where scholarship begins to disagree on the course of ISPP and overall Indian conversion intention. While some point out that conversion to Christianity served as an "entrance" into the ISPP and future educational opportunities, historians like Pavlik suggest that the LDS Church took advantage of Native disconnection with mainstream society and perhaps even leveraged this weakness to gain Church members, ultimately fulfilling Mormon prophecy.

The reason why the justification of the ISPP was debated was due to a shift in the LDS Church's perspective on Native Americans. This change can be largely credited to the transfer of the Church presidency to Prophet Spencer W. Kimball in 1973. While the Church still recognized deep interest in the Native Americans because of their history in the Book of Mormon, there was a significant shift in the language and attitude towards them (Kimball, 1971). Specifically, Kimball referred to Natives as "Royal Blood," inherently idolizing and praising them (Pavlik, 1992). He also argued that the "development...growth, and progress of the Lamanite people" was of "prime importance to all Mormondom, to the whole church program, to all Christianity" (Pavlik, 1992). Although this language may appear tolerable, the Church's romanticization and reliance on the "development" and "growth" of the Natives implied that they need to change their existing identity or physical appearance to achieve a satisfactory level, by LDS standards. Furthermore, giving Natives the title "Royal Blood," permanently reassured that they were seen as a racial subset under the Church instead of as a distinct demographic, further cementing the Church's power over Native Americans.

Solidifying Natives as a group under the Church ultimately weakened the original intention and purpose of the ISPP because there was now evidence to indicate that Indigenous children were perceived as figures under LDS leadership. This perception is problematic because those in power now have the agency to exploit and mistreat those in subordination. A 1981 revision of the Book of Mormon now described Lamanites as "white and delightfultsome" instead of "pure and delightfultsome"; motivation for this change aroused from the Church's belief that "conversion to faith" truly resulted in a whitening of their skin (Pavlik, 1992). Clearly, this revision is problematic due to racial implications; it associates whiteness with purity, cements color as a "standard," and promotes the belief that Natives needed to change in some way during conversion in order to be accepted by the Church. These examples all contribute to the argument that the ISPP operation can't be solely justified by Mormon prophecy because there was a shift in attitude towards Mormons that needs to be accounted for. The usage of offensive terms and inaccurate portrayal of the effects of Indigenous conversion to Christianity show how the LDS Program was another form of assimilation and acculturation, categorized under Mormon theology.

Yet, if this program seemed undesirable, why did Native families continue to send their children? The main reason for continued, voluntary participation was parental wish for their children to have a "better life" (Pavlik, 1992). While the term "better life" has many implications—better socially, academically, culturally, or mentally—the ISPP had a lot to offer for these families, including shelter, food, clothing, access to higher education at LDS institutions, employment opportunities, and involvement in the Church (Pavlik, 1992). Researchers who also polled 365 Native families asking why they volunteered for the ISPP found that 24% (the largest percentage) participated "to help fulfill the Book of Mormon prophecy" (Jacobs, 2016). This study indicates that some Indigenous families were in concordance with Mormon theology and hoped to embody this Lamanite "role." When synthesized together, both of these motivations for voluntary participation in the ISPP show how Native families seemed to approve of a

transition into a more developed environment with abundant resources to strengthen the children's upbringings.

However, their voluntary participation cannot be used as a means for justification because there was a misalignment between the advertisement of the program and documentation from live experiences. In other words, although Native families thought they were sending their children to educational institutions and welcoming foster families, later reports from first-hand accounts of experiences present insights that contradict this notion. In a podcast interview with Matthew Garrett, author of *Making Lamanites: Mormons, Native Americans, and the Indian Student Placement Program, 1947-2000*, he explained that the Native children were unaware of what they were signing up for. Even though there were limitations, such as children with difficult experiences that chose not to share and reflect post-graduation, Garrett, acknowledging these constraints, argued that the ISPP had a mix of both good and bad reviews. One account discusses a child who was so ashamed of his "dark" and "sinful" skin that he spent an entire night trying to scrub his body to get rid of the color (Westwood & Toledo, 2022). On the other hand, some kids reported that the Church had offered them a new identity and that they were taught to be humble, brave children of God (Westwood & Toledo, 2022). Despite these differing experiences, the LDS program can be viewed as a culturally destructive program, regardless of its intent. Because the program decided to teach Native children to somehow change—accept American values and develop a new identity—many children report feelings of dismay towards their Indigenous heritage and tribal association. Obtaining new identities also indicated that their existing character was flawed in some aspect, and that to be accepted and acknowledged by the rest of American society, Natives needed to transform.

However, some scholars, like author Jessie Embry, may interject to argue that "foster families made great sacrifices in letting strangers into their private places" and that LDS families who volunteered to foster Native children had a "genuine love" and "desire" to aid them. Yet, their genuine attitudes can merely be written off as paternalistic, which aligns with the then-current 20th-century assimilation tropes. In addition, it's important to recognize that throughout the program, Native children were constantly viewed as subordinate and within the power of LDS leaders and host families, evidently having little agency. This lack of autonomy combined with pre-existing colonialist attitudes towards Indigenous groups undermine Embry's assertion, ultimately demonstrating that the LDS program, while established out of educational motivations, began to harness acculturation as their prime methodology in teaching as the operation progressed.

Thus, it can be concluded that the systematic practices for transformation that the ISPP used fractured Indigenous identity and overall weakened tribal heritage. To this end, viewing Native Americans as Lamanites cannot justify these reported experiences of culture shock and forced change, ultimately proving that the ISPP was just as similar to other assimilation and acculturation practices supported by the US government.



## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, analyzing how the ISPP fits into pre-existing Indigenous child removal trends is key to understanding the extent to which it mirrored other assimilation-purposed institutions. What began as an operation to provide education, employment resources, and religious studies to Native Americans in the Utah area, while simultaneously satisfying God's call to Lamanite salvation in the Book of Mormon, eventually evolved into a program that harnessed culturally destructive values, teachings, and methodologies. By combining Mormon theology with the first-hand experiences of Native participants, this paper makes the point that the ISPP, and specifically, LDS host families, used assimilation and acculturation practices, often knowingly. Because of this implication, the operation of the ISPP cannot be justified by the Lamanite role in the Book of Mormon.

Despite this conclusion, limitations still remain. The ISPP in itself is still, moderately, a recent event. Scholarly sources on Indigenous child removal, with or without the Mormon context, remain limited in the field due to the little evidence and novelty of the topic. Participants of the ISPP and its counterpart programs in the 20th century are still healing from their experiences, and a select few have formed communities aimed at discussing and recognizing their involvement with the programs and institutions. Legal protection today, aiming to restrict the removal of Indian children by non-Indian families, has risen within the past five to six decades. The most notable legislation is the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978. This act cemented placement priorities for Native American children, aiming at connecting children with their extended family, members of the child's tribe, or other Indians in general (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2016). This legislation is a key factor in at least reducing the opportunity for mistreatment or abuse of Indian children if relocation becomes necessary during their upbringing.

To this end, there are still unsolved issues and questions that arise in the field. What are other forms of protection for Native American families and Indigenous tribes in the 21st century? How can the LDS Church properly collaborate with Indigenous tribes in the area and offer support and healing resources? As stated earlier, given the young nature of this topic and recent efforts to collect more data and hear real accounts from survivors, these questions serve as a beginning point of a new era of peace for Native Americans and continued support from the rest of American society.

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