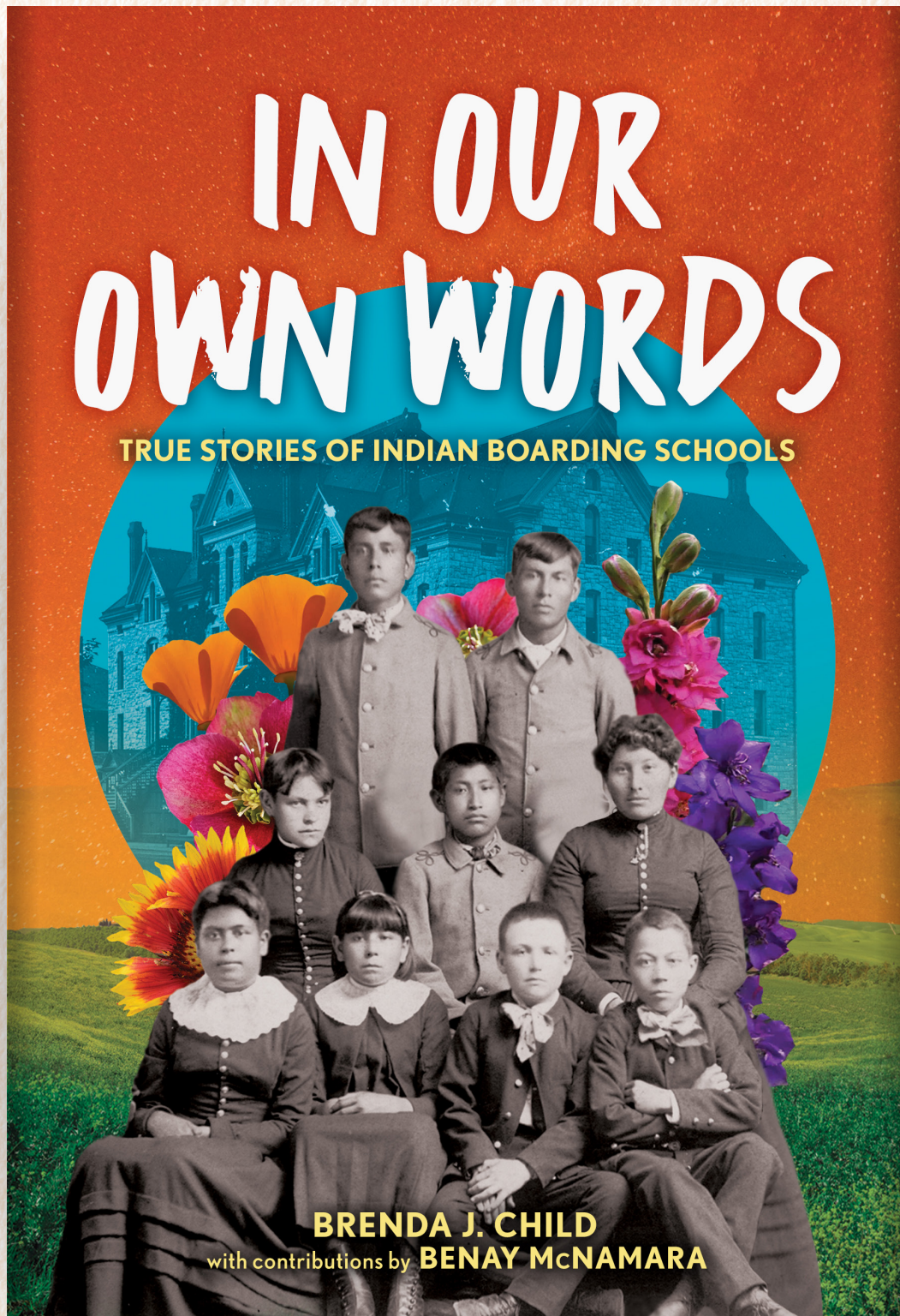


LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

Educator's Guide | Age Range: 9–14



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Dear Educator:

During the period from 1879 through the late 20th century, thousands of Indigenous children attended federal residential boarding schools in the United States. The originators of “Indian boarding schools” deliberately targeted the most vulnerable members of Indigenous families to coerce Indigenous nations toward assimilation into mainstream U.S. culture and society by forgoing their Indigenous identities. Proponents of Indian boarding schools believed that targeting the children would lead to generational shifts in the ways Indigenous peoples live, work, speak, and think in our contemporary world. Ultimately, the intended prizes for the federal government and settler colonial society were access to Indigenous land and resources and exploitation of their children’s labor. What they didn’t anticipate was the strength and resilience of Indigenous peoples to hold fast to their identities, languages, cultures, and values amid the violence of boarding school life, nor the powerful legacy of connecting many Indigenous nations through their lived experiences as survivors of boarding schools.

Brenda J. Child’s narrative approach to *In Our Own Words: True Stories of Indian Boarding Schools* uses letters, oral histories, and archival records from real people who experienced boarding schools. We meet young children who long to see their families back home, adventurous teens who ran away from school, and charismatic young adults who write about their daily routines and encounters in boarding school. We get to witness the first-person heartbreak of parents who begged to see their children once again and hear honestly how they used the very system that tried to strip them of their identities to advocate for their own children in boarding schools.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) acknowledges that history and the social studies continue to be the least prioritized content area in elementary grades. By pairing nonfiction literacy with primary sources, learners can engage in historical reasoning and inquiry and disciplinary literacy, while also addressing historical silences, understanding multiple perspectives, and contextualizing contemporary contexts. See its Statement on Powerful Teaching and Learning at <https://www.socialstudies.org/position-statements/powerful-teaching-and-learning-social-studies>.

CONTEXT OF BOARDING SCHOOLS

American settler colonialism as a grounding concept that created the system that drove all policies and development of relationships between US and Indigenous nations and peoples. It’s important for educators to consider how boarding schools worked as a tool of settler colonialism (Child, p. 33-35) and to fully understand the context of chapter 2.

During the period of US policy regarding the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their homelands, otherwise known as **the assimilation and allotment era**, Indian boarding schools served as the factories that worked to produce assimilated Indians who no longer relied on their Indigenous identities, languages, and lifeways but instead were meant to fully embrace Americanism.

The history of Indigenous families and boarding schools is complex, as Child demonstrates with primary source materials in this book. Boarding schools have been seen by Indigenous peoples along a spectrum of negative and positive experiences and purposes. The author captures some of these sentiments by including the voices of parents and families who represent the range of encounters

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Indigenous people had with these boarding schools, as she states: “Students...found happiness or refuge in the schools, while clearly others were abused and suffered—and so we have learned that there is a wide-ranging continuum of Indian experiences” (p. 273).

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended to be used as a launching point to help young learners engage with history, to interact with the real people whose lives they read about and to consider different perspectives so they can develop a deeper understanding of the reality for the people we read about in this text.

It is written with the young learners in mind, those in upper elementary, middle school, and early high school. The main themes of hope, resilience, courage, and strength are centered throughout the engagement activities, but not at the expense of deeply considering the US policies and impacts of colonialism that created the hardships and dire situations the people at the heart of these stories endured.

Main themes and components of the book are used to guide the engagement, but there are also suggestions for extensions of learning related to the book.

THEMES

Throughout the book, the recurring themes of **hope**, **strength**, **courage**, and **resilience** are reintroduced in the stories of children and families impacted by boarding schools. These positive themes are almost always the result of encounters with adversity and despair caused by federal policy and the legacy of settler colonialism in the United States. Child states her hope that the reader will see “how American Indians remember boarding school history today, often as a metaphor for the broader experience of colonialism during the same era of assimilation and allotment” (p. 274).

By sharing letters with the reader, Child, invites us to meet children who were boarding school students, parents of said students, and other people involved in these schools, like administrators and reservation Indian agents, throughout the book. Child explains to the reader the importance of letters as the basis for understanding “a complex history of the American Indians involved with residential school education” by bringing their stories out of anonymity and into the full text of history (p. 15).

Exploring Themes

Throughout the book, there are many examples of how Indigenous peoples and nations have endured despite efforts by the US government and its settler colonial system to eradicate them using violence, policy, and practices. These efforts are supported by systems set up by oppressors to bolster their own power, such as a series of laws.

By exploring themes in the different chapters of the book, young learners can begin to identify and understand how the systems work. Using a cause-and-effect chart, learners can find examples of each subtheme from the book.



In Our Own Words: True Stories of Indian Boarding Schools

Ask learners to create a FIVE-column chart with these headings for each set of themes: SUB-THEME, EXAMPLE FROM BOOK & PAGE, CAUSE, EFFECT, and RELATION TO THEME. Have them write the word or phrase that demonstrates each subtheme, along with the page number where they find it in the book, then hypothesize the cause and effect for each, based on their reading. Finally, ask learners to relate their theories back to the theme (i.e., how does the example help us understand Indigenous resilience and hope, or strength and courage in the face of these adversities in the subthemes?)

THEME—Resilience & Hope vs. Adversity:

- SUBTHEME—Dispossession
- SUBTHEME—Disease
- SUBTHEME—Poverty
- SUBTHEME—Systems of oppression

THEME—Strength & Courage:

- SUBTHEME—Stereotypes against Indigenous core beliefs / values
- SUBTHEME—Removal of traditional lifeways

An alternative way of engaging with themes could also be to use a T-chart to simply list examples from the book of each theme or subtheme.

Ask learners to create a FIVE-column chart with these headings for each set of themes:

SUB-THEME (a. Dispossession; Disease; Poverty; Systems of Oppression) (b. Stereotypes against Indigenous Core Beliefs / Values; Removal of Traditional Lifeways)	EXAMPLE FROM BOOK & PAGE	CAUSE	EFFECT	RELATION TO THEME a. Resilience & Hope vs. Adversity b. Strength & Courage
e.g. SUB THEME: Removal of Traditional Lifeways	page 51 "Ohiye sá chose assimilation as a path to survival."	page 51 "Ohiye sá chose assimilation as a path to survival."	My hypothesis: attending boarding schools became a survival strategy for families	Related to theme Resilience & Hope vs. Adversity because children were removed from their traditional lifeways through boarding school, so they learned to blend in and conform even if they had to practice their Indigenous lifeways in secret
SUMMARY:				



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ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Letters and Stories

Child provides spotlights on several boarding school children throughout the book: for example, “Meet Red Bird” on page 21, “Meet Ohíye Sá” on page 46, and “Meet Lutiant” on page 280. Find the other people in different chapters to get to know more about these individuals spotlighted; some chapters have more than one. You can meet them in chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 10. There are also letters from students, such as Isaac Plenty Hoops in chapter 10, that you can reference in the engagement activities below:

- Delve into the letters and stories of one of the people we meet in the book. Describe who that person was and how their story represents one of the themes of the book: resilience, hope, courage, or strength.
- Based on the letters and stories from one of the people we meet in the book, imagine what a day would look like for that person. See the humorous version: “Student Life: Hour by Hour” written by Gilbert on page 145. In the perspective of the Indigenous boarding school student you select, write one journal entry for the day. What would you be thinking, or doing, how would you feel, what would you see others doing, and so on?

Spotlights

There are sections in the book that highlight the stories of prominent and interesting Indigenous former students. Their lives were impacted by boarding schools in different ways, and they each contributed to our understanding of how Indigenous students navigated boarding school life.

ENGAGE with the story by choosing one of the spotlighted former students to become friends with. What are some things you are curious about when you meet someone new? Make a list of questions that you would ask this person if you met them, then use their story from the book to answer your questions. (Some examples might include the following: Where are you from? How do you like school? What are your favorite things to do?) Based on the story you know about the person you selected, how do you envision your friendship (e.g., what kinds of things would you do when you were together; what would you talk about)?

Spotlights: Zitkála-Šá (Red Bird) p. 29; Ohíye sá (Charles Eastman) p. 46, 51; Jim Thorpe p. 65, 214; Lutiant LaVoye p. 279.

Schools

Locations of schools often were the deciding factor in how families selected where to send their children to boarding school. Other factors also weighed into the decision, but such decisions were not made lightly, as boarding schools were often a last resort for families.

There are different Indian boarding schools mentioned throughout the book. Different tribal nations sent their children to certain schools for many of the same reasons. Over the course of the boarding school era, these schools shifted in their approach to schooling and their treatment of students, though many of the same concerns were brought to light by letters from parents included in the book.



ENGAGE with the text by working with a small group of peers to create a web for one school, such as the Flandreau Boarding School. At the center of the web, write the name of the school. At the end of each line extending from the web, include one piece of information that you learn about that school from reading the book. Thematic focus areas for web can include items such as dates, location, tribes enrolled, names (students, parents, or administrators), routines, reasons for attending, concerns or problems encountered, and so on.

Since the same schools are mentioned in many chapters, this web can be used as an ongoing engagement activity for every encounter with the book.

NOTE: This could also be completed by the whole class on a larger scale as an exit ticket for each time they read a different chapter or section of the book. Individual students or small groups could be selected to enter information on the classroom web at the end of the session.

Timeline

Indian boarding schools evolved over time and in different places, eventually leading to the dismantling of many boarding schools in favor of day schools located on Native American reservations. Federal policy played a crucial role in the establishment and operations of boarding schools, from presidential administrations to superintendents and commissioners on Indian Affairs and Education to legislation that affected Indigenous people. Global and national health and economic crises also had impacts on boarding school enrollment and experiences.

ENGAGE learners in developing a chronological sense of how the boarding school era unfolded by using dates, events, people, and legislation to create a timeline spanning the years from the mid-1800s through the 2000s.

EXTEND learning by asking students to extend the timeline to include more contemporary events and legislation that impacts modern boarding schools.

Mapping

Refer to the map ("Federal Off-Reservation Boarding Schools in the Assimilation Era, Listed by State") located before the Table of Contents with locations of boarding schools.

ENGAGE by locating one school nearest to where you live now. What can you find out about it? Create a timeline for that school using information from the book (e.g., opening, closing, laws and policies affecting the school, leadership of the school and federal government).



EXTENSION OF LEARNING

1. Which schools are still in operation?
 - What boarding schools are currently in operation? Where are they located? Use what you know from reading the book, search the school website, and conduct internet research to compare historical and contemporary aspects of one of the modern schools. TRY: make a poster for one currently operating school and discuss how it's different now from its original intended use
 - Use these and other websites to learn more about Indian boarding schools:
 - Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs school website:
<https://www.bie.edu/topic-page/reservation-residential-schools>
 - Map from National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition of all boarding schools in the U.S. historically and contemporary:
<https://boardingschoolhealing.org/list-of-indian-boarding-schools/> (map)
 - Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative (2021):
<https://www.bia.gov/service/federal-indian-boarding-school-initiative>
2. Find more stories:
 - Using information available from the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, local historical societies, or from documentaries (see the PBS playlist on boarding schools at <https://www.pbs.org/articles/native-american-history-documentaries-about-residential-schools-and-forced-adoptions>), share the stories of other Indian boarding school survivors. Make and present a slide deck that includes the name of the former boarding school student, the school they attended, and a summary of their story. Include photos and other archival images where they are available.



In Our Own Words: True Stories of Indian Boarding Schools

PRAISE FOR *IN OUR OWN WORDS*

★ “While sharing difficult history, Child underscores the ways Native peoples resisted. . . . This unflinching account of Indian boarding school history is examined from every angle . . . **a must-have for every collection.**” —*Booklist*, starred review

“Meticulously researched. . . . This comprehensive volume is **an important and accessible exploration of a frequently silenced perspective of American history.**” —*Publishers Weekly*

“*In Our Own Words* is **a long overdue conversation across generations**, from future ancestors to today’s kids. It pulls back the veils of time and distortion to reveal the U.S. federal Indian boarding schools and their impact on young Native people. Both an **achingly necessary, thoughtfully assembled** book and an important step toward genuine healing.” —*Cynthia Leitich Smith, enrolled Mvskoke citizen and editor of the Printz Award anthology *Legendary Frybread Drive-In**

“**Gently and thoughtfully** lays out the origin, complexities, horrors, and evolution of the boarding school system, all while celebrating the lives and incredible courage of the children themselves. . . . **This book is excellent.**” —*Deidre Havrelock, Orbis Pictus Honor-winning author of *Indigenous Ingenuity**

“Readers will not find an author better suited to contemplate and convey students’ boarding school experiences than Child.” —*John W. Troutman, historian at the National Museum of American History and author of *Indian Blues**

“Child reveals the **complex** layers of assimilation politics while never losing the thread of the human story. . . . Add to the book’s **triumphs** this one: the author, a descendant of boarding school survivors, has herself reached a pinnacle of education that allows her to undertake this crucial **historical truth-telling**, this literary act of survivance.” —*Kimberly Blaeser, author of *Ancient Light* and former Wisconsin Poet Laureate*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brenda J. Child is the author of several award-winning academic books of history. Her bestselling book for children, *Bowwow Powwow*, won the American Indian Youth Literature Award for best picture book. A former Guggenheim fellow, she is Northrop Professor at the University of Minnesota and a citizen of the Red Lake Nation.



This guide was created by Natalie Martinez, PhD, Laguna Pueblo, whose short-lived Indian boarding school experience in junior high school also helped her develop resilience in response to adversity.

