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"Take Every Good": A Study of the Hidden Trends in the Latter-day Saint Indian Placement Program

Annie Penrod Walker

THE LATTER-DAY SAINT INDIAN Placement Program unofficially started in 1947 when a seventeen-year-old Navajo girl named Helen John was harvesting sugar beets with her family in Richfield, Utah. Helen had been attending school on the Navajo reservation in Arizona for years, but that summer her father told her that once they returned to the reservation she would have to stay home and work, allowing her younger siblings to have a turn at school. Upset and disappointed, Helen ran off in tears and was overheard by Amy Avery, the wife of the farmer Helen’s family was working for. Helen revealed her desire to be educated, to learn how to read, and to continue going to school.1 Amy Avery called Golden Buchanan, who had recently been called as the stake coordinator of Lamanite2 affairs in Richfield and discussed how they could help Helen stay in Utah and attend school. After a surprise visit from Spencer W. Kimball, who had been assigned to oversee the Church among the Lamanites and was traveling home from a visit to Arizona, Buchanan and his family were asked if they would take Helen John in as one of their own. Thus began the first trial run of the LDS Indian Placement program.

2 Mormons believed that the descendants of the Lamanites were the Native Americans, and therefore called the Indians Lamanites.
A quick study of the Latter-day Saint Placement Program reveals historical arguments over cultural assimilation, the loss of Indian culture, and the morality of the program. Going deeper into the study of the Placement Program, however, does not clarify these arguments, but instead the topic becomes more and more muddied, making it difficult to take a stand on whether the placement program was helpful or hurtful for Native Americans. Insight from a more recent source helps bring understanding to the conflicts of the program.

The main body of sources this paper uses come from a collection of approximately 160 Native American oral histories gathered from 1989 to 1991 by Farina King and other employees of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies. Interviewees were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, with the majority from the Navajo or Dine tribe, and all from Utah, Arizona, Nebraska, New Mexico, or Washington. The Redd Center sampled a range of lifestyles, including those who returned to the reservation, those who stayed in Utah, and even those who worked at Brigham Young University. Studying this recent source of Native American oral history interviews, three themes repeatedly surfaced that have been undervalued in current historiography. First is the number of Native Americans who were primarily baptized in order to go on placement, but with no desire to understand the Mormon religion. Secondly, that most Indians who went on placement became more appreciative of their culture and found correlations between Mormonism and their native Navajo religion. Lastly, the oral histories revealed the idea that placement was generational—that it fulfilled its duty to the generations of older participants who needed it and has since become unnecessary.

**CONTEXT AND HISTORIOGRAPHY**

Golden Buchanan and Spencer W. Kimball worked to transform Helen’s experiment into an entire program for the placement of Indian children, hoping to address the growing poverty and lack of effective education on Indian reservations. The Placement Program fit nicely into the greater national context of the time, as the federal government was making efforts to “‘Americanize’ Native Americans. This meant, in effect, replacing their “old ways” and cultural traditions with all the attributes of modern America’s economic and social system.”

Native Americans had previously been exposed to the idea of their children

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leaving the reservation, as federal boarding schools and foster programs had already been in place throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some Indian families willingly sent their children to schools or programs, hoping to offer them the best opportunities, while other families had their children forcefully taken from them by eager Indian agents. In either instance, the main goal of these institutions was to "Kill the Indian, and save the man," by any means possible.

Some programs, however, declared their desire for acculturation rather than assimilation, trying to find a balance between two cultures rather than allowing one to dominate the other. Even in religious and federal Indian programs striving for assimilation, however, "Teachers expected students to conform by accepting white behavior patterns and attitudes, thus negating the children's own belief systems. This attitude implied the superiority of white culture and left some students ashamed of their heritage." These patterns of white superiority resulted in a complicated self-image for the Native Americans who participated in the Indian Placement Program.

Similar to the federal programs, the Latter-day Saint Program was meant to educate and civilize the Indian. LDS placement was unique in some ways, however, and must be viewed through the Mormon context in order to better understand the program. Mormons taught that the Book of Mormon, a book of scripture revealed to their prophet Joseph Smith, was written specifically for the Lamanites, who were seen as the ancestors of Native Americans, but who lost their way and fell into wickedness. Thus "Mormons have traditionally believed that they have a special responsibility for the welfare and conversion of all American Indian peoples." The early pioneers who migrated to Utah in the 1840's and 50's tried different ways to relate to their Indian neighbors, "They first combined their religiosity with various church programs including feeding and clothing the less fortunate natives," they also sought to establish special Indian farms, like the one Helen John's family worked on, and "the third approach was proselyting." These friendly efforts were not always practiced or well received,

6 Morgan, 191.
but the doctrine they embodied would help lay the seeds for the acceptance of the placement program by Mormons and by Native Americans.

Even with the efforts of these Latter-day Saint programs, the needs of the Indians were not being met. Spencer W. Kimball, one of the early champions of the Indian Placement Program, became president of the Church in 1972, which brought the doctrine of the Lamanite even more into the spotlight. As awareness of the poor conditions on Indian reservations grew Latter-day Saint leaders began to respond “more institutionally to the needs of native Americans beginning in the late 1940s and 1950s. Building on earlier approaches, the Indian Placement Program came to address more modern needs and circumstances of reservation Indians.”

Often in relation to the program, Kimball gave countless addresses about the Lamanites and the members’ duty to aid them. In the Church’s 1953 general conference Kimball offered an address entitled “The Lamanites are Progressing,” stating:

The Lord bless the Lamanite people. They are a great people. They are intelligent, and I repeat my theme song: The difference between them and us is opportunity. It is your privilege and mine through education, through employment and every other means, and particularly through bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ in all kindliness and brotherliness to them, to give them that opportunity which will make of them enlightened, faithful sons and daughters of God with all of the blessings which are promised to them.

Kimball argued that white members of the Church who had the financial means should offer educational and religious opportunities to the Indians through the program. Many members felt it was their duty to sacrifice and take in foster children, and in 1970 the Indian Placement Program hit its peak, serving about five thousand Indian students ranging from sixty-three different tribes. Spencer W. Kimball was a unique individual whose personality sheds light on some of the debates surrounding the program. Kimball believed, along with most members of the church, the Lamanites had fallen into sin, forgotten the true doctrine of the forefathers, and needed to be re-converted to restore their promised blessings. At the same time however, Kimball strongly believed that some aspects of Native culture were beautiful and should be celebrated,

8 Whitaker, 39.
as they were the promised royal people, hence he advocated pride in being a “Lamanite.”  

Historians have been more mixed than Kimball in their studies of the program. The few studies that exist from the beginning and into the height of the program are general overviews or histories of the program. As criticisms of the morality of the program emerged, however, the historiography began to focus on the effects of the program, both the positive and negative for Indians and Mormons. Recent reviews of the program investigate the criticism that placement has resulted in negative psychological effects on Indians who participated, complicating the process of adolescent development as it “set an unrealistic expectation for a life that doesn’t exist on the reservation.”  

Some of the literature argues that forcing adolescents to choose one culture over the other, by living with white families, was devastating to Indians, that it forced them “to think of themselves as good only when thinking that their families and heritage were bad.” These are the common perceptions of placement, that it caused major issues among Native American identity. Other studies conclude, however, that placement was generally a success, that it achieved its goals and aided in furthering the Native American’s opportunities. The studies that view placement as positive conclude that negative feelings were generally due to a lack of information, or a lack of understanding of the goals and objectives of the program by both white foster families and Native Americans.

One of the most influential works of scholarship on the program provided a more defined evaluation of the long-term effects of placement by interviewing 138 placement students and comparing them to 85 who did not go on placement. Bruce A. Chadwick and his team compared religiosity, overall happiness, educational attainments, economic success, and psychological state. He found that, overall, placement participants had achieved a higher level of high school graduation and higher education than the non-placement group. They did not have a significantly more satisfying family life, but did seem to be more social and to have more friends. The difference in religiosity was only modest, and the “claims that serious psychological problems are caused by placement

12 Martin Topper, “Mormon Placement: The Effects of Missionary Foster Families on Navajo Adolescents,” Ethos 7 (Summer 1979): 159.
13 Morgan, 209.
14 Howard Rainer, “An Analysis of attitudes Navajo community leaders have toward a religion sponsored program based upon membership of the faith and amount of information attained,” (M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1976).
participation were not supported in this study. . . . All things considered, participation in the ISPS had a modestly positive, long-term influence on the lives of Indian young people. In only rare instances, such as arrest rate, did participation prove to be a liability.”

The scholarship on the LDS Indian Placement Program aids in increasing understanding of the program and its effects, but also reveals the thinness of the historiography and the need for future studies to fill in the missing pieces. My study of the program aims to help this process by presenting arguments that have yet to be thoroughly discussed or considered. In addition, my body of sources has not been extensively used in any work on the program, thus providing new perspectives to the experiences of the Native Americans. The Charles Redd Center interviews were not strictly about placement, but were general life histories, asking about family, school, and life on the reservation. They also focused on cultural clashes between Mormons and Native Americans, especially regarding missionary work on reservations and any discrimination Indians felt within the Mormon Church. The fact that the placement program came up in the majority of these interviews, more than half had participated in the program and more knew people who had, suggests its significance in the life of these Navajo Indians. A few of the individual interviews are found in present scholarship, but most of the interviews have not been used in any study of the placement program.

Studying this neglected source of interviews revealed important holes in the history of the program that have not been emphasized in previous scholarship. Understanding the culture of baptizing as a ticket out of the boarding schools or off the reservation helps reveal why many Native Americans struggled on placement. Second, previous studies have not emphasized the fact that placement actually helped some students understand their Indian identity and come closer to their native culture. And though the program suffered severe criticism towards the end of the twentieth century, the idea of placement as generational—fulfilling its duty to the generations it was meant for and then slowly becoming irrelevant—suggests another key reason for its eventual disappearance.

**Placement by Rapid Immersion**

Two years after Spencer W. Kimball officially announced the program in 1954, complaints from the Hualapai Indians in Arizona were brought to the

Bureau of Indian Affairs, claiming that Mormon missionaries were using the Indian Placement Program as a proselyting tool to conduct mass baptisms. These complaints not only foreshadowed some of the problems and criticisms the program faced in the future, but they revealed the important culture that developed from rapid baptisms on reservations in connection with placement. Because placement students were required to be members of the Church, the age of acceptance was set at eight—the age of baptism for Latter-day Saints. Early in the program these eight-year-olds made up the majority of students, but the age requirement came under strong criticism in the late 1970s for two major reasons. The first was that these children were leaving their native homes at a very young age, usually before they had the opportunity to understand their own culture. Because of this, the age of acceptance was changed to eleven in 1984 and eventually fourteen in 1986. The second major criticism harked back to the Hualapai’s initial concerns—that the missionaries on Indian reservations were using placement as a proselyting tool as a reward for anyone who was baptized. President Kimball and the program directors tried to address these concerns by re-training missionaries and involving caseworkers in the recruiting process. Despite their efforts, however, the placement program created a unique baptism culture among Native Americans.

Many children who got baptized to go on placement without any understanding of the Mormon religion, and who did not experience any true conversion while on placement, usually returned to the reservation disengaged from the Mormon religion. Jimmy Benally, a Navajo who grew up near Shiprock, New Mexico, discussed how he was baptized to go on placement, and how he witnessed so many others get baptized, go on placement, then come back and have nothing to do with the Church. After placement, Jimmy went inactive in the Church, but eventually decided to serve a Latter-day Saint mission and was called to the Southwest Indian Mission, which included Arizona and New Mexico. He says that as a missionary he discovered the quota rule, “we just signed up kids and baptized them to go on placement. You’ll just find that a lot of kids that were on the LDS Placement Program really weren’t converted to the church. They just went to attend a school. When they quit the placement program, they just became regular people.” This phenomenon, the quick rush to get baptized for school without a desire to learn of the Church or continue as a member after placement, added to the numbers who participated in placement but eventually no longer identified as Mormons. It also created difficult cultural and religious

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16 Allen, 95.
17 Jimmy N. Benally, interview by Odessa Neamn, transcript, 18 July 1990, LDS Native American Oral History Project, Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Brigham Young University, 3.
clashes for the children, as they were unaware of the demands or expectations that their active Mormon foster families would have for the Indians who were supposed to be converted.

Though a large number of students were ignorant of the religious demands they would face in the placement program when they were baptized, others thrived as new Latter-day Saints in their foster homes. Wallace Brown, who attended school in five different Utah cities, including Taylorsville and Trenton, recalls being baptized before being placed, “Apparently they had to baptize us before we could go. There was no testimony or anything involved in this. We were hustled into the program.”18 Through the Indian Placement Program and his foster families, Brown came to an understanding of the doctrine of the Church and has remained a strong and active member, but laments the many who were ignorantly baptized.

Though there were some children on the reservations who were truly converted before their baptism, their example often gave other children a reason to follow ignorantly. Olivia Ben, who was born in Shanto, Arizona, recalls how her older brother read The Book of Mormon and asked to be baptized because he felt it was true. Olivia remembers him going to Lake Powell with a group of kids from the reservation, “getting dunked,” and coming back baptized. From then on, “every time it rained the little puddles, we’d all get baptized.”19 This became a common culture on the reservations, that every time there was some water, everyone was “getting baptized.” After her two older brothers went on placement to California, Olivia begged her mother for a chance to go. She claims, “I went through the whole missionary lessons, and I didn’t really understand what was going on. I just knew that if I got baptized that was my ticket to California.”20 This idea of seeing baptism as either a ticket out of reservation life or a ticket to a new and exciting place, the program created a culture of quick reservation baptisms. Unfortunately, these quick baptisms did not always reap positive benefits. Edouardo Zondajas, a Navajo from Omaha, Nebraska, who was baptized before he knew about placement, attributes the rush into baptism as one of the major reasons so many students returned home with a disdain for the program.21 Students not only dealt with the cultural shock of leaving their native homeland

18 Wallace Brown, interview by Farina King, 10 November 2007, LDS Native American Oral History Project, BYU, 10.
20 Olivia Ben, 3.
and joining a white society, but they also entered into a major religious change and were expected to follow certain rules.

**FINDING RATHER THAN LOSING IDENTITY**

Though some Native Americans struggled with balancing two cultures and religions, one of which they knew very little about, others were able to strengthen their identity as both a Native American and a Mormon through the program. As they experienced the outside world, they became more appreciative of their culture and found correlations between Mormonism and their native religion, ultimately strengthening their belief and understanding of both cultures.

One of the misconceptions of the placement program is that its goal was to stamp out any traditional culture, religion, or language of Indians. Though not always practiced, the theory of the program was in fact to allow students to find the best in both cultures. Unlike most federal Indian boarding schools, Native Americans in the program were allowed, and even encouraged, to speak their native language when appropriate. The Indian Student Guide states “refrain from speaking in your Indian language with other students when there is someone present who does not understand, unless you are trying to teach them the language. We encourage you to speak in your own language when the situation is such that no one will be hurt.”

It goes on to say, “Feel free to talk with people about your home and family so they will understand you and your people.”

The goals of placement were clearly not to rid the Indian entirely of language and culture, but instead to encourage a mutual understanding between Native Americans and foster families.

The program also put a focus on the foster family's role in creating this mutual understanding, but could not ensure success in every situation. The guide for foster parents states “The Indian students and foster family can benefit from each other by accepting the best of both cultures.” It also implores foster families to “help your Indian student be proud of his home, parent, and heritage. He should be helped in accepting the best of both cultures.”

Unfortunately foster families did not always know how to connect with their Indian students, nor were they comfortable talking about a culture they did not

understand. Most Indian students started out quiet and passive, unsure of how to express themselves in this foreign society that valued competition, punctuality, and self-importance—values looked down upon in their traditional society. Audrey Boone struggled forming a relationship with her foster mother who tried to pry conversation out of her, even spanking her to get Audrey to talk. But most students, including Audrey, had an easier time relating to their foster siblings, who Audrey explains was a “kid just like me . . . I could play and talk with them.”26 These relationships aided in helping Indian students adjust to their new home, and eventually many were able to find a beneficial relationship with their foster families.

One of the breakdowns in the communication of the placement program’s goal to “accept the best of both cultures” came in the confusing Mormon doctrine of Native Americans as Lamanites. In the Book of Mormon the Lamanites are seen as “wicked people” and are cursed with dark skin, though they can become white again when they repent of their sins. Though the ‘Lamanites’ change from good to bad throughout the book “Lamanite thus carries a potentially pejorative meaning in Mormon thought. It seems to equate white skin with goodness and dark skin with wickedness and savagery. The imagery has helped create a view of contemporary native Americans as inferior.”27 A proclamation in 1845 by the Twelve Apostles of the LDS Church described the state of the Lamanite people as the “despised and degraded son of the forest.” 28 Many Mormons struggled to get over this conditioned prejudice, and to not just pity or tolerate the Native Americans but to accept them as their own brother, sister, and even children. Some Indians struggled too, knowing they were viewed as lost or fallen people, but others were able to find parallels between their traditional Navajo religion and the doctrine of Mormonism. The Book of Mormon also states that the gospel of Jesus Christ will be taught to the descendants of the Lamanites, believed to be the Native Americans, and that they will become clean and powerful, restored to their previous state as God’s chosen people. In the Book of Mormon, Native Americans found “an explanation for their low social and economic status” while also finding hope in “the ultimate promise of salvation and honored status.” Better understanding their history as a people and “their inherent position in

27 Whitaker, 34.
28 “Proclamation of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints,” April 6, 1845.
Church Scripture provide[d] them with a sense of acceptance, belonging, and importance"²⁹ both in the Mormon world and in the traditional society.

Though the students did not always understand the program’s objective of having Native Americans and foster families benefit from one another, the exposure to mainstream education and a strong Mormon home created an environment where both cultures were giving and receiving. Brenda Beyal had no desire to go on placement, but intended to continue living with her mother and grandmother on the reservation. Her mother, however, pushed her into placement telling her “Go and learn. Go and glean what you can. Bring the very best back with you. We’re sending you because we love you.” Her mother knew the importance of her children gaining what education they could and bringing it back with them. When asked if she struggled between feeling white or Indian, Brenda said, “I don’t think I had a problem with wanting to be white; I just knew that the white people had something to offer and I was willing to take what I could.”³⁰ Though not always successful, this collaborative learning was the main goal of the program, and many were able to use it to their advantage.

Besides a greater knowledge of white society and the Mormon religion, those who went on placement tended to respect their traditional culture much more than those who had remained at home.³¹ Stephanie Chiquito who was placed in Preston, Idaho, was asked about her Indian culture and she responded, “I’m proud of it, I think being on placement program and being away from home made me appreciate my culture more and made me become more aware of it. I don’t think I would have been aware of it if I had stayed at home on the reservation. I think I took it for granted in a lot of ways. Now I see how important it is.”³² Many interviewees revealed that when they returned home for the summers, those who had not participated in placement tended to be more ashamed of some of the Indian ways, especially religious or traditional ceremonies, whereas those from placement valued these ceremonies more.

Though there were some major cultural differences between whites and Indians, for example competitiveness, punctuality, and self-value, some Indians were able to recognize similarities between the cultures and religions. Daisy

Baptisto recognized that the Mormon culture of the family and the church often worked together just as the Native Americans did. Wallace Brown also saw similarities: “Knowing what I know about the traditional and cultural teachings of the Dine, if the Dine people knew for sure the ceremonials, the songs, and the prayers for real, they would understand that [the Mormon religion] was the only way that our people could preserve the teachings and prophecies that were going to come to pass.” Olivia Ben remembered traditional Navajo stories like the man in a big fish and made connections to the lessons of the gospel, like Jonah and the whale. She stressed the importance of reconciling the two religions: “there’s so much to grasp from the Navajo culture . . . . There is so much similarity. In a lot of ways there’s no way to really interpret it into English. You just have to know how to speak it [Navajo] and what it means. This relates to the temple ceremony when they’re telling the creation story. It has deep personal meaning that cannot be said during the summer months.” Emery Bowman had a similar experience after returning home one summer. He sat down with his father to ask about some of the Mormon doctrines and how they connected to Navajo traditions. Bowman came away from placement not just having pride in his Indian heritage, but better understanding of the role of the Native Americans and the sacredness of his culture. His identity had not been taken from him, but rather he had found his identity through placement.

As much as possible, President Spencer W. Kimball tried to reinforce this celebration of Indian identity and culture. In a newspaper article entitled “Lord Calls you His Own:’ A Special Promise to Lamanite Youth,” he states “The Lord calls you His own. The word Lamanite is a glorious appellation. Be proud of your heritage. Never hang your head, but be proud you’re a Lamanite.” The article quotes a girl who’s Indian name is Yellow Horse, stating:

six years ago I didn’t want to even tell anyone my name. I hated it, and probably my people. Now through the gospel of Jesus Christ and a study of The Book of Mormon I am proud to tell people my name and I say loudly, “I Love my People.” As I read

33 Daisy Baptisto, interview by Deborah Lewis, 1 January 1990, LDS Native American Oral History Project, BYU.
34 Wallace Brown, 18.
35 Olivia Ben, 4.
36 Emery Bowman, interview by Deborah Lewis, 27 January 1990, LDS Native American Oral History Project, BYU.
37 “’Lord calls you his own’ A special promise to lamanite youth,” The Deseret News May 10, 1975.
The Book of Mormon I can see the people who lived then, and there are people today who are living like those did. I love my own family and my foster family.\(^{38}\)

Though not everyone's story went like this, there were many who finally understood their place in the world, or between two worlds, through the help of the Indian Placement Program. So what was so different about these students that helped them have such positive experiences? Of course there are many answers, from the environment of their natural home, to their foster home, to the influence of siblings, and their ability to adapt and change. Emery Bowman, for example, explains how people would think he was white because of his personality. He quickly learned that white society did not value quietness and humility the way Native American culture did. He became more outspoken and was willing to try new things. Bowman and others, like Florence Billy who attended school in Salem, Utah, decided early on to not let racism bother them. They accepted who they were and said, "This is what's what," anyone who thinks differently that is their problem, not mine.\(^{39}\) Of course not every student could easily set aside their feelings of isolation or misunderstanding, and adapt to their new surroundings, but those who could were able to make great gains through the program.

Many critics of the program blame the discrimination that Emery Bowman and Florence Billy avoided as a lasting negative consequence on Indians that went through the program. Surprisingly, the white students were generally supportive of the placement students; rather, it was the Indians remaining on the reservation who became a major cause of strife in the placement program. James Lee Dandy tells of his experiences in Tremonton where his fellow white students treated him like a king, carrying his books from class to class and fighting over who would help him with homework.\(^{40}\) Audrey Boone, who attended school in West Jordan, Utah, discussed how the ward took her in instantly, and some even favored her.\(^{41}\) Arguably, these examples could be seen as racist as the students were treated differently, whether better or worse, because of their race. The students were sure to feel some distinction either way, but oppressive discrimination was not as rampant as one would think.

Some of the biggest problems actually came when the placement students returned home to the reservation for the summers. James Dandy tells how friends and family at home took some time to re-adjust to returning placement

\[^{38}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{39}\text{Florence Billy, interview by Ernesteen Lynch, 12 August 1990, LDS Native American Oral History Project, BYU, 6.}\]
\[^{40}\text{James Lee Dandy, 7.}\]
\[^{41}\text{Audrey Boone, 5.}\]
kids. Those on the reservation thought the placement kids were “too good, too Anglo, or too Mormon” but Edouardo Zendejas says that idea wore off pretty quickly and soon it was as if the kids had never left, quickly reverting to their native ways. When placement students came home and their friends and family were not attending church, they would quickly get out of the habit and “take the summer off.” Some reservations students however, after hearing stories about foster homes and schools from the placement kids, decided they wanted to go have a good time on placement. This caused problems between the student and foster families when they realized it was not all just a good time, and most of these students did not return the next year.

The strife among Indians on the reservation, and the struggle some students had in balancing their Native culture with white society, brought the program under attack in the 1970s. Critics argued that the traditions, cultures, and psychological well being of Native Americans were being sacrificed at the expense of increasing the number of Mormons in the West. The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1976 shut down Indian foster programs throughout the country, but allowed for the LDS program to continue as it required the consent of the student and the Native Parents and because it had the students returning home at the end of each school year. The Indian Child Welfare Act however did raise questions asking, “does the program prepare Indians for leadership positions in Indian communities or provide escape from reservation life through integration into non-Indian society? Is education or acculturation to Mormon beliefs and lifestyles the major purpose of the program?” These questions called for a review of the major goals of the program.

James B. Allen states “the major goals of the placement program were to help LDS students gain the education needed to succeed in the modern world and to help them understand and live more fully the religious principles of the church.” George P. Lee, the famous Native American General Authority who went through the Indian Placement Program, expressed an additional implicit goal in the Parent’s Guide to the Indian Student Placement Program: “I learned that I could be proud of my heritage and rise above the problems that have kept my people from progressing. One of my greatest discoveries was that the gap separating Indians from whites could be bridged and that I could compete, excel, and be accepted in a white community while retaining my uniqueness and

42 James Lee Dandy, 7.
44 Allen, 112.
identity as an Indian." President Kimball had planned on Native Americans receiving education and instruction in the LDS Church and then teaching their children and families in that way, building up and strengthening the American Indian. But even with the clear understanding of its goals, many despise the program, believing it stamped out the Native culture of the Indian and tore apart Indian families.

**Placement as Generational**

One of the most interesting ways President Kimball’s goals for education and instruction were assessed was when the interviewers asked whether the interviewee would send his or her own children on placement. Each Native American said no, but not because of negative experiences, they simply believed it was unnecessary now. They argued that because they (the parents) had gone on placement, they were prepared to teach their own children lessons of the gospel and of white society and had no need of placement. They had learned all that they needed to teach and raise their own children in a successful, and often Mormon way. This idea that placement was generational, that it fulfilled its duty to the generations who needed it and was now unnecessary, aids in explaining the decline of the program. Most of the literature claims that the program ended (though it never “officially” ended) because people realized how immoral it was. Though this was part of it, the idea that the Indian Placement Program was a generational program greatly adds to the understanding of its dissolution.

Also, as education on reservations and surrounding areas improved and placement students brought their knowledge back to improve their families, the placement program became irrelevant. When asked if she would send her children on placement, Brenda Beyal also said no, that their generation, the generation of today, has enough opportunities. She claims that now parents have “tools in our little parent tool bag to raise our children in the gospel and raise our children to value education. I think that time [when children went on placement] is passed.” During Brenda’s generation, education was not valued on the reservation as much as working in their native agricultural societies. The presence of the placement program helped families understand the advantages a strong education could give Indians. Brenda’s statement clearly references the two main goals of placement, to help raise children in the gospel and to value

46 Brenda Beyal, 4.
education. In her interview, Olivia Ben references a quote by President Gordon B. Hinckley that states, “take every good that you have and let the church build upon it.” Through the generations of placement participants, there were many who followed that call, finding the best of both cultures and no longer needing placement to provide their families greater opportunities.

With the changing generation, American philosophy towards Native Americans also began to change. As the Native American was seen as adaptable and strong, boarding schools were better regulated and funded, and reservation schools improved. This improvement in education and the ability of the Indian to better interact with white society reduced the need for Indians to work through foster families. Many of the oral history interviews suggest that eventually reservation schools became more effective and students would first choose to stay at home and attend school rather than leave their home. Some historians attribute the decline of the Indian Placement Program to the Mormon Church’s 1972 decision to remove missionaries as recruiting agents and the 1984 decision to limit the program to children from ages eleven to eighteen. By the 1980s the program was cut in half, serving about 2,500 students and by 1992 it was only serving about 400 students. The last student graduated in 2000, when the program unofficially ended. Instead of the Church officially ending the program due to criticism, Native Americans controlled the ending through their levels of participation. With better educated parents and improved schools, Indians quickly decreased their involvement with placement, revealing its irrelevance. With mounting criticism and the changing procedures in the 1980s, the placement program was definitely dwindling, but it clearly aligns with the idea that the generations among the Church and Native Americans were moving away from placement.

Though the program no longer exists, the positive and negative effects are still widely felt. One of the biggest questions critics still ask concern ethnic identity and the loss of native culture among placement participants. Bruce A. Chadwick’s study revealed, “participation was associated with higher general happiness and a stronger perception of being at ease in the white world. It was also related to a modest lessening of Indian identity.” As the Native Americans became more competent in the white world, and the more years they spent on placement, the less comfortable they felt in the Indian world. Ninety-one percent of placement participants in Chadwick’s study stated they felt they “completely” fit in or fit in “pretty well,” whereas almost the entire control group felt

47 Allen, 117.
48 Chadwick, 303.
they "completely" fit in. The question that cannot be universally answered is whether this uncomfortable feeling was worth the gains from the program.

From the start of Helen John's desire for education and the sacrifices made by the Buchanan family, the Indian Placement Program lasted for fifty years and served over 15,000 Indian students. The sacrifices made by foster families and the natural parents caused many stresses and tensions between the two cultures. Though each individual's experience was personal, the more information revealed about the program increases the understanding and reconciliation of long lasting effects on individuals involved, the LDS Church, and the United States. By uncovering neglected sources and comparing them to current historiography, the themes of rapid baptism, strength in a dual identity, appreciation of culture, and the generational transition of placement are highlighted and expand our understanding of the program's beginning, effects, and ultimate decline.

Annie Walker is a history teaching major who plans to teach history and dance to high school students, helping develop young minds and inspiring them to learn and grow. She has a deep passion for history and the cultures, contradictions, and personalities of the past. She is one of six children from southern California, five of which attend BYU. She has danced on the BYU Ballroom Dance Company for the past three years and has taught ballroom dance at BYU for two years. She is married and loves traveling with her husband, who fortunately loves history just as much as she does. This essay was written for the History Capstone taught by Dr. Craig Harline.