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California's History of Discrimination and Exclusion Haunts Early Care and Education Today

By the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment



California's History of Discrimination and Exclusion Haunts Early Care and Education Today

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Cover images, clockwise from top left: The Penngrove School was for White children only, Penngrove, California, ca. 1890 (courtesy of the Sonoma County Library); Mary J. Sanderson, first Black school teacher in Oakland, and her class standing in front of Brooklyn Colored School, Oakland, California, ca. 1870 (courtesy of the African American Museum & Library at Oakland, Oakland Public Library); a group of Californio children stand outside an early private school in San Fernando Valley, California, ca. 1884 (courtesy of the California Historical Society Collection at the University of Southern California); Chinese public school children, San Francisco, California, ca. 1890 (courtesy of the California Historical Society Collection at Stanford University); a group of Indigenous students and their teachers at Mission San Diego, San Diego, California, ca. 1880 (courtesy of the University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library via California Digital Library).

About CSCCE

Founded in 1999, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) is the national leader in early care and education workforce research and policy. We act on the premise that educators should be valued, respected, and guaranteed economic dignity and that the provision of early care and education is a public responsibility.

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Introduction

The history of early care and education (ECE) is rarely told in the context of state history, yet so much of how the ECE system operates is a reflection of historical and present-day state and local contexts. California's past visibly shapes early care and education today. It underlies contemporary racial disparities in access to services for children and families, as well as job roles, training opportunities, and equitable pay for the ECE workforce. Likewise, historical racial discrimination drives ongoing disrespect for and knowledge about the cultural and linguistic traditions of Asian, Black, Indigenous, and Latine communities as well as other people of color and marginalized groups. Prejudice and discrimination also affect how these populations are reflected in dominant methods and practices of teaching and caregiving (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2022; Lloyd et al., 2021).

Like California state history in general, the history of education in the state often minimizes or overlooks the race, class, and gender oppression and discrimination at its core and is likewise reluctant to focus on how this heritage has shaped and remains evident in state policies and educational practices today. Indigenous populations inhabited the territory for thousands of years prior to 1850, when California became a state. Largely ignored in California state and educational history is how Native people resisted mistreatment and systemic violence by European colonizers who displaced and enslaved them before and during statehood. Nor do we learn Indigenous peoples' roles in educating and caring for their children.

This invisibilization can still be traced in the ECE system. While the federal government of the United States has dismantled some of the more egregious policies impacting Native children, families, and the ECE workforce through its investments in [Tribal child care](#),¹ many states do not include Tribal child care in their lists of ECE programs. Likewise, studies of early care and education often lack a specific focus on or outreach to Indigenous communities. Furthermore, California and other states rarely ensure free or affordable universal access to child care for Indigenous children and their families or provide adequate compensation and respect for all Indigenous members of the ECE workforce.

In 2020, New Mexico became the first state to create a cabinet-level government agency, the Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD), appointing an Assistant Secretary of Native American Early Education and Care to ensure that early education and care in Native American communities is represented at the very top of the government leadership structure (New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, 2022). Such an ambitious effort remains needed in California.

¹ CSCCE recognizes the sovereign status of Tribal Nations in the United States. We capitalize all usages of Tribe and Tribal, as well as all terms relating to Native people, including Indigenous, Native American, and American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN).

California ECE history and its persisting impact offer valuable yet often overlooked lessons for advocates, caregivers, educators, and policymakers. Many of us have been taught that California is exceptional² compared to other states, claiming as evidence its history as a free state³ that prohibited slavery prior to the Civil War, its educational leadership, and its progressive policies (McWilliams, 1999; Office of Governor Gavin Newsom, 2024a). But this interpretation disguises key features of California's past and current realities regarding educational and employment opportunities. Not unlike other states, California has embraced education for many different purposes that reflect when and by whom programs were established, who taught in them, and who attended them. All of these programs had different goals for children based on their ethnic and/or racial identity, gender, and social status (Allen, 2017; Barnes, 1923; Beatty, 1995).

Over time, the aims of education for children of different races and ethnicities have evolved in response to shifts in the cultural, economic, and political spheres of the state and the country. Such shifts have impacted the emphasis on academic, industrial, or vocational teaching in children's education (Du Bois, 1909; Williams, 2022; Yates, 1905). These pedagogical theories were applied differently in classrooms serving children from historically underserved groups, which contributed to the devaluation of the systems, values, and traditions of immigrants and people of color, including members of the early childhood workforce (Allen, 2017; Taylor, 2017).

Ancestors of Today's Early Childhood Programs

Historically, most families have relied on community and family members to care for their young children while they worked, but women forced to care for the offspring of their employers or enslavers were often prevented from caring for their own children (Hallam, 2004). These women, especially women of color, were considered primarily workers, not mothers. The idea that some children, particularly those whose mothers were disregarded, were less deserving of education has infused the early childhood system from its start (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2022). Additionally, women who cared for other people's children in their own homes or in the child's home—those we refer to as family child care or home-based providers—were not considered part of the organized early education system or were addressed only tangentially in its dominant history until the second half of the 20th century.

California day nurseries and kindergartens—the terms used for organized child care and early childhood programs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—are recognizable as early ancestors of our current

² California uses the term "exceptional" to describe itself in comparison to other U.S. states and boast its history as a free state, its educational leadership, and its progressive policies as evidence of its exceptionalism (McWilliams, 1999; Office of Governor Gavin Newsom, 2024a). American Exceptionalism refers to a belief that the United States is culturally, economically, morally, and politically superior compared to other nations (Onuf, 2012).

³ California was admitted to the Union as the 31st state and the 16th "free state," which upset the balance of power with slave states. This shift led to the Compromise of 1850 in which slave states were guaranteed that no federal restrictions on slavery would be placed on subsequent states accepted to the Union, such as Utah or New Mexico (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 2022a).

center-based early childhood programs. Initially both types of programs were privately funded, and even when kindergartens received public funds, it took many decades for classes for children ages four and a half to six in the state to be incorporated in the [public school system](#) and funded with classes for older children (Whitebook et al., 2022).

California's ECE system emerged formally in the 1880s and began earlier than similar programs in most states (Vandewalker, 1924b). By 1892, only 8.1 percent of four- to six-year-olds were enrolled in one of the 89 California kindergartens, 80 percent which were privately funded. By 1912, 13 percent of four- to six-year-olds were enrolled in one of the 188 kindergartens, and 80 percent received public funds (Whitebook et al., 2022). As California expanded kindergartens for White children ages four to six, the director of government schools for the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1894 established 40 Native American kindergartens across the United States (Beatty, 1995, p. 99; International Kindergarten Union, Committee of Nineteen, 1924).

Day nurseries and kindergartens were concentrated in developing cities. They differed in purpose and quality depending on a family's income and were also almost always segregated by race and primarily served children who today may be considered White but did not fit the definition of Whiteness at the time (Whitebook et al., 2022).

While private and public kindergartens primarily served White children, day nurseries were more likely to care for the infants, toddlers, and preschoolers of working mothers who were often children of color. Although many of the earliest day nurseries had kindergarten programs, they were less respected than free-standing kindergartens because they were not seen as being "educational," in large measure due to the age and race of children they served (Whitebook, 1976; Whitebook et al., 2023). As the early childhood system developed over time, the "care versus education" distinction contributed to enduring inequities in resources, training, and compensation for the workforce (Whitebook et al., 2022).

For more on the inequities that endure in our present-day ECE system, visit [ECHOES](#). The Early Childhood History, Organizing, Ethos, and Strategy (ECHOES) project highlights misconstrued and overlooked early childhood histories of the women who have cared for and taught young children for generations. It explores the visions and voices of women of color, immigrant women, and working-class women who have made significant contributions but have been left out of dominant historical narratives.

Initially, we intended this report to focus on California's ECE history from statehood to the early 20th century, but the more we learned, the more we confronted the limits of our own education about California's past. What we found belied the idealistic notion of California as a free, non-slave state and revealed how the state's treatment of populations of color continues to influence education and employment opportunities today. We realized that to understand how our history has shaped and still influences the present and the future, we needed to look further back, before statehood. Otherwise, we would be replicating the tradition of misconstruing our past,

which has traumatized and continues to harm children, families, and the ECE workforce, impacting how our system operates to this day.

While this paper cannot present a comprehensive history, we are able to offer highlights of what we have learned and what has led us to reconsider California's origins as we continue to explore how the past shapes early care and education today. We hope this overview of California's history as it relates to caring for and teaching young children will help inform our understanding of how injustices from pre-statehood continue to replicate themselves in different ways in present-day California. Our aim is to encourage readers to question what they have learned about California, to inspire them to think differently, and to uncover more about the history of their own states.

Early Childhood Before the Idea of California

A Note on the Term "California"

Throughout this report, when we say "California" we are referring to the area of California as it is known today. However, it is important to recognize that Indigenous peoples had their own systems of naming the region that do not correspond to contemporary state boundaries. Scholars are divided on the etymology of the name "California." Some have argued that "California" was introduced by the Spaniards when a map of the area identified it as "Calida Fornax," Latin for "hot furnace" (Karlman, 2024; Vogeley, 2001). Others have posited that the name bears similarities to a Native American phrase "kali forno" meaning "high hill" (Karlman, 2024). However, the most likely source of the state's name is the 16th-century novel *Las sergas de Esplandián* by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo, who wrote about the Black Queen Calafia, ruler of the island of "California" (Vogeley, 2001).

European colonization and settlement began almost two centuries later in California than on the continent's East Coast or in the Caribbean. Still, the land that would become California was one of the most densely inhabited regions of North America for thousands of years prior to colonization (Paddison, 2005b). Until the early 18th century when Europeans arrived along the West Coast, each major Indigenous Tribe had its own cultural practices, government, language, religion, territory, and traditions.⁴ California's Indigenous peoples were very diverse, with more than 60 major Tribes of some 500 individual bands of small, autonomous communities connected by trade and kinship networks. They spoke more than 100 distinct languages with as many as 300 dialects (California Indian Museum and Cultural Center, 2018).

⁴ Variation among Tribal communities extended to how they harvested California's natural resources and the degree to which their way of life involved agriculture, fishing, gathering, and seafaring or any of these activities in combination (Paddison, 2005b).

There is limited information about the size of the Indigenous population prior to colonization, but in the late 18th century, the Indigenous population living in present-day California was estimated to be between 300,000 to 1 million (Akins & Bauer, 2022; Library of Congress, n.d.a).⁵ Anthropologists have categorized the land into six main regions loosely grouped by culture, see **Figure 1**.

Figure 1. Pre-Contact Indigenous Cultural Regions and Tribes



*The Chemehuevi people reside in areas of both the Colorado River and the Great Basin.

Sources: Castillo, 2024; National Park Service, 2015a; North American Indian Research Institute, n.d.; Northern California Indian Development Council, n.d.

Although at that time the Indigenous peoples of California did not have educational institutions as we might define them today,⁶ teaching the children of the community was considered of utmost importance. Children were and continue to be one of the most prized resources in Indigenous societies, because they carry the beliefs, culture, and traditions of their community

⁵ A combination of illness and violence brought by Europeans resulted in the dramatic decline of these numbers. By the beginning of the 20th century, the Indigenous population had plummeted to 20,000 (Calisphere, 2005).

⁶ Native communities had no alphabets and left no written records, so what we know of them today is shaped by the following sources of historical information: archaeological evidence; early records of European explorers and colonists; oral histories given by Tribal elders in the early 20th century; and oral traditions passed down to later generations (Paddison, 2005b).

into the future (Schweigman, 2014). In many Indigenous cultures, raising children was a shared effort. Oftentimes, community members became extended family, creating a large support system that allowed for different knowledge (for example, cultural traditions, parenting skills) to be transmitted within the community and equipping children with a network of adults committed to their emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being (First 5 Center for Children's Policy, 2023).

Rather than a formal occupation and a solitary task, where individuals must attain certifications or licensures to instruct children, caring for and teaching youngsters was communal work. Many Indigenous cultures employed storytelling techniques to transmit cultural traditions, histories, and practical skills (Cajete, 2017). In many Indigenous societies, elders were considered the teachers due to their experience and perspectives, but all other community members were expected to model behaviors for children to emulate (Schweigman, 2014). Although men and women contributed differently to the community, all contributions were equally valued (Lloyd et al., 2021). This community-based approach to early care and education continues in many ways for Indigenous children living in California today (First 5 Center for Children's Policy, 2023).

The [Tribal Child Care Association of California](#) (TCCAC) prioritizes honoring Tribal cultures and traditions through its work with 80 percent of the state's federally recognized Tribes. TCCAC ensures that each Tribal nation's unique perspectives and teachings based on their historic practices are acknowledged in collaborative gatherings and reflected in support and professional development initiatives. The gatherings highlight the importance of addressing disparities in knowledge and awareness among Indigenous communities about one another's educational practices.

TCCAC has also developed the TCCAC Workforce Pathways Program to support Tribal early educators and child care providers across all settings. This program provides educators and providers in center-based, home-based, and informal child care settings an opportunity to deepen their skills in culturally relevant ways since a lack of understanding results in cultural insensitivity and inequitable practices when working with Indigenous children and families (Tribal Child Care Association of California, 2022). The program also supports educators and providers interested in furthering their education while honoring culture as the foundation of tribal child care (Tribal Child Care Association of California, 2024).

Early Childhood During the Spanish Colonial Period (1769-1821)

Members of the Order of St. Francis, a Roman Catholic religious order, established the mission system along the Alta California coast during the early years of the Spanish Empire. The mission system was considered essential for the survival of New Spain, one of four viceroyalties Spain established to govern its conquered lands in the "New World" (Mendoza et al., 2019). Each of the 21 missions established along the coast was staffed by two Franciscan priests and

guarded by a small militia. The missions were a means to control the Indigenous population of the Americas and coerce them into adopting the beliefs, culture, language, and traditions of Spanish culture and society (Clarke, 2016). Although the mission system primarily impacted coastal Indigenous communities, it laid the foundation for the continued subjugation of the Indigenous population throughout California.

Figure 2. Missions Established in California During the Spanish Colonial Period



Source: California Missions Foundation, 2022

California Missions as Plantations

The mission system was organized under a Spanish style of land ownership and management that was essentially a de facto plantation. The mission grounds included a large enclosed compound of houses, workshops, a chapel, storehouses, classrooms, a kitchen, and servants' quarters. Initially, missions aimed to convert the local Indigenous populations to Christianity and prepare them for life in a colonial society. Conversion was not a voluntary process. Converts were forbidden from returning to their communities and were forced to remain in the missions, working (Library of Congress, n.d.d). When they refused or escaped and were forcibly returned, many of them experienced extreme violence such as brandings, solitary confinement, and whippings. The conditions of the mission system were also extremely poor and rampant with

novel illnesses and starvation: “Across the California missions [...] *one in three infants did not live to see a first birthday*. Four in ten Indian children who survived their first year perished before their fifth....” (Madley, 2016, p. 35, author’s emphasis).

Although schooling was available, adults and children spent most of their days performing physical labor assigned according to gender and age, following patriarchal norms. Men performed farm-related work such as blacksmithing, carpentry, and shepherding. Women were allocated domestic work such as cleaning, cooking, sewing, and washing. Children were expected to do some work like serving at Mass or tending to gardens. Both children and adults were forced to communicate solely in Spanish and were punished if they spoke their Indigenous language. They were also forced to denounce their spiritual beliefs in favor of Catholicism (Library of Congress, n.d.d).

Resistance of California Indigenous Tribes

Despite the many restrictions and threats the mission system posed to their way of life, Native people found many ways to resist. Subtle resistance occurred when Native people continued to speak and teach their original languages and practice their Indigenous beliefs, ceremonies, and traditions without the knowledge of the missionaries (California Indian Museum and Cultural Center, 2018). More overt ways to resist included the destruction of property, flight, rebellions, worker slowdowns, and even the murder of oppressors (Guglielmo & Joffroy, 2020; Reyes, 2010). As important as it is to acknowledge the systemic violence against the Indigenous peoples of California, the strength of Native peoples’ resistance to colonization likewise demands recognition.

A Note on the Term “Hispanic”

In this text, the term “[Hispanic](#)” refers to any person with ancestry from a country whose primary language is Spanish. Although widespread use of the term began in the United States in the 1970s, we use it in this report to identify the people residing in California who fit this definition and who were familiar with the language, religion, and traditions of Spain—and later Mexico—before and during early statehood. We employ this term as a means to simplify for readers the various different identities that were prescribed to people based on their ancestry throughout California’s colonization.

Raising and Teaching Children According to Their Perceived Worthiness in the Missions

Young children were especially important to the success of the missions. Native children served the long-term purposes of colonization: they were viewed not only as an important exploitable workforce, but also as transmitters of knowledge to their families (Beebe & Senkewicz, 2001).

The Spanish Crown transported Hispanic families with children from Mexico to California to advance colonization by serving as a “civilizing influence” for the Native people living within the missions. Missionaries believed that families who practiced the language, religion, and traditions of Spain would serve well to persuade and pressure the Indigenous population to do the same (Beebe & Senkewicz, 2001).

Indigenous Children

To increase the Indigenous population in the missions, the Spanish clerics enticed Native children in the hope that their families would follow (Bouvier, 2001). The missionaries used incentives of clothing and other gifts or promises to lure Native people into believing that they would be well nourished and protected within the missions (Halnais, 2008). The Spanish clergy in charge of the missions believed that Native parents did not educate their children properly, claiming that teaching them “basic” skills for subsistence and survival—building shelters, foraging, hunting, preparing food, etc.—was not sufficient. This attitude completely disregarded the cultural, language, and religious instruction that Indigenous children received in their communities of origin. Instead, the Spaniards fervently advocated for Christian instruction to “civilize” the children (Crispin-Peralta, 2013). It was common practice to separate young children from their families in order to inculcate Catholic teachings and Hispanic traditions (Reyes, 2010).

Children’s religious training was primarily in Spanish and absorbed through repetition and memorization. Music was especially important in the conversion process as it created an initial connection that did not require comprehension of the language. The meaning of prayers was taught once children learned more Spanish (Crispin-Peralta, 2013).

In addition to language and religious training, “civilized education” required that young children learn how to work according to the expectations of the missionaries. Young children were responsible for various tasks on the missions, including gathering olives, weeding, and protecting crops from pests, all in addition to their lessons in Catholic doctrine (Webb, 1952).

Once they were older, children began doing labor that was deemed gender appropriate. Boys learned to be blacksmiths, carpenters, shoemakers, silversmiths, and any other profession that supported the missions’ survival (Crispin-Peralta, 2013). Girls and women were sequestered in dormitories called *monjeríos* (nunneries) to ensure their “virtue” remained intact. They were given lessons in domesticity, morality (as defined by the missionaries), and religion (Reyes, 2000). All of these teachings aimed to ensure that Native children could live their childhoods “as

if they were little Spaniards” and continue to pass these teachings to their own children, which colonizers marked as the success of their own efforts (Bouvier, 2001, p. 83).⁷

Hispanic Children

During the first years of colonization, most of the men who settled in the territory were unmarried (Crispin-Peralta, 2013). As mentioned previously, to advance colonization the Spanish Crown spent a considerable amount of money transporting Hispanic families to California in order to expose the Indigenous population to Catholic and Hispanic customs. Hispanic children were considered essential to transforming the region into something more “civilized” because they increased the population of *gente de razón* (people of reason) (Crispin-Peralta, 2013).

Hispanic children were raised and taught in ways that benefited their families, the colony, and themselves. Although some families hired teachers to instruct their children in reading and writing, informal education predominated. From toddlerhood, children were taught about their roles within their families and the community. Girls were educated to eventually serve as mothers and spouses by learning about household tasks, including cleaning, cooking, sewing, and washing, while boys learned skilled trades and could expect to provide military service for the Crown (Crispin-Peralta, 2013).

California's Spanish Era lasted little over half a century, when Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821. The policies of the eventual Republic of Mexico significantly differed from those of the Spanish monarchy. Under the rule of Spain, land grants were rare, and titles remained in the hands of the Crown, but under the new Republic, governors made hundreds of grants for individual ranches (Library of Congress, n.d.c).

The Mexican Colonial Period: An Era of Ranchos (1822-1846)

After independence from Spain, the secularization of the missions began in 1834. Mission lands were reallocated in approximately 600 large grants to *Californios* (Hispanic Californians) and well-connected immigrants recently arrived from Mexico. Californios established *ranchos* (ranches) that required the Indigenous labor force to succeed, and ranchers soon replaced the Franciscan missionaries (Library of Congress, n.d.c).

⁷ The mission system was one of the initial methods implemented to separate generations of Indigenous children from their families and homelands in order to teach them the culture and language of the settlers in California. Similar mechanisms persisted through the Mexican Era (1821-1848) and into American statehood (Sepulveda, 2022).

The Californios

[Californios](#) were individuals of non-Indigenous ancestry with a Spanish surname who had been born in California, Mexico, or Spain, and lived in California during the Mexican Colonial period. During this time, Californios were awarded more than 600 land grants from the Mexican government. They also acquired large cattle herds that had once belonged to the missions and began trading beef products with foreigners. Californios “inherited” the labor force of the missions, exploiting the Indigenous people who were forced to work in Hispanic households and ranches.

Indigenous people rarely benefited from the secularization process. Although initially promised land of their own, few Indigenous families residing in the missions actually received anything. The land that was allotted was generally unsustainable and abandoned after a few years (Paddison, 2005a). Instead, Indigenous people were forced to work on the ranches as cowboys or servants in order to survive (National Park Service, 2015b).

California's Mexican Era is defined by the ranchos mainly along the coast that made cattle-raising and the production of beef, hides, and tallow central to the local economy. Californios became increasingly dependent on the products and services of foreign merchants who came to buy hides and tallow, and explorers and trappers from other parts of the United States made their way into California (Paddison, 2005a).

Raising and Teaching Children Based on Their Assigned Roles in the Ranchos

Similar to early childhood under the mission system, early childhood on the ranchos was guided by the tenets of Christianity and patriarchy (Crispin-Peralta, 2013).

Californio Children

Californio children were raised according to their position in society. Similar to child rearing during the previous period, they were brought up in ways that reinforced their cultural beliefs and their status as superior to Indigenous children. During this time, godparents became essential to raising and teaching children, who were encouraged to emulate the behavior of cousins, guardians, or siblings (Miranda, 1983). This tradition allowed children to acquire knowledge and understanding of Californio cultural and societal values, solidifying the cultural hierarchies between the so-called “people of reason” and Native people (Crispin-Peralta, 2013).

Hispanic families began this indoctrination immediately after birth: babies were baptized into the Catholic faith just days after they were born (Miranda, 1983). Gendered separation of daily tasks

also continued during this period, with girls learning to clean, cook, wash clothes, and care for children, among other skills, while boys learned trades such as blacksmithing, carpentry, and shoemaking (Crispin-Peralta, 2013). All children were taught skills essential to frontier life and the economic survival of the ranchos, including how to ride and care for horses and the preparation and production of cowhides and tallow (Miranda, 1983).

Indigenous Children

Although little is known about the rearing and teaching of Indigenous children during this period, they were a common presence in *pueblos* (villages) and on ranches, serving as domestics, manual laborers, playmates, and ranch hands in Hispanic households and ranchos (Crispin-Peralta, 2013). Californios routinely kidnapped and transported Native children to California pueblos and ranchos, while claiming concern for their livelihood and well-being.

Heads of household who brought children into their homes as wards viewed child labor as part of a reciprocal relationship: they provided children with clothing, education, and sustenance, and the children owed their labor in return (Crispin-Peralta, 2013). Indeed, Indigenous families were expected to serve as the workforce in Hispanic households and ranches, so the children of this workforce often provided child labor, unofficially (Crispin-Peralta, 2013). Indigenous children likely performed tasks reminiscent of those in the missions, including assisting in household or production tasks (Silliman, 2004).

The Road Toward Schooling

During this period, Californio governors issued a series of decrees requiring that residents establish schools for the Hispanic children in their communities. On May 1, 1844, Governor Manuel Micheltorena issued the Reglamento de Escuelas Amigas, which ordered that each of the pueblos open schools and instruct students in “reading, writing, the four rules of arithmetic, and [the] Christian doctrine” (Micheltorena, 1844, cited in Crispin-Peralta, 2013, pp. 203-204). Girls would also be taught embroidery, knitting, and sewing techniques. Schools opened for a morning session (8:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.) and for an afternoon session (2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.) in which children focused primarily on lessons in Christian doctrine in addition to arithmetic, reading, and writing (Micheltorena, 1844, cited in Crispin-Peralta, 2013, p. 209).

Classrooms had children separated according to gendered roles practiced at home, providing them with religious training and requiring them to acquire and emulate the manners of Californio society (Crispin-Peralta, 2013). For Californio government officials, education was a way to further distinguish between the “people of reason” and the Indigenous population (Crispin-Peralta, 2013). However, schooling efforts during this period were short-lived. The Mexican–American War soon changed the trajectory of California, as well as the attitudes toward the

education of and opportunities for children of Hispanic heritage compared to those of Indigenous or mixed Hispanic and Indigenous heritage.

The Conquest of California in the Mexican–American War (1846-1848)

As Americans continued to encroach on California territory, Californios realized their days were numbered. Although ownership of property was limited to Catholics with Mexican citizenship, many Americans converted to Catholicism and petitioned for Mexican citizenship (Richards, 2017). By 1845, California had become home to some 2,500 incomers of non-Hispanic heritage (Library of Congress, n.d.c).

By the end of the Mexican Era, California's Indigenous inhabitants numbered less than 100,000, and California had become home to an additional 14,000 permanent residents (Library of Congress, n.d.c). As non-Hispanic people continued immigrating to California, Californios' position in society was threatened. The end of the era was foreshadowed with the 1844 election of U.S. President James K. Polk, a Southern Democrat whose campaign supported "Manifest Destiny," the idea that the westward expansion of the United States was divine providence (Public Broadcasting Service, n.d.d).

On May 13, 1846, President Polk declared war on Mexico, beginning the two-year Mexican–American War. Within 16 months, American troops captured Mexico City and laid claim to parts of the California and New Mexico territories (National Park Service, 2022). On March 10, 1848, the U.S. Congress approved the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in which Mexico relinquished ownership over present-day Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming in exchange for \$15 million and the U.S. government's assumption of debts owed to U.S. citizens (Public Broadcasting Service, n.d.d; U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 2022b).

From the Gold Rush to Early Statehood (1848-1865)

On September 9, 1850, when California became the 31st state to join the Union, it did so as a "free state" (California State Parks, n.d.). However, this definition did not mean that the discrimination and racial violence prevalent in other parts of the United States did not exist in California. Indeed, many of the same conflicts around identity and slavery were occurring in the newly established state (Anderson, 2020).

In its early years, the State of California allowed the enslavement of Black Americans and permitted the continued enslavement and mistreatment of the Indigenous population (California Task Force, 2023). As California developed, discrimination against select European and non-

European immigrants was also justified and codified into emerging California laws. During this time, Anglo-Americans became more powerful and prominent by enacting several laws that served to disenfranchise the existing and newly arrived populations of color in the state (California Task Force, 2023).

The Gold Rush: Changes to California's Population

In January 1848, gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill in California as the Mexican–American War was coming to an end. Through the mid-1850s, the population in the region surged, resulting in the largest migration in U.S. history at that time. The Gold Rush drew immigrants from more than a dozen different nations, including Chile, China, Germany, Ireland, Mexico, Peru, and other parts of the present-day United States (Public Broadcasting Service, n.d.b). Because of the large numbers of Anglo-Americans, one third of whom were enslavers from the South, this increase in population served to reinforce the continued colonization of the Indigenous—and increasingly Hispanic—people of the West Coast (California Task Force, 2023; National Park Service, 2022).

During the Gold Rush, California's migrant population nearly tripled in size, from an estimated 92,500 in 1850 to more than 308,000 in 1860 (Library of Congress, n.d.b). Of the many people who arrived in California, the largest populations besides Anglo-Americans were Black Americans and immigrants from China and Mexico (Oakland Museum of California, n.d.). Once California entered statehood in 1850, Anglo-American miners became less tolerant and welcoming of miners who were not U.S. citizens. Indeed, California's new legislature adopted a series of laws to prevent non-citizens from amassing the same amount of wealth as Anglo-Americans (Library of Congress, n.d.b).

Early Statehood and Education

An understanding of the treatment of different populations and the ways this treatment impacted their children's early learning opportunities and later schooling is essential for understanding education during early statehood. Our focus here is on those populations facing discriminatory and oppressive treatment in California just prior to statehood and during early statehood. California prioritized the establishment of a public school system based on the common school model used in other states that primarily catered to the educational needs of White students (California Constitution, 1849).

As a young state, California did not allow people of color to participate as teachers nor were students of color allowed to enter public schools with White students throughout the 1850s and 1860s (California Task Force, 2023). In 1854, Black students in San Francisco became the first children segregated in California's public schools. Soon, however, state law prohibited "Negroes, Mongolians, and Indians" from attending public schools with White children anywhere in California (Frazier, 2021).

The School Law of 1855, which denied public education for Black Americans, Asian Americans (primarily Chinese), and Native Americans, was amended in 1860 to allow the creation of separate schools for students of color (Frazier, 2021). But such schools would only be established if at least 10 parents of students of color petitioned the school districts for their creation. If their parents did not petition, students of color received no public education. In districts with fewer than 10 school-age children of color, students could attend the regular schools, unless the parents of White children objected (Moore, 2003). White parents tended to demand a segregated school for students of color when their numbers increased in the community (Wollenberg, 1978).

California's education laws shifted following the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the end of the Civil War in 1865,⁸ but the fight for public education—along with other civil rights and economic security—for Black Americans and other populations of color continued throughout the 19th and 20th centuries (Cones, 2016). In 1885, the School Law still denied public education for children of color and only provided funding to schools based on the numbers of White students enrolled (Frazier, 2021). ECE programs that developed in the late 1880s emulated the educational requirements for school-age White children and reinforced segregation (Whitebook et al., 2022).

Anglo-Americans or White Americans?

In this text, we refer to the Americans who settled in California beginning in the 1840s as Anglo-Americans, reflecting the term used by the existing populations in California and the Southwest during this period (National Park Service, 2004g). We later refer to this population as White Americans because that is how they identified themselves in California's 1849 Constitution (California Constitution, 1849). Note that many people who are referred to as White today may not have been considered White during this period and may have been excluded from this population, particularly if they were immigrants.

⁸ President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, declaring free all enslaved people residing in the 11 Confederate states fighting against the Union troops (National Museum of African American History & Culture, n.d.).

Treatment of Pre-Statehood Populations and Impact on Children's Schooling

Californios

As Anglo-Americans established themselves in California, they enacted laws to undermine Californios' influence and social status.⁹ With political power in the state shifting, Anglo-Americans soon outnumbered and overpowered Californios, impacting the livelihoods and trajectories of the Hispanic population. During this time, Californios living in the state became referred to as "Mexican Americans." They were granted U.S. citizenship and classified legally as "White" (Torres-Rouff, 2012). Despite this status, Mexican Americans were often segregated and discriminated against based on their appearance, language, mannerisms, and religion (Barrett-Jackson et al., 2016). Ultimately, the culture and religion that ensured the success and influence of Californios during California's colonial history made Mexican Americans second-class citizens in the new state of California (Gutiérrez, 1995). Being "gente de razón" no longer signified status, but served to highlight the differences between Anglo and Hispanic cultures.

California did not initially restrict children of Hispanic ancestry from attending public schools because they were considered legally White (Torres-Rouff, 2012). However, at the beginning of the 20th century when more Mexican American children enrolled in schools, they became the focus of local segregation, as well (Weiler, 1994).¹⁰ Unlike California's other marginalized populations, the segregation of Mexican American students was not authorized in state laws. By the 1920s, many communities—especially in the state's southern region—had established separate public spaces for the Mexican American community, including neighborhoods, public schools, restaurants, etc. (Weiler, 1994). Again, the culture, language, and religion that had once signified a higher social status in California were now used to discriminate against and segregate Mexican Americans.¹¹ Beginning in the 1840s, the characteristics that once enabled the Hispanic population to oppress California's Indigenous populations were turned against them and made them susceptible to oppression by White Americans.

⁹ California's legislature passed the Land Act of 1851 to verify Californios' claims to individual land ownership. By 1856, 813 claims had been reviewed, but only 553 had been approved (California Secretary of State, n.d.). Californio landowners were required to prove ownership using documents, which often proved burdensome as documentation was not standard during the Mexican Era (Gutiérrez, 1995). Additionally, barriers in language and ethnic and/or racial animosity complicated matters. Claims to ownership that went unverified ultimately ended in the hands of Anglo-Americans (Chavéz, 1998; Gutiérrez, 1995).

¹⁰ Increased enrollment during this period may be attributed to various factors, including increased migration from Mexico due to the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) as well as an increase in the number of migratory Mexican workers who brought their families with them and resided in California throughout the year (California Office of Historic Preservation, 2015; Rosenblum et al., 2012).

¹¹ There is limited information on the educational experiences and opportunities for Mexican American children related to early care and education prior to the 1900s. As the Mexican American community's resources became increasingly constrained, it is likely that many working families relied on informal caregiving (families, friends, neighbors) rather than on formal ECE programs for child care services. It is also possible that some women provided child care services for other families during this period, however, due to the discrimination and exclusion prevalent in this time, they were likely poorly compensated (National Park Service, 2004h).

Indigenous People

Throughout the first years of statehood and the centuries to follow, California's Indigenous population continued to be exploited and oppressed. White Americans exploited Indigenous peoples' knowledge and skills in order to facilitate colonization using coercion and violence (Lloyd et al., 2021). And the illness, starvation, and violence Indigenous people were subjected to during colonization was only exacerbated with statehood (Public Broadcasting Service, n.d.c).

Almost immediately upon achieving statehood, the California Legislature enacted laws to infringe on the rights of Indigenous people. At the first State Constitutional Convention, a bill to eliminate Indigenous peoples' right to vote passed, as well as the Act for the Government and Protection of Indians, also known as the Indian Indenture Act (National Park Service, 2004a). This act codified into law the servitude of Indigenous people to White Americans (Drummond, 2022).

Under the Indian Indenture Act, White Americans were automatically favored in conflicts and disputes and allowed to contract Indigenous people's labor for years if they were criminally convicted or deemed vagrants. If Indigenous children were considered orphaned, White Americans could assume custody and make all decisions on their upbringing (National Park Service, 2004a; Public Broadcasting Service, n.d.a). During this time, White Americans also attacked Native villages, killing entire communities to curtail their presence in the lucrative mining industry.

Almost as soon as California became a state, the U.S. Congress established the reservation system through the Indian Appropriations Act of 1851. This act allowed the U.S. government to take the land Indigenous populations had inhabited for thousands of years and redistribute it. As Californios' ranchos were divided into smaller properties and territories, Indigenous people endured continued violence from intolerant new landowners. Many Indigenous cowboys and ranch hands were displaced from the roles they were originally coerced into during the Mexican Era as the ranchos were increasingly reallocated to White Americans (National Park Service, 2004a).

Indigenous populations were forced onto designated reservations, and their access to ancestral lands, cultural practices, and essential resources was limited (Cossard, 2024). This displacement further restricted the autonomy of California's Indigenous population as their ways of living were disrupted and replaced with systems imposed by the federal government (Public Broadcasting Service, n.d.c; U.S. Department of the Interior–Indian Affairs, 2017). During this time, the U.S. Army forced California's Tribes to sign 18 secret treaties that renounced their rights to ancestral lands in exchange for reservations; the treaties were ordered to remain undisclosed until 1905 (Miller, 2013). While the Indian Indenture Act was repealed in 1866 to comply with the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, by 1870 California's Indigenous

population had dropped to 30,000, primarily as a result of violence. Exposure to novel diseases also contributed to the decline in population.¹²

California's Indigenous population was excluded from the state's public education system. From 1860 to 1920, federally operated segregated boarding or residential schools¹³ were established for children as young as four years old and into adolescence to eliminate Indigenous ways of life. Children's original cultures, languages, and traditions around clothing and hairstyles were stripped away, to be replaced with the English language and American modes of existence in order to "civilize" them. Children who resisted adopting White Christian practices or speaking English were subjected to physical and psychological violence (ACLU of Northern CA, 2019; National Museum of the American Indian, 2020).

Some of the more than 40 kindergartens for Indigenous children established throughout the country during the 1890s were operated by churches and missionaries (Beatty, 1995, p. 99). The kindergartens may have been located on reservations or incorporated as a component of boarding schools, which meant that children, some as young as four, were physically separated from their families and communities (Newland, 2022).

Early Educational Experiences of Indigenous Children

Many questions emerge about the early educational experiences of young Indigenous children. References to boarding or residential schools, "Indian Schools," and federally established kindergartens for Native American children appear in primary and secondary sources, but the available information lacks clarity about distinctions among the terms used for these settings and whether the terms were ever used interchangeably. Although we can identify the names and locations of some of the boarding schools for Native American children in California and other states, we cannot confirm the ages of the children who attended them (National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, 2023).

It is also unclear whether any of the boarding schools in California or elsewhere included any of these federally funded kindergartens. Furthermore, we do not know if any of the 40 federally funded "Indian School" kindergartens operated in residential boarding schools, and if so, how many and in which specific ones. In 1924, the Bureau of Education published a report listing the 24 "Indian Schools" with kindergartens but did not provide additional information on these schools. Nor did the report clarify if

¹² The 14th Amendment protects from laws that infringe upon people's privileges as U.S. citizens. It also prohibits states from denying citizens their rights to life, liberty, and property without due process of law.

¹³ In total, 523 boarding schools have been identified, operating in 38 states beginning in the 19th century. Of the 523 national boarding schools, 408 (78 percent) received federal funding, another 105 (20 percent) did not, and 10 (2 percent) were either established after 1976 or information about their funding is not yet known (National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, 2023).

these were among the 40 federal Native American kindergartens operating in the 1890s or whether any operated in California or in residential boarding schools on reservations (Vandewalker, 1924a).

Patronizing attitudes toward students of color in boarding schools and kindergartens alike reflected many teachers' beliefs in White cultural superiority. These educators embraced their responsibility to teach the children White American values (Ross, 1976).¹⁴

Boarding schools emerged later in California than in other states. The first such institution in California was the Round Valley Indian School in Covelo, which began with federal funding in 1860. Other Indigenous boarding schools in the state began in the mid-1880s. Of the 12 boarding schools in California, nine were operated by the federal government and three were operated by the Catholic church. Boarding schools continued the separation of children from their families as well as their exploitation as workers that began during the mission system (Sepulveda, 2022).

In 1924, the California State Supreme Court found that Indigenous children had the right to attend public school, however, they were often relegated to segregated and underfunded schools (Hendrick, 1976). And despite the ruling, boarding schools were not outlawed nationwide until the 1970s (Newland, 2022). The resulting trauma of these institutional experiences are carried across families and entire Tribes today (Beatty, 1995; Lloyd et al., 2021; Ross, 1976). Though the boarding school system was in operation for more than 100 years, only recently has a more accurate accounting of this system come into focus. Federal agencies and religious institutions have begun to release data on schools they operated. Nonetheless, there remain persistent gaps in research about the boarding schools and scant funding for research about them.¹⁵

Educators, policymakers, and researchers have long requested access to up-to-date information on Indigenous boarding schools but have had to make do with what was available. This limited and inconsistent information has given rise to the [National Indian Boarding School Digital Archive](#), a comprehensive digital database that houses information and resources on Indigenous boarding schools, which allows people to do their own research (National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, 2024a, 2024b). The data that are available have raised many questions about the sources of existing data and the ways in which this information has been collected and interpreted.

¹⁴ For example, Lucie Maley, a kindergarten teacher at an Indigenous reservation in the 1890s, believed that the children she taught had "inherited cruel and savage dispositions" and that it was her responsibility to teach them White American values as described in the March 1898 edition of the *Kindergarten Magazine* (cited in Ross, 1976, p. 40).

¹⁵ Information on boarding schools is held by various institutions, some public and some private, and it is not clear how complete the records are. Therefore, basic questions cannot yet be answered about the number of children who attended them, the number of children who went missing or were murdered, who they were, their ages, and where they are buried (National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, 2023). The [National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition](#) has the most comprehensive mapping and reporting on the number of boarding schools that the authors of this paper were able to identify.

Table 1. California Boarding Schools (1860-Present)

Name	Location	Years
Anaheim Boarding School	Anaheim	Anaheim
Fort Bidwell Indian Boarding School	Fort Bidwell	1898-1932*
Fort Yuma Indian Boarding School	Fort Yuma	1884-1900*
Greenville Indian Industrial Boarding School	Greenville	1891-1923*
Hoopla Valley Boarding School	Hoopla Valley	1893-1934*
Middletown Training School	Middletown	1885-1887?
Perris Indian Boarding School	Perris	1891-1904*
Round Valley Indian School	Covelo	1860-1924*
Sherman Institute	Riverside	1903-Present*
St. Anthony's Industrial School for Indians	Grantville	
San Diego	1886-1907†	
St. Boniface Indian Industrial School	Banning	1890-1974
St. Turibius Mission Boarding and Day School	Kelseyville	1888-1905†

* Indicates that the school was operated by the U.S. federal government.

† Indicates that the school was operated by the Catholic church.

Note: For more information on the boarding schools and the collections that hold information about them, please visit the [U.S. Indian Boarding Schools of California Archives Resource Guide](#) (National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, 2023).

Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

Treatment of Newly Arrived Populations and Impact on Children's Schooling

Black Americans

Despite its status as a free state, California's earliest laws ensured that Black Americans had limited opportunities. Upon admission to the Union, the California Legislature enacted laws that limited Black Americans' rights to education, marriage, property, testimony, and voting (California Task Force, 2023; National Park Service, 2004b). Nonetheless, in the early years of

statehood, a sizable number of Black Americans arrived in California on their own accord in search of freedom and economic opportunities (Coleman, 2014). In the face of obstruction and limited prospects for success, many Black Americans persevered during this period to become activists, educators, entrepreneurs, journalists, landowners, politicians, and more (Beasley, 1919; Wagner, 2007).

Other Black Americans had been brought to California unwillingly by their enslavers before and during early statehood. Enslavers relied heavily on Black Americans' forced labor to amass wealth and establish their financial foothold in the state (Anderson, 2020). Many enslaved persons, adults and minors, were forced to labor in homes and mines. Although California's constitution stated, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, unless for the punishment of crimes, shall ever be tolerated in this state," this clause did not reflect the reality of enslaved Black Americans or many others who had migrated voluntarily during the early years of statehood (Caesar, 2024).

Many of California's earliest lawmakers were enslavers elected to enshrine slavery in the state's laws. The legislature passed the California Fugitive Slave Act in 1852, making it more difficult for enslaved Black Americans to escape and free themselves if they did not have freedom papers with them (Anderson, 2020). This law gave enslavers one year to "collect" enslaved persons and take them back to their home state. Any of the estimated 2,000 Black Americans, both enslaved and free, residing in California during this period could be arrested, enslaved, or kidnapped, if a White American identified them as someone who had been enslaved and escaped—no proof was required. Enslavement continued in the state until 1864, one year before the end of the Civil War (Drummond, 2021).

These conditions of enslavement and constant threat for Black Americans led to the first Black activist movement in California (Moore, 2003). Beginning in 1855, Black American activists and leaders held a series of gatherings called the California Colored Conventions in response to the discrimination and injustices to which they were subjected (Pfaelzer, 2021). They addressed community concerns related to the economic and political uplift of Black Americans, including the need for the abolition of slavery, increased educational opportunities and political representation, and protection from racial aggression and violence (Foreman et al., 2020).

The California Colored Conventions sought to unite the Black American community in California to advocate for civil rights, equality, and fair treatment under the law (Barrett-Jackson et al., 2016; Moore, 2003). Among other concerns, the 1855 convention focused on the education of children of color and the need to establish schools for them (Pfaelzer, 2021). Like others who advocated for public schools, the convention delegates argued that states have the responsibility to provide free education to all children in a self-governing republic (Glass, 2015).

As their communities continued to grow, Black women pushed for educational opportunities and access to schools for their children (Drummond, 2021). When public schools delayed admission

of Black children in Los Angeles, Biddy Mason (1818-1891) was instrumental in founding a school and child care center for Black children. Other Black women were well-known leaders and played similar roles.¹⁶ By 1880, California amended its legal code to outlaw school segregation of Black Americans, although de facto segregation persists today (California Task Force, 2023; Whitaker & Nelson, 2024).

Chinese Immigrants

Approximately 25,000 Chinese men immigrated to California during the first years of the Gold Rush. Many came from Guangdong Province, which was experiencing multiple natural disasters and political turmoil at the time (National Park Service, 2004c; Simpson, 2012). After entering California, primarily through San Francisco, many Chinese men and those few with families¹⁷ settled throughout the state in search of work opportunities. They developed Chinese American communities in which many members made efforts to participate in the cultural and political life of the state, despite exclusion and mistreatment from White Americans (National Park Service, 2004d, 2004e).

Despite their different beliefs, customs, and primary language, Chinese immigrants were initially welcomed to California by White male business, religious, and policy leaders, and many Chinese men were employed in the mining industry. However, as their numbers grew so did anti-Chinese sentiment, and in only a couple of years, racial violence erupted in the mines along with laws calling for the removal of Chinese immigrants from California (Luo, 2025).

In 1852, the California Legislature adopted the Foreign Miners Tax, a monthly \$4 fee that primarily targeted Chinese and Mexican miners through 1870 (Library of Congress, n.d.b).¹⁸ The discriminatory tax prevented many immigrants from continuing to work in the mines and forced many Chinese immigrants into lower-paying and often-perilous work as laborers, cooks, traders, and small business owners.

In the 1860s, many Chinese men found employment through the Transcontinental Railroad, laying much of the tracks for the Central Pacific Railroad (Library of Congress, n.d.b; National Park Service, 2004c). Few White men were willing to undertake the risky railroad work, so Chinese men were welcomed and appreciated for their skill and willingness to work long hours

¹⁶ One noteworthy example was Black American activist and educator Elizabeth Thorn Scott Flood (1828-1867) who is recognized today as the first Black American teacher in Sacramento and the founder of three schools for students of color during the first years of statehood (Beasley, 1919; Wagner, 2007). For more on Black American leaders in California, see Delilah L. Beasley's book The Negro Trailblazers of California, which highlights Black American pioneers in the state (Beasley, 1919).

¹⁷ Most histories of Chinese immigrants in California do not address women, and it is often assumed no men had wives or children with them in the United States. However, some men arrived with their children and spouses, and others married soon after arriving in California and started families (Luo, 2025). During this time, no person of Chinese ancestry was granted citizenship until 1898, regardless of their country of origin (American Immigration Council, 2025).

¹⁸ The Foreign Miners Tax followed the Foreign Miners License Law of 1850, which charged all non-citizens \$20 monthly, but was repealed in 1851 (Library of Congress, n.d.b).

and cooperate with one another (Luo, 2025). Nonetheless, Chinese railroad workers were paid just a dollar a day, half the pay of White American workers while facing life-threatening conditions, including avalanches, explosions, rockslides, and violence. More than 1,000 Chinese railroad workers died building the railroads (National Park Service, 2023). In 1867, in a collective action unrivaled at the time, 3,000 Chinese workers up and down Donner Summit refused to come out of their camps, striking for higher pay and one less hour of daily work. The strike was crushed by the rail magnates (Luo, 2025, pp. 48-54).

Chinese immigrants also established small businesses that provided essential services, like laundry. Washing clothes and bed linens was considered “women’s work,” but with the growing population of men during the Gold Rush, demand for these services had increased exponentially. Dirty laundry was even shipped to China and Hawaii, an expensive and time-consuming alternative (San Francisco Planning Department, 2021). Recognizing an opportunity, Chinese entrepreneurs established the first laundry services in the Western United States. By 1870, there were more than 1,300 laundries, with Chinese businesses constituting the majority of such services (Asian American Education Project, 2023).

Despite their contributions to California’s economy and society, Chinese immigrants were barred from citizenship and naturalization because they were considered neither Black nor White. Furthermore, in 1855 California passed An Act to Discourage the Immigration to This State of Persons Who Cannot Become Citizens Thereof, which primarily targeted Chinese immigrants (National Park Service, 2004c). Lack of citizenship severely limited their opportunities in the United States, and anti-Chinese immigration laws also made it difficult for Chinese men to bring their families.

Chinese women faced notable discrimination; nearly all were accused of “poor morality” and prostitution. The Protestant missionary movement in California joined forces with opponents of Chinese immigration against Chinese women. An 1870 law made landing ships with Mongolian, Chinese, or Japanese females illegal, unless the women on board could show proof that they were coming to the United States voluntarily and “possessed good habits and good character” (Luo, 2025, p. 106). The 1870 census classifies 70 percent of the reported 2,018 Chinese females to be prostitutes with no accounting for language difficulties or census-taker bias (Luo, 2025).

Some wives did manage to immigrate with their children or they started their families in the United States (Luo, 2025). Regardless of their place of birth, Chinese children faced discrimination in educational opportunities in the United States, even though many came from educated families in China and had attended schools operated by missionaries of various Christian faiths. The first public school for Chinese children, the San Francisco Chinese School, began operating in 1859 and was designed explicitly to segregate and separate Chinese children from White children but was short-lived and closed in 1871 (Levitt & O’Connell, 2020; Luo, 2025).

So hostile was anti-Chinese sentiment throughout the nation that the U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, prohibiting immigration from China for the following 10 years.¹⁹ This law was then extended by the Geary Act in 1892. The Chinese Exclusion Act was the only U.S. law ever to prevent immigration and naturalization on the basis of race (Office of the Historian, n.d.).

In 1885, the California Supreme Court declared unconstitutional a local ban against Chinese Americans in public schools, ruling in favor of a Chinese American family in *Tape v. Hurley*.²⁰ The court established that Chinese children had the right to an education, but that they had to be educated in “separate but equal” Chinese schools (Kuo, 1998). While California officially repealed the law establishing separate schools for Chinese children in 1947, many of these segregated schools had vanished even before then as Chinese children integrated into predominantly White public schools (Thomas, 2021). Nonetheless, culturally specific Chinese schools did not disappear.

In the early 1970s, early learning programs to maintain and support Chinese culture and belief systems for young children were established by members of the Chinese American community in San Francisco to create opportunities for young children to receive culturally and linguistically relevant early childhood services. The first bilingual Chinese–English ECE program in Chinatown was established in 1972, shortly followed by the opening of Wah Mei School in 1975. These two programs laid the foundation for the establishment of several other culturally specific programs over the next few decades, many of which continue to operate in San Francisco today (N. Yee, personal communication, January 29, 2024).

Discussion: Repercussions on Early Care and Education Today

The maltreatment of and discrimination against people of color in California before and during early statehood can be likened to a palimpsest, a parchment that has been imperfectly erased, whose lingering effects continue to influence our present and hold potential repercussions for our future as we confront the ongoing consequences of these historical wrongdoings (Alexander, 2005). The hierarchical and often brutal system affected children's learning

¹⁹Although Japanese immigrants arrived in San Francisco prior to 1882 and were subject to similar anti-Asian sentiment, following the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act larger numbers of Japanese immigrants began to arrive in the United States in the 1880s to address labor shortages created by this legislation (National Park Service, 2004f). Anti-Japanese sentiment extended to schooling, and students of Japanese ancestry were barred from attending common schools in California into the 20th century (Lyon, 2024).

²⁰In the 1884-1885 school year, Joe Tape tried to enroll his eight-year-old daughter Mamie into two San Francisco public schools, but she was rejected by the school superintendent who claimed the school could not be forced to educate a group deemed “dangerous to the well-being of the state” (Luo, 2025, p. 230). Mamie had been born in California, spoke English at home, and her father asserted that the family had “adopted the manners, habits, and customs of the American people,” and his daughter routinely played with White children (Luo, 2025, p.230). He concluded that the only objection to her admission was on “the ground of race or color” (Luo, 2025, p. 231). Joe Tape decided to make Mamie a test case of the violation of the 14th Amendment and hired William Gibson, son of a Methodist missionary and a Harvard Law School graduate, to represent his family (Lou, 2025).

opportunities during California's colonial periods and influenced the development of public school systems for newly arrived populations in early statehood (Moore, 2003).

Access to Early Care and Education

From the start, public schools were designed to cater to the educational needs of White students, prioritizing those with greater family resources and serving primarily children age six or older (Moore, 2003). Although efforts in early care and education emerged in the 1880s, ECE programs were not embraced as part of the public school system, but developed following similar assumptions about the educational requirements for older White children in the early statehood years.

This exclusion of early care and education in California's public school system continues today for the most part, with the exception of public school kindergartens first established at the end of the 19th century for a small swath of White children nearly five years old; it took almost one hundred years for all children in the state to be eligible (Whitebook et al., 2022). Transitional kindergarten (TK), the state's grade for four-year-old public school children began in 2012 and is still under enrolled, though moving more quickly to be available to all children (Gold & Sequeira, 2024). Nonetheless, questions of accessibility and feasibility—especially for those who require full-day access to child care—remain unanswered for many families and in many communities across the state. Kindergarten and TK continue today with different rules about attendance and the length of the school day compared to compulsory schooling for children six and older (D'Souza, 2021; Montoya et al., 2022; Whitebook et al., 2022). Questions also remain as to who has access to positions teaching TK, which can pay more than double the salary of other ECE teaching positions, and why hiring practices appear to favor a population that is traditionally more White and less experienced in ECE pedagogy than the traditional ECE workforce (Williams et al., 2021; Powell et al., 2022).

In the almost 175 years of California statehood, there is wide variation in access to education and opportunities—not every group's experience is monolithic. In early care and education, great disparities still exist for the people who provide and receive services. For families, disparities in accessing services stem from exclusions based on family income and location, while educators and providers experience inequalities in opportunities and pay based on education and type of setting. These disparities all disproportionately affect low-income populations of color.

In California, families of color, especially those with infants and toddlers, are most impacted by a continuously inadequate supply of subsidized child care services in the state, exacerbating historic inequities in access to wealth and economic security (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2022; Pryor, 2024).

The ECE Workforce

The field of early care and education is one of the most underpaid and undervalued in the United States. An early belief that caring for and teaching young children was a woman's natural responsibility and required few skills and little effort established a rationale for paying early educators less than teachers of older children and those working with infants and toddlers even less than those working with children age three and older (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2022).

From our country's founding, Black girls and women were forced to care for the children of their enslavers. After the Emancipation Proclamation, Black and other women of color as well as working class immigrant and non-immigrant women were hired as cooks and maids. They often cared for and helped raise the children in these households, performing this challenging domestic work for low wages (Guglielmo, 2020). Today, women of color and immigrant women in the ECE field continue to receive disproportionately lower wages than their White peers.

These disparities are heightened when we consider the setting, ages of children served, and the education of the early educators themselves, among other factors. In the United States, center-based educators who work full-time with infants and toddlers are paid approximately \$8,000 less per year than educators who work with preschoolers (McLean et al., 2024). This disparity is especially harmful to Black educators working in center-based settings as they are more likely to work with infants and toddlers. Black, Latina, and immigrant teachers working in home-based settings also face this disparity because a large share of infants and toddlers receive care in these types of programs (McLean et al., 2021; McLean et al., 2024).

As of 2022, ECE assistant and lead teachers in California earned a median hourly wage of \$16 and \$19 an hour respectively, compared to TK and K-12 teachers who earned \$41 an hour. Although benefits—such as health insurance, paid sick time, and retirement—are standard for many sectors, they are oftentimes unavailable for early educators not employed in public schools or other settings of early care and education (McLean et al., 2024; Montoya et al., 2022).

Looking Back to Move Forward

Efforts are underway to acknowledge the harm done to historically marginalized populations and the consequences of enduring inequities, as well as how these communities have resisted and continue to resist different forms of violence. Until recently, this legacy was excluded from California's official state history. In 2021, Assembly Bill 101 made California the first state in the country to require that Ethnic Studies be a high school graduation requirement. This groundbreaking legislation aims to provide a more culturally sensitive and inclusive education to students starting in the 2025-2026 academic year (Office of Governor Gavin Newsom, 2021).

Nonetheless, many Californians remain unfamiliar with the contributions and struggles of African Americans, Asian Americans, Latine Americans, and Native Americans, including the devastating and long-lasting impacts of colonization and cultural genocide on Indigenous populations. In 2022, Governor Gavin Newsom signed the California Indian Education Act, which encourages educational institutions to create California Indian Education Task Forces to develop relevant curricula on the culture and history of local Native Tribes, and efforts are underway to make this required curricula (California Native American Legislative Caucus, 2022; California Native Vote Project, 2022). In 2024, Governor Newsom signed Assembly Bill 1821, which requires that K-12 students be exposed to Native American experiences and perspectives when learning about California's mission period and the Gold Rush so that they may have a more complete understanding of the state's history (Office of Governor Gavin Newsom, 2024b).

While Governor Newsom's efforts are long-overdue steps forward, there is a lack of clarity about whether or how they apply to early childhood programs. Indigenous perspectives largely have been excluded in the creation of curricula and efforts to provide inclusive high-quality early care and education in California. The result is a persistent lack of cultural knowledge and sensitivity when caring for and teaching Native children.

Likewise, educational sovereignty—a community's right to design and influence the education and learning of their children in ways that honor their cultural traditions and language—is essential in creating a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape (Moll, 2002; Zingg, 2019). As recent policy and efforts on the ground seek to address and rectify historical inequities, progress towards educational sovereignty is key. In addition, adequate funding, equitable representation, and community and provider involvement in decision-making processes play a determining role in ultimately shaping children's learning experiences and future prospects. These factors not only impact the ability to attract and retain skilled teachers, the quality of instruction, and the provision of essential resources, but also protect the well-being of those who educate and care for children.

To transform and improve our present ECE system to one that works effectively for California's diverse children, families, and the ECE workforce, it is critical to understand why this system came to be and the roots that continue to tether it and visibly shape early care and education today.

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