

Book Review

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A Place to Be Navajo: Rough Rock and the Struggle for Self-Determination in Indigenous Schooling, by Teresa L. McCarty. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002. 229 pp. \$49.95

In an honest and compelling qualitative account, Teresa McCarty offers a glimpse into the struggle of the first American Indian community-controlled school with critical discussions of the past, present, and future education of the Navajos. The carefully intertwined quotes from several Navajo people interviewed for this book provide the reader access to the Navajo people and their identity, especially those who have experienced schooling at Rough Rock. To allow the reader to fully appreciate the current situation at Rough Rock, McCarty gives a detailed account of the history of the Navajo people and their education, including the factors that led up to the development of the Rough Rock Demonstration School.

Historically, the Navajo have lived very different lives from the dominant Western culture that now occupies much of the United States. In contrast to the dominant Western culture, the traditional *Diné* [people] dwelt together in close communal tribes, sharing what they owned and produced. McCarty states that food from the herd was “shared among everyone in the residence group” (p. 30). Learning the Navajo way involved participation in the social world. However, in Navajo culture, teaching was implied instead of explicit: “Traditional education involved observation and involvement in family activities related to the home, the herd, and the fields, and the gradual assumption of adult responsibilities” (p. 35). Children were taught to “walk the right path and to live a good life,” according to Mae Hatathli, an elderly Navajo woman (p. 32). Children learned by watching others and then trying on their own. This style of learning reflects some generalizations made by Swisher and Deyhle (2000) on common American Indian learning styles. They suggest these children “approach tasks visually, seem to prefer to learn by careful observation preceding performance, and seem to learn in their natural settings experientially” (p. 225).

Traditional ways of learning were rejected as obsolete when a new society encroached upon the Navajo way of life. McCarty details the oppression many Navajo students experienced in boarding schools and schools that shunned their traditions, values, and language. Many elders recall being taught to forget their native language, to learn English, and to adopt Western ways to have success. Adding insult to injury, they were often punished by other Navajos who enforced insidious rules in order to control the American Indian students. They learned that school was not the place for Navajos to be Navajo. Although these times were very difficult, the elders remember that they became even more determined to keep their heritage language and culture in order to oppose the hegemonic forces seeking to assimilate them into the dominant, mainstream culture. McCarty rightly denigrates the aims of the U.S. colonial type of schooling: “By the late 19th century, schooling had replaced the military as the hammer of Federal hegemony—the means by which Indigenous languages, cultures, and identities were to be pounded out and reshaped” (p. 52).

The more recent past of the 1930s and 1940s proved to be an era of change for the whole country, as well as for the Navajo nation. The U.S. government found that too much soil erosion had occurred because of sheep overgrazing the land. Therefore, the government mandated a limit to the number of grazing animals in each land district. This was devastating to many Navajo. Raising sheep was an integral part of Navajo society, and was used as a means to educate children in the Navajo ways. People recall these times with bitterness and sadness. Agnes Begay said that when she was a young girl, “When they took the sheep, we used to cry” (p. 58). With the intrusion of outside forces, the Navajo way of raising children all but disappeared, thereby leading many Navajos to accept Western schooling. World War II involvement by thousands of Navajos created opportunities for them to observe the tangible benefits of schooling. Yet, with the increased desire for education, the government could not provide enough educational opportunities for all of the American Indians who desired to attend.

Because of dedicated and assertive Navajo educational leaders, Rough Rock got its school with community input, approval, and support, and opened in 1966. Leaders in the community were anxious to cultivate “the talents and resources of the entire community, fostering a sense of shared purpose and hope, and *creating* a community around the school” (p. 84). Community members taught traditional Navajo weaving and adobe building, and stayed at the dormitories to share their stories with students at night. All community members were valued for their contributions. They transmitted important cultural values of kinship and communal sharing. The staff demonstrated a high level of dedication as they “participated in periodic live-ins, residing with local families for 2 or 3 days as a way of learning about their students’ lives and home experiences” (p. 93). Everyone from the community was involved in creating a place where it was safe to be Navajo.

But a place to be Navajo—a place to be different from the norm—requires the Navajo to struggle against the norm to survive and thrive. The author identifies power relations and ideological frameworks that influence learning across generations. In the early years of the Rough Rock Demonstration School, a study on American Indian Schools lauded Rough Rock's efforts at building community connections, while it condemned nepotism and patronage, which are integral in the Navajo communal culture. How could school leaders avoid nepotism when most everyone from the tribe was related, and their culture valued sharing community resources, including jobs? These researchers were trying to analyze educational achievement without knowing the aims of the Rough Rock educational leaders. This demonstrated how inept and biased researchers, who have different ideological backgrounds, can often make unfounded and irrelevant conclusions. Also, the evaluation highlights the struggle inherent in using schools to achieve indigenous community-defined ends: "Perhaps we should not be surprised, moreover, that a Federally funded evaluation of a Federally funded program used normative criteria and measures that legitimized the larger power structure within which both the evaluation and the Rough Rock Demonstration School coexisted" (p. 109). As the passage of time proves, this larger power structure does not diminish, but rather increases in force.

Moving to more recent information on Rough Rock, McCarty continues with a critical presentation of two stories about the struggle for self-determination—a struggle felt within the community as well as waged against outside forces. The first story depicts the struggle of a revolution in indigenous education. School staff were educated in Western ways, and therefore many were never taught to read and write in the Navajo language. Yet with the assistance of traditional elders and outside educational experts, the Navajo staff developed curriculum, books in Navajo, and effective pedagogical theories. The other story depicts a Navajo school and "process held hostage to a Federal bureaucracy that, despite its rhetoric, stymied self-determination at every turn" (p. 113). Similar to language policy and planning legislation discussed by Skutnabb-Kangas (1997) and Sonntag (2002), McCarty demonstrates how politicians symbolically support the development of American Indian schools and curriculum, while the government offers various excuses for not providing needed funds, or for tying up access to funds in bureaucratic processes. While the federal government's system of allocating funds satisfies non-Navajo federal standards, the system itself does not or cannot address the needs of the local students and educators.

Similar to educators nationwide, teachers at Rough Rock have felt pressure to adhere to national educational movements. Because the teachers at Rough Rock resented feeling controlled by mandates from the board or other non-Navajo administrators unfamiliar with their classroom needs, they were determined to make effective changes. In their professional development courses, the teachers studied together to educate themselves on how to use dialogue journals and portfolio assessments as tools to help bilingual students

develop their writing abilities and to monitor students' learning. They made cultural connections to the curriculum whenever possible. But teacher empowerment is elusive. McCarty describes it as "a complex and entangled negotiation at every turn, mediated by coercive relations of power" wherein indigenous schooling is "an ongoing struggle for identity, agency, and voice" (p. 165).

Near the end of the book, readers encounter the context of the shocking 1995 protest at Rough Rock. This unfortunately resulted in a large boycott of the school by many students and served to divide the staff. Because of complaints about the Navajo language being withdrawn from the high school curriculum and because the school board lost touch with the current local needs of Rough Rock, the school began to restructure its bilingual and bicultural program. While the author effectively includes poignant quotes from many Navajos who participated in the Rough Rock Demonstration School, the reader is left wanting to hear more of the voices of recent or current Rough Rock teachers and students. Yet McCarty does acknowledge that in ethnographic research, it is necessary to maintain confidences that may require leaving out some pertinent information.

A troubling issue addressed by McCarty and discussed by several educational researchers (Corson, 1997; Crawford, 1995; McCarty, 2002; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1997; Wiley, 2002) is that of native language loss among many indigenous peoples. Wiley (2002) states that among language-minority students, a "shift to English was often not by choice" (p. 42). One of the challenges of maintaining the Navajo language and identity is that children are overpowered by the use of English as the dominant language, often in local, as well as national, contexts (e.g., children see English being used in the local schoolyard as well as on television and in the national media). Furthermore, current politics mandate that all students meet specific standards—standards that require literacy skills in English. Readers, who understand the benefits of bilingual and bicultural education, become frustrated when McCarty states that teachers have recently felt pressure to limit their use of the Navajo language, even with young students, in order to prepare students to meet English-language literacy standards. McCarty provides some hope for self-determination. She reveals how some Navajos create a new identity generated by contact with the dominant society while maintaining some of their traditional culture and language. Yet, she questions the validity of requiring a self-determined people to meet standards set by outsiders. In a world that often is ignorant of language-minority students and their needs, *A Place to Be Navajo* is an excellent book for educators who wish to learn more about indigenous-language education in a unique bilingual setting.

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