

# **Native Systems of Education**

Roberta Tayah-Yazzie  
University of Arizona

Prof. William Demmert  
December 13, 2005

## Native Systems of Education

Today, we view Native American education as a failure as we view schools through the lens of researchers who are focused on standardized test results. There was a time, prior to European contact, when Native American education was very successful for Native youth as they mastered their own systems of education prescribed by their own people and communities. The goal of living a prescribed “way of life” according to Native systems was mastered by many. The natural process of learning was a system which contained human development stages known to parents, communities, and now educators. Storytelling is one of the teaching methods used for Native youth to acquire this system of education. The Hopi and Lakota systems of education will be examined to document this success in Native education.

Just as the mothers were training the girls to be able to be good housewives, so the fathers were teaching the sons to become skillful hunters. Our parents were our only teachers...But when our training was completed, we were prepared to face life. (Standing Bear 1931: 46)

There is definitely tremendous validity in the slogan, “Parents are our children’s first teachers.” This slogan is used in many contemporary schools to encourage parental involvement. Furthermore, it is recommended for practice in early childhood education programs across the country encouraging parents that “true” education begins in the home with parents as the initial educators. Native American scholar, Dr. William Demmert, Jr., also confirms that educators who make a connection to the home, through language, also make contributions to “youngsters intellectual skills.” “True education” is a concept that many scholastic educators continue to study and analyze because education varies for various people. It is my understanding that “true” education is the “real-life” activities and events that occur in the every day lives of children in the real world. Then, it is only logical and sensible to believe that the home is the natural environment for real-life activities and events to take place, which shape children’s understanding of the real world.

Native American parent, families, homes and communities have instilled Native children with an abundant amount of knowledge, skills, philosophies, and pedagogies to live good, productive, and promising lives. The everyday practices of living life as a Native American prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century should be examined as a valid form of education. The ways in which valuable, traditional knowledge is inculcated and preserved for many generations need to be brought to the educational forefront as proven practices in Native education. It is through this model of obtaining knowledge which

educators, today, should use as a base to improve schools and schooling for Native children (Demmert nd). This unconscious system of education to instill traditional knowledge for Native children to live a productive life is what we call Native education. This model of Native education correlates with culturally based education (CBE), which truly promotes a set of ideals and principles from the school environment that are consistent with the “lifeways” and “thoughtways” of the home (Mohatt, Trimble, Dickson nd). Through out this paper, it would be beneficial for the reader to consider Native education also as CBE, since they both promote knowledge to be obtained as humanly natural as the home and community experiences.

We have learned what not to do in the last 500 years of domination by visitors from other places. We have learned that many of our own experiences in training the young over thousands of years included practices that researchers of today is finally recognizing as important to success in training and educating today’s young and preparing them for their role as adults. (Demmert nd)

The process of education provided to Native youth prior to the establishment of formal educational academies is important and needs further examination. “Real-life” education among Native people, in their own homes and communities, has been taking place prior to European contact. This system of Native education should definitely be studied because children of that time were successful in mastering it. In addition, the instructional and teaching pedagogies involved in successful mastery of the system definitely needs further research. To mention a few reasons to examine Native systems of education, this essay will address two Native educational systems of living life as a Native American and will analyze how storytelling becomes a valuable teaching tool in mastering this system of education.

Prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the system of mastering Native educational goals of its own time is undocumented and rarely found in present research literature. It is until recently, Native people themselves began to document this sort of system for their own people. Scholars like Hartman Lomawaima and Stephanie Charging Eagle have been instrumental in articulating and documenting this knowledge on Native systems of education. They both designed and produced their own system of education as necessary tools for individuals to feel and sense the power of self worth as Hopi and Lakota people. In addition, their study focused not only on the individual, but extends this knowledge to the broader areas of family, community, and land.

Lomawaima, a Hopi native and Associate Director of Arizona State Museum, designed “Sources of Knowledge.” His system of education focuses on Hopituh which means to live a way of life according to the Hopi way of life. Lomawaima’s model focuses on the different levels of education beginning with Tuuwutsi, then Tutavoh, and ending with Navoti. Each stage comprises and focuses on different elements of Hopi life at the different periods of one’s life. In Tuuwutsi, which means telling stories, the value of kinship, behavior, place names, animals, and plants is stressed to Hopi children up until the age of six or eight. This oral knowledge is instilled through Tuuwutsi method and I will elaborate on it later in this essay.

Next, Tutavoh is the next level of education provided for children up to the age of ten. The emphasis will be on: one, preparation for life; two, livelihood; three, purposeful curriculum; four, logical progression; and five, a belief system. Some of these teaching are provided in the kivas by other influential people in the Hopi child’s life like

Godparents who serve as advisors. The intent of this stage is to provide knowledge and skills on how to make a living.

Lastly, the Navoti stage focuses on basis of Hopi life. The areas of study include knowledge, theoretical, philosophical, and spiritual elements associated with committing and dedicating one's life to this system of Hopituh. This level of knowledge includes great dedication to Hopi life, villages, and kivas. By reaching Navoti, Hopi youth have gained an understanding of living a prosperous Hopi life by acquiring the essential sources of knowledge to do so.

Lomawaima's model of "Hopituh" confirms how knowing, understanding, and appreciating one's cultural base are necessary for a young child to begin his formal educational journey (Demmert & Towner 2003). Furthermore, to live the Hopi way of life according to the Hopi people and communities will definitely determine what may possible happen in a child later on in life, which is living a successful and productive life as a Hopi adult. Lomawaima's model of Native educational systems is successful because there is a huge level of congruency between the Hopi cultural disposition of the Hopi child and the social cultural expectation of the Hopi community (Demmert & Towner 2003). This valuable source of knowledge base for Hopi child becomes a valuable base for information to passed to the next generation of Hopi children by parents and educators.

Charging Eagle, a PhD student in American Indian Studies at the University of Arizona, designed "Lakol Wicohan" (Way of Life). This model emphasizes on the stages of life necessary to understand the "Values of the Lokota." These values of the Lakota range from fortitude, respect, generosity, and wisdom. Fortitude comprises of physical

endurances to experience and endure hardships in addition to caring for the less fortunate. Moreover, respect entails the willingness to experience and learn from others, like parents, family, and community members. Generosity basically deals with the sharing of materials belongings and insightful knowledge. The knowledge gained through generosity, respect, fortitude will reflect the wisdom one will possess to be compassionate, to be courageous, and to understand humility.

In order to reach and understand Lakol Wicohan, Charging Eagle designed five stages of life to proceed through in order to understand the way of life. The first stage is birth, where the mother plays an instrumental role in inculcating babies (hoksicala) with valuable knowledge until they reach the age of two. The second stage is Tokahe, where children are instilled with basic social values by identifying their gender roles. This stage involves learning through play and games up until the ages of ten. The third stage is Incinupa, which entails broader instruction and lessons of life. Incinupa also includes skills to be acquired according to gender roles as young adults (teen-agers). The fourth stage, Iciyamni, reaches adulthood where one accumulates knowledge on marriage and children. In addition, this stage focuses on knowledge obtained from previous stages in order to live a life according to the values of the Lakota. Lastly, Icitopa is the final stage of life where elders are living the way of life according to the Lakota people. Not everyone reaches this ideal stage where your Lakota knowledge reaches fruition.

Charging Eagles model of “Lakol Wicohan” to live the Lakota way of life entails how new knowledge is introduced at a different level of human development and building upon that prior knowledge. In this model of Native educational systems, in order for learning to occur, relevant knowledge from a person’s long term knowledge and

memory must be used (Demmert & Grissmer 2005). Prior knowledge and experiences is essential in obtaining new knowledge in at different level of human development. It is also important to note the success of Charging Eagles model since it supports how “[the] primary socialization of infants and young children is accomplished through joint, meaningful activity with guidance by more accomplished participants, principally through language exchanges and other semiotic processes” (Demmert 2003). Lakota children will experience success in Charging Eagles model of Native educational systems as they use acquired knowledge presented to them at birth, which will definitely become an abundant source of knowledge in their adulthood.

Both Lomaiwama and Charging Eagle’s system of education composes multiple stages and processes to follow in order to meet the overall Hopi and Lakota goals of life. These stages are very clear cut with age guidelines establishes for each. Each stage also has set goals and content to accomplish prior to reaching the next stage of education. Today, we call these “development periods of the lifespan” (Dacey & Travers 2004) beginning with prenatal, infancy, early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, middle adulthood, and later adulthood. In order to successfully reach the final period of the lifespan, one needs to gather an abundant amount of knowledge prescribed for Native youth by their own customary and traditional belief systems of education. Some of this required knowledge is also separated according to different gender roles to function as Hopi or Lakota men and women.

In Standing Bear’s book, My Indian Boyhood, he clearly articulates his learning and teaching derived from his parents, particular his father, to become a successful and prosperous Sioux man.

“Through this method of upbringing, a bond or a tie was formed between Sioux parents and children, so that as we grew in years our respect for our parents grew also. Finally, as we grew to manhood, we looked forward to the day when we should repay our kind parents by taking care of them in their old age” (p. 9).

In Waterlily, the main character was strongly influenced by the women in her family to develop into a good, confident, and strong Lakota woman. Deloria states, “Waterlily went everywhere with her grandmother, Glokku, and her aunts and others, and always it was pleasant,...she had found preference, her own mother,... she would be needing more guidance...” (83). Demmert (nd) in his “Language, Learning and National Goals” article states, “The Tlinget learned early in their history that paternal uncles and other members of the family were important partners in the educational process young children experienced, for these mentors would not tolerate failure” (30). Gender roles and the stages of human development had a tremendous impact on learning of young Native to acquire the prescribed system of Native Education.

Acquisition of this knowledge content appears to be a natural process in both Lomawaima and Charging Eagle’s system of education. The involvement of educators, such as the parents, extended family, Godparents, and communities play an instrumental role in raising children from the early baby stage with predetermined goals required at each stage of life. For the Lakota, the Hoksicala is presented with a cradleboard which has its own curriculum for mother and child to master together. For the Hopi, the kinship system plays an enormous part in the upbringing of a child. The kinship of a child determines who will have input in making sure Native children productive members of their families and communities (Charging Eagle, Lomawaima, Demmert, nd).

There is an accountability system involved in both Hopi and Lakota systems of education because there is huge responsibility automatically imposed on parents, homes and communities to guarantee each member of the community to go through the stages of life to reach the common goals—to live the way of life according to Hopis and Lakotas. The amount of involvement to raise Native children in their homes and community is unbelievable for this period in time. It is essential for any Native community to understand the importance the success as young children develop skills and obtain knowledge in order to become productive members society (Demmert,nd). Today, there is irony to this historical form of Native education since contemporary schools complain about the lack of parental participation and involvement. In earlier Native education, everyone was involved.

“American Indians have been telling their own stories for countless generations. Deep, varied oral traditions existed in precontact times and still exist on the North American continent. These songs and traditional stories, including epic work, could fill volumes. They have great meaning within the individual cultures, meaning that it is often not easily understood by and outsider. Even in translation and out of context, however, these oral traditions have been praised for their beauty, and are now being studied as literature” (Bruchac 1997: X1).

The knowledge content of living the Hopi and Lakota ways of life have always been unwritten but thoroughly practiced by its members through oral stories. This unwritten system of education has been practiced and preserved for hundreds of years by Native people before formal academies were introduced to Native people. Cajete (1994) states that, “[The] ability to use language through storytelling, oratory, and songs was highly regarded by all tribes as a primary tool for teaching and learning” (33). Native

youth acquired this valuable knowledge content through the natural process of stories generated by their elders.

For the Hopi's it is through Tuuwutsi, telling stories, which the Native system of education begins. For the Lakota, it just as valuable to orally pass on their complex system which Lakota people devote their entire lifetime to. Dacey and Travers (2004) relate to this process as how, “[development] is a lifetime process—complex, intriguing, and filled with unanswered questions” (7). My Indian Boyhood (Standing Bear, 1931), Waterlily (Deloria, 1988), and No Turning Back (Qoyawayma, 1964) are valuable Native American literature which supports the value of storytelling in Native education. Each text supplies an enormous amount of stories on Hopi and Lakota ways of life.

Native youth were inculcated with an abundant amount of knowledge by their parents, grandparents and communities for many generations through real-life actual stories. These stories were the primary tools to teach Native ways of life since they built a strong connection to one's personal life. Oral storytelling is a social practice that takes many forms depending on the purpose and context in which it is used. In My Indian Boyhood, Standing Bear (1931) brings his stories to life through by addressing his personal encounters with nature, hunting, fishing, and daily life. Standing Bear's experiences are necessary in order to live a balanced life with ones self and his natural surroundings. Standing Bear recognizes, “Life for the Indian is one in harmony with Nature and the things that surround him. The Indian tried to fit in with Nature and to understand, not to conquer and to rule” (13). This confirms Cajete's statement, “Story is the way humans put information and experience in context to make it meaningful” (138).

Stoodt claims, “Through telling, retelling, believing, and disbelieving stories about each other’s past, futures, and identities, we come to know one another better” (4). Stories can offer an understanding of people, animals, plants, and the land as we co exist in one universal place. By listening to stories, knowledge is gained and by doing an activity, the experience provided ample opportunity to digest further information of the content presented. This form of education is definitely a contributor to the learning process for youth and adults to gain knowledge and retain previous knowledge. In Waterlily, a wonderful history lesson is provided by Woyaka (He Tells) as he visits village to tell winter stories to families who invite and welcome him. Deloria claims Wayaka provided valuable historical knowledge to the community by, “They must hear the myths and the legends; they must know our people’s history, and to that end they much listen to the count” (49). This type of storytelling was the highlighting event of the year for many villages.

I support the ideas of how, “oral storytelling is a good basis for early literacy development” (Cairney 1997: 77). In order to successfully function in Hopi and Lakota communities, while mastering the “way of life” is literacy. To be literate, according to Webster’s dictionary is to be “informed, educated, learned, intelligent, versed, and knowledgeable.” To become literate, Native children need to use their multiple intelligences to digest family oral history while mastering the goal of living the way of life according to the Hopi and to the Lakota. Children need to digest oral history through this process: one, they need to hear it; two they need to see it; three, they need to be familiar with it; four they need to understand it; and lastly, they need to practice it.

Following these natural steps of learning would ensure one to become educated and knowledgeable through stories.

It is through this process which Polingaysi, in No Turning Back, believes was the best method to teach children. Polingaysi's way of teaching children was to use a methodology of bringing in materials and concepts which children can personally relate to. The stories and songs of the animals to master the goal of teaching children the school. Polingaysi's formal teaching process is a very natural approach in teaching so all children can learn. She claims she will teach young Hopi children, "I shall begin with the familiar. The everyday things. The things of home and family" (125). These familiar concepts of daily life for Native youth can be more specific, clear and meaning if told in the Native language of the child. As Cleary & Peacock explain, "Certain concepts fundamental to specific cultures can only be expressed in a tribal language. Certain words carry the meaning of a whole story" (125). It through this same process, which Waterlily and Standing Bear were educated.

Using true and real life experiences contribute to the learning process of Native youth. In Stand Bears' stories, he uses his own experiences as examples of gaining insightful knowledge of learning by doing. Standing Bear learns moral and character development following his first buffalo hunt. These explorations and experiences are strong contributor to the learning process. It through hands-on experiences Native youth gain their knowledge of the world around them. In Standing Bear's situation, it took him seven years to properly prepare for the actual buffalo hunt. In addition, it is after the experience of the buffalo hunt, moral and character development emerged. It is natural that honesty, bravery, and respect are learned through real life experience.

According to Cleary & Peacock (1998), “In more traditional American Indian culture, stories are a medium through which children’s theories of the world are, in part, constructed” (45). There is no generic way of educating youth to gain the insights of the world they live in, but the use of stories is a means in providing that knowledge. It is through these stories that listeners gain experiences to increase their knowledge and understanding of others. According to Simon Ortiz (cited in Brill de Ramiriz 1999),

“Oral tradition of Native American people is based upon spoken language, but it more than that. Oral tradition is inclusive; it is the actions, behavior, relationships, practices throughout the whole social, economic, and spiritual life process of people. In this respect, the oral tradition is the consciousness of the people” (3).

This consciousness is what Lomawaima and Charging Eagle term the “way of life” according to the Hopi and the Lakota. This consciousness is the system of education we instill in our Native children. To do so, Native people use and tell stories. When Native people and communities tell their stories we naturally implement a Native system of education matches perfectly with CBE. The six elements of CBE are very visible in Native educational systems, especially through storytelling. According to William Demmert (2003), these elements are:

- Recognition and use of Native American Languages.
- Pedagogy that stresses cultural characteristics and adult-child interactions.
- Pedagogy in which teaching strategies are congruent with the traditional culture and ways of knowing and learning.
- Curriculum that is based on traditional culture and that recognizes the importance of Native spirituality.

- Strong community participation in educating children and in the planning and operations of school activities, including parents, elders, and other community resources.
- Knowledge and use of the social and political mores of the community.

Native parents and communities have incorporated these natural teachings, as prescribed in the six elements of CBE, for over 500 years in bringing and raising their children to become successful and productive citizen of their Native learning communities.

In conclusion, the Hopi, Lakota, and many other tribal systems of educating Native youth to live positive, harmonious “ways of life” in their homes, communities, and surrounding world are excellent examples. These Native systems of educating youth have been practiced for hundreds of years and appear to be successful in producing competent and productive citizens of Hopi and Lakota society. These societies honor people, animals, plants, and the world they live in order to live balanced, harmonious Native lives through storytelling. Lomawaima & McCarty (2005) concur by stating, “Native educational systems were designed to draw strength from the cycles of life with the human body and in the larger world, in fields and gardens and animal communities that provide models of instruction” (35), which many people continue to practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century . A slogan used in contemporary education, which perfectly matches this Native system of education is: “It takes a village to raise a child.”

## References

- Brill de Ramiriz, S. 1999. Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press.
- Bruchac, Joseph. 1997. Lasting Echoes. San Diego, CA: Silver Whistle.
- Cajete, Gregory. 1994. Look to the Mountain. Skyland, NC: Kivaki Press.
- Cairney, T. 1997. New Avenues to Literacy. *Educational Leadership International*. 54(6), 76-77.
- Charging Eagle, Stephanie. 1999. Values of Lakota. Unpublished raw data.
- Cleary, Linda & Peacock, Thomas. 1998. Collected Wisdom. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Dacey, John & Travers, John. 2004. Human Development Across the Lifespan. Boston MA: McGraw Hill Publishing.
- Deloria, Ella. 1988. Waterlily. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Demmert, W, Jr. No date. Language, Learning, and National Goals: A Native America View. ERIC Digest.
- Demmert, W. Jr. & Grissmer, D. 2005. Improving the Education of Native American Children. Unpublished raw data.
- Demmert, W, Jr. & Towner, J. 2003. A Review of the Research Literature on the Influences of Culturally Based Education on the Academic Performance of Native American Students. Portland, OR: Norwest Regional Educational Laboratory.
- Eggan, Dorothy. 1974. Instructional and Affect in Hopi Cultural Continuity. *In* G. Spindle. 1974. Education and Cultural Process. NY: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston.
- Lomawaima, Hartman. 2005. Sources of Knowledge. Unpublished raw data.
- Lomawaima, Tsianina & McCarty Teresa. 2005. To Remain an Indian. Unpublished manuscript.
- Mohatt, G., Trimble, J., & Dickson, R. (nd). Psychological Foundations of Academic Performance in Culturally Based Education Programs for American Indian and Alaska Native Youth: Reflections on a Multidisciplinary Perspective. Unpublished raw data.

Qoyamayma, Polingaysi (Elizabeth White). 1997. *No Turning Back*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

Standing Bear, Luther. 1931. *My Indian Boyhood*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Stoodt, Beverly. 1996. *Children's Literature*. Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick, Publishers.

Tapahonso, Luci. 1997. *Blue Horses Rush In*. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press.