

Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to examine the Navajo oral traditional story and to initiate meaningful learning in culture-based education (CBE). In Navajo, culture oral story telling is the way to make meaning out one own identity. CBE can build a culturally richer context for Navajo children and enhance understanding of their identity and community individuality. The rationale of this study is to demonstrate how Navajo children can find who they are through listening to and learning the stories of the sacred mountains of the Navajo Nation. Spirituality to the Navajo is having respect for the relationship that exists between the Navajo, including the natural environment, and the sacred mountains.

Introduction:

The Navajo narratives enable learners to understand the natural world and build cultural awareness with storytelling. The oral tradition facilitates narrative examination and collaborative learning for Navajo children through culturally relevant stories and activities. The culture-based education (CBE) is rooted in the idea that American Indians engage in the process of educating their children through both Indigenous wisdom and knowledge (Brayboy, 2005). These rich cultural traditional stories tell how Navajo came to be in the southwest region of North America.

This inquiry will determine how using stories engages the learner in learning about their own culture. According to Native scholars, Demmert and Tower (2003), “The curriculum is based on traditional culture that recognizes the importance of Native spirituality, and place the education of young children in a contemporary context”. The Navajo oral creation stories confirms Demmert and Towers notion of CBE, since they have elements of culture-based education (CBE) as it is grounded in the belief of the Navajo elders.

CBE has components that promote literacy in Navajo language and culture in the schools. CBE is a different education initiative juxtaposed to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) schools of the past. The BIA schools education served to assimilate Native American students using cruel methods to abolish their language and cultural ties. Now, similar practices are used continually in the

public school as a hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum in education is when teachers do only a short session about the Native American topic.

The themes used for Navajo children are unfamiliar in these short sessions, because the subjects are about different indigenous tribes from different regions, which have little to do with Navajo Culture. The stories that connect Navajo students to their identity are stories with spiritual content like the Navajo creation stories, the Navajo sacred places, and Navajo sacred mountains. These stories are told to Navajo children in their early childhood years. Stories that have many connections for the Navajo people in relation to their existence as natural beings.

Origin of Oral Story

A brief background of Changing Woman (Asdzáá Nádleehé) contains the following elements, since she was a child created by the Holy People to resolve mean acts of the monster against the Navajo people during the times when there was disorder on the Navajo land (Dinétah). Gobernador Peak (Ch'ool'íí) was her birthplace, which is one of the sacred mountains. Navajo First Woman and First Man raised Asdzáá Nádleehé at this sacred mountain. Under their guidance and in a mystical and magical way (according to Navajo stories), she quickly became a young woman. She had the first sacred Puberty Ceremony (Kinaalá) on Ch'ool'íí mesa and this was Navajo the first Kinaalá ceremony. Shortly after that she gave birth to a twin Monster Slayer (Naayéé'Neezghání)

and Child Born of Water (Tó Bájishchíní) two boys. This is one version of this significant Navajo story, which I will use for this for this paper.

The twins' duty in the story, when they got older, was to get rid of the big monsters disturbing Navajo people. This particular story confirms how, “Indigenous knowledge embedded with a cultural context, expressed through language, ceremony, artifacts, cosmology and social relationship”(Paci J.C.D.& Krebs L, 2004) are important elements of learning to obtain knowledge. The Navajo wealth of knowledge is constructed through culturally relevant activities related to the past, present, and the future. It is through these types of stories, like Changing Woman, shared by educators, which will instill Navajo children with insights and knowledge explained in CBE.



With this picture above, I will show the significance of Navajo oral stories connected to this particular sacred place. This is an aerial view of Shiprock Monument (Tsé Bit'a'í) taken from the air of the rock formation 1,700 feet tall. Tsé Bit'a'í translation in Navajo is the “rock with a wing”. The location of this formation is 30 miles south of Shiprock, New Mexico on the Navajo Nation. It is near another historical natural site of “Four Corner National Park” where the four states meet that is also part of Navajo Nation. The picture in this sacred place has rock bridge formations like a thread leading

to Tsé Bit'a'í. Dyson and Genishi, (1994) would also depict Shiprock to be a scared place for Navajos since the “[place] is crucial and it shapes and constrain the stories that are told or indeed, that could be told about Shiprock, according to the Navajo people, simply should not be considered a piece of geography (Dyson and Genishi 1994).

This place, Shiprock, has connection to the oral story about Asdzáá Nádleehé who is the Navajo first mother and Navajo deity, and her son, Naayéé' Neizghání, who had one of the many battles with the giant bird monster at the top of the Tsé Bit'a'í. Naayéé' Neizghání, was tossed from the top by the giant monster and was saved by an eagle feather before he hit the ground. Afterward, Naayéé' Neizghání, killed the giant bird monster with the bow and arrow given to him by his father the Sun.

Today, Tsé Bit'a'í is home for Lucy Tapahonso, Navajo poet and University of Arizona professor, who speaks of Tsé Bit'a'í as a birth place for the Navajo and “ensures identity” she speaks of and the place where placenta are buried near a tree next to the family sheep corral. Even the corral is considered a scared place in itself. According to Native scholar and poet, N, Scott Momaday, he eloquently describes what a corral means to him. “[The] corral, the high a stone wall: it is great ring, a well. At night, it is perhaps beautiful when the moon shines down upon the many facets and smoothes them out, so that the figure is whole and softly defined and gleaming. And inside the ring is nothing, blackness” (p. 36). The corral, which houses animals and umbilical cords is sacred and has many valuable teachings. It is true for Navajo

children the corral is where a Navajo child's umbilical cords lie as explained by Tapahonso.

Tsé Bit'a'í represents of a ship on it that sailed out to the desert when the land the Navajo people call home was all under the water in the past.



There is an image of the Navajo woman standing at the bottom of Tsé Bit'a'í facing to the east. I became conscious of this image of Tsé Bit'a'í surrounded by Navajo traditional hooghan, a corral, an outhouse and waterfront. In this picture, I saw an image of Navajo woman holding a baby. Based on my knowledge, I immediately connected the image in the picture to Changing Woman (Asdzáá Nádleehé) from the Navajo creation story. Asdzáá Nádleehé went toward the west

direction to live out her life after she creates the first four original Navajo clans and humans' beings began to emerge in the world. The Navajos today have had increased to over 50 clans. Asdzáá Nádleehé is a sacred and mystical deity and the first child and later a mother in the Navajo creation story. It is because of her creation, all Navajo children are considered a prized and sacred gift from the Holy People. The Holy people ask parents to teach their children the kinship ties and to know their clans, which are important elements of culture. Culture shapes mind, it provides Navajo children with the tool kit by which they construct not only worlds but also our very conception of themselves and power

(Bruner, 1996). In Navajo communities, children learn to respect the natural environment of their community in their early childhood years. Asdzáá Nádleehé brings the spiritual knowledge. Today, many Navajo identify themselves through knowledge by their clan relationship. The story of Asdzáá Nádleehé adds the spiritual knowledge of the clan's relation, which is the primary focus of CBE.

Ways of Knowing

The protocol of introducing oneself by introducing one's clans must be honored and well presented. In the following order, first identify your maternal clan, second your paternal father's clan, third, your maternal grandmother clan, and fourth, your paternal grandfather clan. This process distinguishes one's identity.

One of my personal experiences with identity was recently in Washington D.C. at a French restaurant. A Peruvian restaurant attendant asks me about my national affiliation and I told her I was a member of the Navajo Nation. The response to my tribal membership was "so you are pure Native American?" This was a surprising response for me. It was the first time the word "pure" was used to describe my Navajo identity. Introduction is essential in Navajo language because it is a personal self-identity in the Navajo culture.

Navajo oral stories are origin stories teaching children and adult members of their communities. The stories used for listening, remembering, and thinking

through for better understanding of the world around them. This is through this process, in which stories find their way into Navajo communities and lives.

In the Native communities, the elders and the parents do story telling. The stories teach moral values of living a good life and knowing your kinship relationships. Navajo children are expected to know their clan relatives and to know how to introduce themselves as members of their clan. This is process is what Basso (1996) points to as “moral tools with psychological implications.”

The parents telling their children oral stories in Navajo is good practice for language retention to prevent Navajo children growing up with Navajo as their second language. Today, there are many Navajo young children who do not speak Navajo and they take Navajo classes in they are in high school or in college as a foreign language. Navajo parents should start teaching their children Navajo by telling and sharing oral creation stories in Navajo. Take advantage of the teaching moments of putting together mini lessons for the Navajo children.

Traditional oral stories are a good way of immersing young children in their mother tongue (Basso, 1996). Any Navajo Story is not frivolous or meaningless, Basso (1996). Native stories have a purpose because it provides continuum of connections to place and ancestors. Native oral stories bring forth narratives of the ancestors and place.

I learned my first language from my mother telling winter oral stories and speaking to me fluently in Navajo. I am very proud that my mother continues to speak to me in Navajo to this day. My first language is important

and I am very proud and honored to speak Navajo. Navajo parents also need to support and encouragement to teach their children in Navajo. “We must create the kind of education that creates great human beings” (Cajete 1994), by using oral story to teach our children their mother tongue. It is through the teachings of my parents I am the human being Cajete (1994) describes. I must contest; Navajo people have strong oral traditions, which are the vehicles for the transmission of culture and knowledge. This tradition is important and must continue to be practiced to educate young Navajo children.

Model of Learning:

The model I will use to describe the process of getting a story in the Navajo culture from Navajo elders is Cajete is “Centering Place” connected rings illustration. How a person will ask the elder to tell an oral traditional story. The first step one is asks an elder. The second step is to seek meaning of the stories and ask questions. The third step is to make meaning of the stories and related them to life experience. The fourth step is to take ownership, find a creative meaning, and make the knowledge significant to you. Every learner has his or her own unique interpretation of each story. The fifth step is sharing the outcome of learned knowledge by teaching the others about the meaning of the story (Cajete 1994).

As Cajete says, “Teaching and sharing are part of the process of becoming more whole and spiritually mature.” Indigenous knowledge belongs to the communities. The sixth step is the celebrating of spiritual sharing and

spreading indigenous knowledge among the people in the communities. The seventh step is being thankful of the gift of knowledge brought forth through oral stories. Cajete says, it is the place where the soul and spirit reside, “that place that the Indian talk about.” The experiences of being fully immersed in the story and applying it to our own experience is like having a spiritual understanding of the story (Cajete 1994).

This process shows how oral stories are constructed and how it is a useful tool for culture-based education. Each time an oral story is repeated it is renewed, and the process provides a continuum of connection to place, ancestors, and the present.

Implication

The Navajo believe their language is a sacred gift from the Holy people. Culture-based education is the curricula that work best for Navajo children for their educational learning. CBE teaching helps Navajo children to become the speakers in their communities. They can use their Navajo culturally knowledge become a successful. Students do their best in their academic achievement through CBE (Demmert and Towner 2003).

Children have positive thoughts about their identity. This causes them to go beyond their limitations and expectations in schools. “Thinking about thinking has to be a principal ingredient of any empowering practice of education” (Bruner 1996).

Navajo Nation own high school Navajo Preparatory School in a Farmington, New Mexico is an example of a culture-based school. Navajo language, culture, and history classes are CBE curricula at Navajo Preparatory. Most of the students who graduate from Navajo Prep go on to attend college after they graduated. The Navajo Prep graduates continue to reach for highest goals through scholarship and research. Navajo Prep is the school where I have taught Navajo language and Navajo culture. My own experience teaching the students at Navajo Preparatory School was great to see students being pride of their Navajo heritage.

Navajo Nation want their children to be the best and the brightest students. They are always looking to the future and want their children to attend schools that have challenging, innovative curriculum. The CBE curriculum in K-12 helps make the transition to do well at the college institutions.

The children that are proficient in their heritage first language, also will be proficient in another language (Demmert and Tower 2003). Navajo Students who do well in college are the students who have bi-cultural knowledge of both their own and the mainstream culture. Many of them appreciate the Navajo oral teaching of identity and for learning the meaning of their culture and language. This is what the component of education Navajo Prep students obtains from the CBE balanced education. The expectation is for of the Navajo children to become leaders of their people and role models for future generations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to say that I wrote this paper from a Navajo perspective, taking into considered the important and scared elements of the Navajo culture. There is knowledge in Indigenous ways of knowing and to the shares the knowledge is to continue the ways of our ancestors.

This paper will begin my journey in writing about the significance of the Native oral story telling. Through my own imagination and understanding of Navajo oral creation story, I try to paint a picture to show there is a thread of Native American oral traditional story in sacred places in Navajo communities. This story and my knowledge about Changing Woman immediately connected me to her image on the Shiprock Monument.

It is through a Native American scholar, Bryan Brayboy; I discovered how my own stories could become my own theories. “I once had an encounter with a colleague who told me that people like me, “told good stories” and later added that because I told good stories, I might not ever be a “good theorist” (Brian Brayboy, personal communication, 2005). My hope is that these are not the only stories I will write because there are other sacred places that I can make significant connections to.

In the future, I would like to write is about the image of the woman standing in Shiprock in further detail. The overall theme Changing Woman and the time she returns to Navajo Nation will be next. The story will continue with how Changing Woman restores order and rids modern day monsters disrupting the harmonious connection in the Navajo society.

Lastly and most importantly, if Navajo children are taught in their Native mother's language in a culture-based education curriculum, their academic performances will improve. There is a continue support for language revitalization and cultural knowledge (Lipka and McCarty 1994) in some successful Native American schools. There is no doubt Navajo children speaking their mother's language will learn the sacred creation oral stories of the Navajo people. These Navajo children will become the storyteller and shares their stories.

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