Diné Youth and Identity in Education

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This chapter presents findings from a doctoral dissertation, *The Racialization of Diné (Navajo) Youth in Education*, which was designed to give a voice to nine Diné youth who described the ways that they were able to negotiate their place in school. My main research questions were about identity, how schools have historically addressed the cultural and linguistic differences that Diné students bring to school, how culture, language, and race intersect in their lives, and what factors determined success or failure for Diné youth subsequent to their schooling experiences.

Past studies of the schooling of Diné (Navajo)[1] youth emphasize the impact of racism on Navajo youth and highlight the myriad reasons why some students succeed academically while others fail in school in secondary and post-secondary school settings (see e.g., Deyhle, 1995; Vadas, 1995). For example, in her longitudinal study of Navajo and Ute students, Donna Deyhle (1992, 1995) implicates "racial warfare" as a significant cause as to how and why some students fail. While Deyhle's research refers to some general claims from John Ogbu's explanations about voluntary and involuntary minorities, Deyhle (1995) states "Navajos, in contrast, have never been an essential part of the White dominated economy" (p. 407). She writes:

> Whereas Ogbu views the cultures of caste like minorities as a reaction to the dominant white group, I believe that Navajo practices and culture represent a distinct and independent tradition. Navajo do occupy a caste-like, subordinate position in the larger social context. However, only a small part of Navajo cultural characteristics can appropriately be called "secondary" or "oppositional." Navajos face and resist the domination of their Anglo neighbors from an intact cultural base that was not developed in reaction to Anglo domination. An oppositional description of Navajo culture ignores the integrity of Navajo culture and neglects the substantive value disagreements between Navajos and Anglos. (pp. 407-408)

As an Indigenous educator, I have become more concerned about the impact of this "racial warfare" in regard to the schooling of Indigenous youth and other youth of color because I believe they are not starting

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[1]I use the terms Navajo and Diné interchangeably. In historical texts, Navajo was used a lot by anthropologists and others. Diné is a term that is being used more and more today. In the Navajo language, Diné means "the People."

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on an equal playing field with white students because of personal, institutional, and structural racism. Over the last five years, I have become more aware of the politics of schooling, identity formation, and knowledge production as a result of my graduate education related to critical educational studies. I have learned about social reproduction theory in education and about ideas like cultural capital along with notions about social and political processes of inclusion and exclusion that continue to influence educational policies today that have detrimental effects for youth of color (Apple, 2000, 2001a; Lareau, 2000; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In "Moments of Social Inclusion and Exclusion," Annette Lareau and Erin Horvat (1999) define moments of inclusion as "the coming together of various forces to provide an advantage to the child in his or her life trajectory" and moments of exclusion as including "placement in a low reading group, retention, placement in remedial groups, and the failure to complete college preparation requirements" (p. 48). That is, many students of color and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are excluded because they do not have access to the cultural, economic, and social capital that are needed to do well in schools and many are losing out. In the case of Indigenous youth, oftentimes their family and community's language, cultural wealth, and knowledge are also seen as a deficit to the existing mandated school curriculum. More so, these youth's identification to and with their unique cultural and linguistic heritage are hardly, if ever, recognized and supported in their educational careers.

As an educator, I have personally heard of administrators and teachers who express their opposition to the need and importance of having Navajo language and culture classes for Navajo students even with the passage of federal legislation such as the Native American Languages Act. For example, on one occasion, a Navajo language teacher with whom I worked relayed to me a story about a white teacher who unabashedly asked her Navajo students, "What is so important about your culture that you are late to class?" The students were several minutes late getting back to their homeroom class because they had been participating in a Navajo cultural activity in their Navajo class. On a more subtle level, I have also observed colorblind racism when teachers say, "I don't see race" or "I don't see color." This new type of racism is one way that whites try to minimize or naturalize racism as the way things are, thereby placing the blame of always complaining or bringing up issues about race and racism on people of color. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) in *Racism Without Racists* describes this new racial ideology as "a loosely organized set of ideas, phrases, and stories that help whites justify contemporary white supremacy" (p. 178). In the post-civil rights era, Bonilla-Silva along with other critical race theorists maintain that these ideas work in tandem with racializing practices that continue to maintain and sustain white supremacy within our "racialized society."

Research background and methodology

The purpose of my dissertation study was to give a voice to Diné youth in education as they described the ways that they were able to negotiate their place in school. My main research questions were about identity, how schools have

historically addressed the cultural and linguistic differences that Diné students bring to school, how culture, language, and race intersect in their lives, and what factors determined success or failure for Diné youth beyond their schooling experiences. I used a qualitative research design that employed a case study approach because case studies provide a systematic way of looking at events, experiences and perceptions while collecting and analyzing the data and reporting the results.

I selected my nine participants, all Diné, from a large university setting. While many of the students were from rural reservation communities, there were several who consider themselves to be 'urban' Navajos particularly in that they have been born or lived in a city for a significant amount of time. Also, there were students who moved back and forth from urban to reservation settings with their families on a regular basis. The method of data collection for this study relied primarily on in-depth interviews. I also reviewed educational documents from national, state, and tribal departments such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2005 and the New Mexico Indian Education Act of 2005, state and private educational reports, and tribal legislative documents related to American Indian and Diné language and educational policies.

Summary of findings

An important aspect of this research on Diné youth highlights findings about students' understanding of their racial, ethnic, cultural, and gender identities in relation to their educational experiences. Using data from the interviews, I discovered that their responses reveal clear indications that identity formation and development are linked not only to individual self definitions based on legal and cultural descriptions but to racial ascriptions based on the social constructions of racialized bodies. For example, all of the participants provided varied responses that reveal the complexities and incongruence of the meaning of identity. For some, their sense of identity encompassed a more traditional understanding of Diné identity in comparison to others whose sense of identity revealed strong notions of citizenship and nationalism. Furthermore, for the students in my study, their perceptions about these different types of identities were largely premised on their past experiences, or lack of experiences, discussing or addressing issues surrounding race, identity, culture, and representation. In some cases, participants were unsure about differences between their racial and cultural identities. It appeared that their ideas were largely based on government notions of citizenship or derived on biologically imposed notions of race and blood quantum in their references to census numbers and certificates of Indian blood.

Racial identity development models offer a socio-psychological perspective for understanding the stages of identity development for African Americans, other people of color, and whites. Furthermore, these models help to address and raise some important questions and issues related to racial identification and why individuals are classified into racial groups. In looking at racial identity, Beverly Daniels Tatum (1997) describes how an individual's and a racial group's cultural, social, political, and economic experiences require an examination of their racial

identity development. For example, African American racial identity development can be described as the attitudes and beliefs that an African American has about his or her sense of belonging to the African American race or ethnic group, about the African American race (and community) collectively, and about other racial groups. In a similar way, I believe that by addressing issues and understanding racial identity development especially in terms of understanding how and why students use the terms Native American, First Nations, or Indigenous peoples, Indigenous youth will become better equipped to articulate and bring out into the open their ideas and experiences with internalized racism, structural racism, and global white supremacy.

In "Indigenous Identity: What Is It, and Who *Really* Has It?" Hilary N. Weaver (2001) writes "Native identity has often been defined from a nonnative perspective. This raises critical questions about authenticity: Who decides who is an indigenous person, Natives or nonnatives?" (p. 246). This idea or phenomena of claiming or re-affirming an Indigenous identity is best captured by Sandy Grande (2008) who refers to it as a 'paradox.' In her article "American Indian Geographies of Identity and Power: At the Crossroads of Indigena and Mestizaje" she states this idea very well:

> While contemporary life requires most Indians to negotiate or "transgress" between a multitude of subject positions…such movement remains historically embedded and geographically placed. Moreover, the various and competing subjectivities remain tied through memory, ceremony, ritual, and obligation to a traditional identity type that operates not as a measure of authenticity, but rather of cultural continuity and survival…. [T]he struggle for American Indian subjectivity is, in part, a struggle to protect this essence and the right of Indigenous peoples to live in accordance with their traditional ways. (pp. 232-233)

Thus, as American Indians try to re-claim, re-define, and re-articulate a fluid but strategic "essentialist" construction of Indian-ness, there are still many challenges that face American Indian communities that require the construction of open, fluid, and transgressive definitions (Grande, 2008; 2004). Therefore, defining Indian, Native, Native American, or Indigenous identity becomes a very salient issue for educators when looking at educational outcomes for Indigenous communities because processes of identity formation and affirmation include looking at complex issues that underscore many aspects of identity development, such as personal, social, and cultural beliefs about identity, the impact of racism and racialized discourse on Indigenous people, the imposition of legal and biological definitions of identity, and the strategic ways that Indigenous people are reclaiming their own beliefs about identity development (Lee, 2006; Garroutte, 2003; Martinez, 2010; Weaver, 2001).

A thorough analysis of student responses in this study revealed that Indigenous youth are critically aware of the relationship between identity, ancestral language, place, and cultural knowledge. Also, Indigenous youth are critical of

the subordination of the "fundamental markers" of their identities. Māori scholar, Margaret Maaka (2003) writes, "the oppression of indigenous peoples... involved the stripping away of the fundamental markers of our identities – sovereignty, ancestral lands, language, and cultural knowledge" (p. 3). In the following comment about "forced citizenship" by Mark, there is the recognition by him that his identity is related to Maaka's statement about the "stripping away of fundamental markers of identities" as part of ongoing processes of colonization and racialization:

> **VW:** How do you identify yourself to others?
> **Mark:** I guess… Diné. Diné nishli. Say that first, and then say…say in English… you know… I'm Diné ….
> **VW:** What's that?
> **Mark:** Indigenous People of America…that is Indigenous… we used to be called American Indians. (pause) I don't like the term Native Americans, we're not really American. (pause) Forced citizenship.

In these statements from Mark, there is an acknowledgement of the oppressive "politicized" nature of identity formation and its connection to cultural, historical and social processes of assimilation, colonization, and racialization. More so, Mark's affirmation of being Diné is significant in how it raises questions about the concepts of relationships and connectedness with others within and outside of Indigenous communities.

In his article titled, "Navajo Cultural Identity," Lloyd Lee (2006) writes, "the Navajo nation brings to the American Indian identity discussion table its own distinct view of identity based on cultural identity features such as worldview, language, kinship, land, pride and respect" (p.100). Furthermore, based on the findings from his dissertation, *21st Century Diné Identity* (2004), Lee posits young Diné students today are "developing their own Diné culture, but, they do make a connection to the past" and that their cultural identity is "rich in the traditional concepts of Diné identity" (p. 161).

> **VW:** How do they know that you're Diné or Navajo?
> **Sharon:** First of all I come from an area surrounded by other Diné' people, my family, my mother, my ancestors have the world view of being Diné. It's a world view that's been passed down. I see as something that connects us to the people, I guess. The worldview that people with the same language, people with similar ancestral background share.

Bergstrom, Cleary, and Peacock (2003) state, "*Identity development* from an Indigenous perspective has less to do with striving for individualism and more to do with establishing connections and understanding ourselves in relationship to all things around us" (p. 26, emphasis in original). They go on to add,

"Listening to stories from this perspective allows the students' voices…to be heard clearly. Their stories tell about their growing understanding of who they are as Native persons – in other words, their identity development" (Bergstrom, et al., 2003, p. 27).

> **VW:** Who are you, how do you identify yourself?
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> **Sarah:** I would just plain out say Diné. What's Diné?… Navajo. What's Navajo? And this is the part where I kind of get lost. People say Indian, yet I don't claim…or some people say American Indian. And it's like No. Native American, I am like…ah…I…it is still like…sometimes I will let it go… but it seems like… deep down I'd rather say Indigenous. That is what I would claim… So like… Navajo , Indigenous… Diné, Navajo, and then Indigenous. I don't know if it is just the way I am starting to think now.
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> **VW:** Where did you hear that term, Indigenous?
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> **Sarah:** Indigenous…first? Oh gosh, it has to been from way back. I don't even remember…I just know…
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> **VW:** Is that a word you learned in school, from your family or… ?
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> **Sarah:** I think it was more family And then I started reading more, when I started getting older, and I started seeing that there were Native American magazines and there's like all these different programs… and that's where I started seeing it more and more…even though a lot of them still say Native American…I saw the whole like Columbus thing, the Indians and then the Native American thing. I think my ancestors were here long before it became America. So I don't understand the whole 'Native' American.

In Sarah's remarks, which are similar to Mark in claiming an Indigenous identity, she states "it is just the way I am starting to think now." Later on, she makes a reference to the "Columbus" thing which suggests her growing understanding of the historical contexts and political constructions of being "Indian" or "Native American" *vis a vis* asserting an Indigenous identity.

For many Indigenous youth, asserting or constructing an identity begins with and continues by negotiating the multiple and contested terrain of identity. As Diné youth, they are astutely aware that their connection to their family and community heritage and their investment in Diné language and cultural knowledge are reasons for how they are mistreated in particular instances by particular people. The importance of talking about identity from an Indigenous perspective is significant especially in regards to the goals of Indigenous education because of the unique status of Indigenous and Native people to nation-states. Also, it is important in regards to the education of Indigenous youth in that students bring with them their individual and collective memories, histories, songs, and the stories of their people. Furthermore, their cultural background or collective cultural and linguistic wealth are wound up with their identities.

In addition to the analysis on identity, I also examined students' negative experiences with schooling using social and cultural reproduction theory that highlighted how institutionalized racialization occurs within educational contexts. Specifically, I analyzed the ways in which these Diné youth talked about their place in school, how their cultural and linguistic backgrounds were minimally supported in the schools, and what they identified or perceived as barriers to their schooling as result of their racial, ethnic, and cultural identity that underscore the processes of racialization and internalized racism. The following is an excerpt from my dissertation from the interview with Sharon.

> **VW:** In what ways then do you think that the Navajo language and culture were supported in the school curriculum?
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> **Sharon:** It's not.
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> **VW:** It's not?
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> **Sharon:** It's not at all. I'm not going to say not all, but, except for the Navajo classes that were specifically labeled Navajo language or Navajo government, anything else that had to do with supporting the culture, really, I can't think of any.

Sharon raises an important concern about how Navajo language and cultural knowledge are not supported in schools, even ones that are in close proximity to Navajo communities and with large numbers of Navajo students. In order to understand clearly the ways that Navajo students' construct and negotiate identities and how those processes can impact their success in school, I believe that it was important also to examine the ways that they developed an understanding of their place in the schools and how some schools continue to marginalize their cultural heritage and thus their cultural identity.

In a follow up interview, we returned to talking about the difference between a racial and ethnic identity again to further clarify her ideas. Sharon said:

> Gosh, I think race looks at the person's skin color and ethnicity looks at the cultural heritage. I think, I do not know. I didn't study race theory or anything. I think it's relevant because in the general discourse amongst people they will tell you that race is about black, etc…. They say I do not see color. It's not necessarily a color but their cultural background. A person may look Native American and you can't just dispel it and say, "Oh you're just a person, a human being." In an ideal world we should think like that. Unfortunately I think when we have things that are already categorized for certain purposes, people start to see color.

Sharon is demonstrating here an acute awareness of race as social construction used to classify people by their features. It is important to note that, unlike Sharon, many students of color become aware of race and racism based solely on their personal experiences. That is, although some students may not have "studied" race theory as Sharon states, their understanding is based on their own individual

experiences and how they observe the world around them. Thus, for many people of color their understanding of race and racism comes from everyday interactions from an early age, their observations and experiences with racial discrimination. Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) state, children

> as relatively new members of social institutions, are engaged in a highly interactive, socially regulating process as they monitor and shape their own behavior and that of other children and adults in regards to racial matters. They not only learn and use ideas about race and ethnicity but also embed in their everyday language and practice the understood identities of who is white, Black, Latino or Asian. These and (other) identities and associated privileges and disadvantages are made concrete and are thus normalized. They are normalized, moreover, not only in performances of "roles" and "scripts," but also in the deeper psyches and subconscious understandings of children and adults. The children perpetuate and re-create the structures of race and ethnicity not only in society, but also in their social minds and psyches. (p. 33)

Sharon's recognition of certain aspects of colorblind racism and the black-white dichotomy in race relations underscores how Indigenous youth are aware of and thinking about issues of race and racism. It also demonstrates the different ways that Diné youth are constructing and negotiating their identities with the process of schooling. For example, for Sharon, her identity is clearly defined by traditional Diné ways of knowing despite what and how she is racially categorized or seen by others. Furthermore, although she is aware that her identity is not defined by a racial category, she is also aware that there is also the possibility that others will assign or ascribe one for her. More importantly, she is gaining an understanding that while a racial identity is not real, its consequences and outcomes can be dangerous. This is an important lesson not only for students but educators who need to be able to address these issues in their teaching and in how they interact with students.

Racially 'ascribed' definitions and/or racializing practices that assign racial meaning to how one looks or what race one is perceived to be from have strong political, economic, and cultural consequences for youth of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Gomez, 2008; Lewis, 2005; Garroutte, 2003). In looking at the following responses from Selena and Sharon related to their experiences with schooling based on Amanda Lewis' description of racialization as racial ascription processes, it is important to emphasize how acts of inclusion and exclusion affect students of color in addition to the categorization and assignment of racial meanings to student bodies along very dichotomous lines.

> **VW:** The white teacher made you move?
> **Selena:** From a seat with all white students to a seat with colored students.
> **VW:** To allow another white student to sit with them?

Selena: Yeah to my seat…. I didn't know if that was intentional

VW: Were you …bothered that you had to move away or that you had to sit with the others?

Selena: Ahmm... it wasn't that it was I had to sit with the other students... it just bothered me that of all the other people she picked me to move, I guess just to like… I felt like she was separating the class on what she felt like…. who she felt it would work best with.

VW: To accommodate the other whites and the new white student?

Selena: Yeah and I think that she probably you know intentionally felt that....that would help me to be at a place where I was more comfortable. I mean maybe she.... I really don't understand like… but I just remember... just being picked out that day and then being like "Ok you can move there and take that seat" and I was like "What?? When there was an empty seat there". Out of all the points I think I felt like, I never really felt like any you know. I guess like racism or being separated until that point. I just …I really didn't like art class.

While Diné students may not be able to articulate ideas about racializing practices, it becomes apparent to them that they are racialized based on what they look like and what others feel is in their best interests. In these instances, students of color like these Diné students may begin to see how their identities are racialized within the gaze of dominant white supremacist discourse in education. That is, they begin to understand that white people's perceptions of them are in many instances based on how they are perceived or categorized as Native American or members of an "other" racial, ethnic, and cultural group. Also, it becomes evident to students of color that they are marginalized because of their connections to specific cultural and linguistic identities or a cultural heritage that is different from the dominant or mainstream American culture.

From her studies on Navajo youth, Donna Deyhle (1995, 1992, this volume) discusses the notion of cultural integrity to underscore the ways in which Navajo students resist and reaffirm their Diné cultural identity and staying connected to the cultural and spiritual values and beliefs of their parents, communities, and ancestors. In doing so, she maintains that Navajo youth assert and maintain important aspects of Navajo culture and language that are integral to their place and connection to the home and community settings while negotiating the school terrain. She attributes the notion of cultural integrity as a prime determinant to how and why some Navajo students did well in school regardless of obstacles or challenges they faced while navigating the racial hierarchal system of the school and community.

Similarly, in my research, the Diné participants' narratives highlight the significance of cultural integrity especially in the ways that they believe that they were invested with and supported in maintaining Diné cultural beliefs and language in their lives. Other key factors identified by students from their early childhood experiences with schooling include parent support and involvement in

school, teacher and student interactions, peer support, and traditional Dine teachings like k'e or the Navajo clan system. For some participants, the investments made by them and their parents in their cultural heritage was often attributed primarily to the efforts of their parents' resilience to help them maintain their connections to language and culture regardless of the obstacles they face that result from changes in life style or language shift. In their study, *The Seventh Generation,* Bergstrom, Cleary, and Peacock (2003, p. 84) identified several key traits that fostered resilience which include: "being well-grounded and connected to one's tribal culture," "trying to live up to the high expectations of influential adults, particularly family," and "tapping into one's inner strength and maturity to stay motivated when things aren't going well."

In the cases of the Diné youth I interviewed and their families, cultural resilience was evident in both parents and students. Although the factor of the student resiliency is significant to this study, the unwavering support of some parents to overcome obstacles and to take chances for the sake of their children was very well noted and warrants further research:

> **VW:** What could you say to a young Navajo student that's in school right now? What kind of things do you think you could try to share with them to help them get where you're at? Based on all we've talked about.
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> **Selena:** Well, gosh, well, I would say that like, whether they're close to their culture or not, I think that like that, if you know all your stories or dances that's really great and I think that benefits a lot of students. At least I think that helps get students through cause it gives them those values that they need to succeed. And, so, that's really important but then even if their family, like mine isn't very traditional to begin with. They kind of moved more towards Christianity, I guess assimilating. Then to just, I think, gosh it's hard to say what got me to this point and what I would say to a student. I know a lot of it is just helping and being close with your family. Really, like, it's hard to… cause all families vary….but, just to care for your family more than your friends, more than whatever. I think my success comes from seeing the successes of my family and the failures and understanding what got them through the situations.

From this particular response and other similar ones, it is evident that many students and their parents persevere regardless of the many challenges and obstacles related to socioeconomic ills or racial discrimination because of their strong connection to their cultural heritage's values and beliefs. That is, as evidenced by the students' responses to how their parents were supportive and instrumental to their success and well being, they shared how some of their parents (and in some cases, grandparents and other relatives) continually strive to empower them by maintaining a connection to their heritage language and culture through participation in ceremonials and daily encouragement. Also,

parents' resiliency showed in how they were not only helping to keep their children in school but in the ways that they worked to help themselves despite the many challenges and obstacles they faced every day. While there have been a great deal of studies in American Indian education that point to the resilience of students in education, not much has been reported on the resiliency and effort of parents and larger Indigenous communities to give their children the support, motivation, and to attend to their basic needs. Also, more research is needed, especially in regards to race relations and the relations of competition, exploitation, domination, and cultural selection in the education of Indigenous youth (Martinez, 2010; McCarthy, 1990).

Conclusion

In sum, Diné cultural integrity is expressed and learned by Diné youth despite the fact of whether they speak the language or not – or if they have only partially internalized Diné beliefs and values. Along with family and community support, their resilience as Indigenous youth, as well as the influence of key people like teachers and relatives, all of these factors were critical to students' perceptions of their success and continue to be the prime factors for their overall success. The reaffirmation, re-articulation, and recovery of Indigenous cultural knowledge and languages regardless of the many challenges from outside and within their communities is key to maintaining face and heart – which is our identity (Alfred, 1999; Cajete, 1994; Grande, 2004; G. Smith, 2002, L. Smith, 1999; Warrior, 1995). Indigenous (Osage) scholar Robert Warrior (1995) writes "if our struggle is anything, it is a way of life…a decision we make in our minds, in our hearts, and in our bodies – to be sovereign and to find out what that means in the process" (p. 123).

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