

From a Place Deep Inside: Culturally Appropriate Curriculum as the Embodiment of Navajo-ness in Classroom Pedagogy

Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz

Three Navajo teachers' conceptions of culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy highlight the benefits of reflective practice within different educational and school contexts. Each teacher provides a way of thinking about culturally appropriate curriculum, and its implementation in classroom practice for different Navajo students. The ways in which these teachers acknowledge the influence of being Navajo allows us to see why each chooses to teach and to know from where her inspiration comes. This study of the three Navajo teachers brings to the larger discussion of culturally appropriate pedagogy the need to consider the cultural knowledge, referred to as "Navajoness," that the teacher brings to the classroom context. Navajoness, a way of being or familiarity with being a Navajo person, appears to provide Navajo teachers with the knowledge and ability to make immediate connections between knowledge in school and home contexts. Further, Navajo teachers have an initial foundation from which to build strong content and cultural knowledge with students, bridging a perceived knowledge gap between home and school. At the center of the research are the following questions: Can any teacher *just teach* without acknowledging and responding to the teaching and learning context? What does a teacher have to know and what actions must be taken in order to create an engaging learning opportunity for students? Exploring the concept of Navajoness is an important part of considering what might be culturally appropriate for building an educational program that responds to the knowledge that students and teachers bring with them to the classroom context. Researchers and educators are asked to examine more deeply the conceptions that teachers hold in the areas of content, Navajo culture, and mainstream culture, and are encouraged to make frequent links between what is theorized and what occurs in everyday classroom pedagogy.

"How can I present this [science lesson] differently so that the kids will get it, understand it, and use it?"—Marie Dineyazhe, 5th grade teacher, Community School on the Navajo Reservation

“Actually doing something—cooking, spinning [wool] is what really captures their eyes...hands on [learning is] important”—Erma Benally, 4-5th grade teacher, Public Elementary School on the Navajo Reservation

“...being Navajo and looking at history differently always influences my teachings. Because I’m constantly saying, ‘what voices are being left out?’”—Carmela Martinez, High School History Teacher (9-12), Private Boarding School in Massachusetts

There is great wisdom, power, and authority that Navajo teachers contribute to the study of culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy. Their experiences and words provide key insights into the multiple ways in which this approach to teaching can be implemented in classrooms serving Navajo students. Moreover, the documentation of existing knowledge and reflective practice in Indian education provides a window through which educators of American Indian students can participate, reflect, and develop culturally relevant modes of teaching and learning. In this article, I connect the conceptualization and implementation of a culturally appropriate curriculum in three Navajo classroom contexts with the broader intellectual and theoretical discussions about the use of culturally appropriate curriculum.¹ The examination of these Navajo teachers’ words and actions provide rich and deep evidence that culturally appropriate curriculum can be understood as the embodiment of Navajo-ness. In critical ways, who teachers are in community, school, and family is the foundation upon which education can be built in each classroom context.

Emergence of the Study: Teacher Conceptions of Culturally Appropriate Curriculum

My focus on culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy stems from the historical study of formal schooling for American Indian children and communities. I shift the paradigm from examining pathology of teacher practice (what’s not working) to describing what informs their practice and discussing what can be learned from their reflective teaching in classroom environments serving Navajo students. At the heart of my research on culturally appropriate curriculum are these questions: Can any teacher *just teach* without acknowledging and responding to the teaching and learning context, which is embedded within a larger social and cultural context? What does a teacher have to know and what actions must be taken in order to create content and culturally relevant learning opportunity for students? In school districts across the United States, teachers are handed curriculum and “the tools” to teach a student population that is developing more and more into a population of diverse learners from multiple cultural, social, and economic backgrounds. How a teacher develops an approach to teaching in a multicultural classroom is without a doubt challenging. Moreover, the challenges exist even in classrooms where students are perceived to share a culture based on language and race/ethnicity, such as Navajo students. Just as

students represent and bring with them cultural, social, economic, and political identities and knowledge of the world, experienced through their own cultural and sociological lenses (certainly there are other lenses), teachers, too, have lenses (often different than the student) that shape their view of teaching and view of the learner.

While there are many different entry points in examining and attempting to capture what a culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy is, I focus the article on describing and analyzing three Navajo teachers' work,² examining their experiences—their intellectual engagement with social, cultural, and political forces that shape the schooling experience—while always keeping at the forefront of my mind that the teacher does not educate alone. I distinguish this study of three Navajo teachers' work from the larger educational and political context in which parents, educators and policy makers are increasingly invested in seeing gains in academic achievement. In this era of accountability, the focus is solidly on what is learned and what is not learned, drawing a concrete cut-off indicated by a test score, ignoring the qualitative aspects of the teaching and learning experience.

This article is an attempt to visit classrooms and contemplate more deeply the complexity embedded in the culture of schooling, culture of community, and the culture of the teacher. This is an opportunity to be reflective as educational researchers and educators of Native students by listening to the experiences of teachers and finding connections to the greater endeavor to provide a quality education to American Indian/Alaska Native students wherever they may be.

Empirical and Aesthetic Descriptions and Methodology

It was necessary to be purposeful in identifying Navajo teachers who were reflective practitioners, who were seen by educators and/or community leaders and parents as teachers who incorporate a culturally appropriate curriculum and teaching in their classrooms. Nominations of teacher participants were made by educators working in schools with Navajo teachers, located both on and off the Navajo reservation.³ The three teachers ultimately selected to participate in this study met all of the following criteria: Each teacher wanted to learn more about her own teaching through on-going dialogue; had questions of her own about Navajo education and culturally appropriate curriculum and teaching; had a nomination from one or more educators familiar with Navajo schooling contexts; indicated willingness and comfort talking about her teaching and being observed during instruction in her classroom; had the support of school leadership to participate in the study; and signed an informed consent to participate in the study.

The table below provides some general characteristics of the three teachers who participated in this study.

The teachers represented different geographical locations in which Navajo students are educated and contexts in which Navajo teachers teach. Each school context highlighted differences and similarities among the teachers. This article begins to uncover the initial discussions of the ways in which the three teachers

Table 1
**Teacher Participants by Grade Level, School Type, School Location,
 Years of Experience, Membership in Local Community,
 and Ability to Speak Navajo Language**

Teacher	Grade	School Type	School Location	Years of Teaching Experience	Member of Local Community?	Speaks Navajo Language?
Marie Dineyazhe	5th grade	Community School	Navajo Reservation	35 years (4 years in this school)	Yes	Yes
Erma Benally	5th grade	Public School	Navajo Reservation	30 years (15 years in this school)	Yes	Yes
Carmela Martinez	9-12th grade-History	Private School	Off Reservation	5 years (2 years in this school)	No	No

conceptualized culturally appropriate teaching in their unique classroom and school contexts.

Portraiture, a qualitative methodology, offered a way to capture the “complexity and subtlety of human experience and organizational life” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv) found in three Navajo classrooms. Portraiture was appropriate for investigating each Navajo teacher’s personal and educational history, conceptualizations of culturally appropriate curriculum, and the ways in which each teacher puts her knowledge and experiences into action in her respective classroom contexts because portraiture employs “systematic, detailed observational” techniques which document “subtle exchanges and behavioral details that [are] important to the larger picture” providing rich description of a person, an event, or understanding (Lightfoot, 1983, p. 13). Portraiture’s goal of “speaking to broader audiences beyond the academy” demonstrated another rationale for employing appropriate methodology, particularly since one of the goals of American Indian research is to speak to American Indian communities (most of whom are not members of the academy). As a result, research findings can be shared in a way that invites Native educators, parents, communities and students to speak about education together in public discourse and movement toward their own social, cultural and political transformation.

Lastly, employing portraiture supported the need to capture “goodness”⁴ in the three teachers’ work (Lightfoot, 1983). The search for goodness is particularly important in the study of American Indian education, where researchers have too often been preoccupied with pathology and used student outcomes to document failure. By searching for goodness in the work of these teachers, a holistic picture of Navajo teachers attempting to define Navajo

education through culturally appropriate teaching and curriculum could be created.

Throughout the research process, I maintained a level of connection with the teachers that was clearly informed by my own beliefs and knowledge of the Navajo cultural context—for example, maintaining clan relationships and protocols with the teachers with whom I shared clan relations. The purpose of the study was to focus in depth on the conceptualization process of teaching in ways that are culturally appropriate to Navajo students. I chose to focus my inquiry on female Navajo teachers, a choice informed by the understanding that in Navajo society women are the transmitters of cultural knowledge and education of children; they are revered as valuable tribal leaders and cultural teachers in and outside the home context.

The research purpose was to work with teachers who wanted to engage in the research process, to share knowledge, and to create new knowledge that would change their practice in ways they felt were helpful. Throughout the study I needed to remain conscious of the perspectives and framework informing my distinct view—Navajo/educator/researcher—and balance the impact of my perspective on every phase of the research process: conception, research questions, data collection, analysis, and narrative development. This process allowed me to maintain a position of reflective researcher, in order to document my understanding and capture teacher knowledge in meaningful ways. This approach is not new; in fact, Native scholars have argued that Native communities need Native researchers studying topics that are meaningful to tribes (Hermes, 1999; Lomawaima, 2000; Swisher, 1998) and that such research employs a methodology that is sensitive to and respectful of those communities and addresses questions posed by communities (Hermes, 1999). Because the methodology of portraiture recognizes the role and autobiography of the researcher, how one demonstrates “sensitive” and “respectful” entry into a context not only makes its way into the final reporting of the study, but it encourages a carefully developed relationship with the study participant. I recall my first meeting with Mrs. Benally, one of the teacher participants in the study:

For our first introduction, Erma Benally and I met at the Super Buffet located in Gallup, New Mexico. Gallup was an hour and forty-five minute drive from Tséghí. She was more than happy to drive to town, for it is a treat for any Navajo family to eat out in Gallup. And who could turn down dinner at Super Buffet where the BBQ ribs were widely talked about? Mrs. Benally brought her daughter and one year old grandson. This was surely a family affair, one that would demonstrate Mrs. Benally's consistency in teaching and caring for the younger Navajo generation. Her attentiveness toward her daughter and her grandson showed in her proud retelling of “baby's” first time talking, first time eating, first time at Super Buffet. In this dinner Mrs. Benally provided an introduction to the woman she is outside school and sparked curiosity about the woman she is in school. It was easy to imagine both home and school personalities complexly tied to her role as emerging grandmother (Yazzie, 2002, p. 55).

In this first meeting, I established with Erma Benally clan relations and developed an important connection to her family and her philosophy of education—through her interaction with her daughter, grandson, and me, a newly found daughter. Learning who Erma Benally is as a teacher of Navajo students did not begin on my first observation in her classroom in the school context, it began that first day I met her at the Super Buffet in Gallup, NM; my relationship to her as a clan daughter shaped the “researcher-subject” relationship in ways that required strict adherence to what could be written about and what needed to remain intimate or sacred knowledge.

This approach to doing research—defining the researcher’s role, responsibility, and perspective—is a central theme of portraiture and very much encouraged by Native scholars in the larger study of Native Americans (Lomawaima, 2000; Mihesuah, 1998; Swisher, 1986, 1998; Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999). Below I share an excerpt from the study describing my reflections on my multiple roles in conducting this study:

This understanding of my role [as researcher] has been an on-going negotiation in which I have strived to see my own views and carefully place my views in perspective with those of the teachers with whom I worked and from whom I learned much about teaching and life. How I approached this negotiation of my voice and their voices was to write reflective notes regarding my thoughts about the process and preliminary analyses. By putting my responses in writing, I could better explore the impact of the work on me and my impact on the lives of these teachers. When writing was not available, I talked with the teachers, family, and colleagues in order to decipher my own thoughts and then later I would write my thoughts down.

I recognize that the subsequent dialogues that I engaged in with each teacher have shaped our knowledge of one another. More than a researcher, I become a daughter to two Navajo women, and a sister to another. My responsibilities to each teacher grew as our relationships developed; I attended ceremonies, weddings, and witnessed life changes. Beyond this piece of work, how I treat these teachers’ stories is guided by my commitment to our familial relationship. As a Navajo person, I now am in relation with three women, and for that I have social and cultural responsibilities to attend to. As a Navajo researcher, I believe I was allowed to see these teachers in action beyond their classroom teaching. I was invited to participate in their lives, to see them educate in ways that I never expected. The opportunity to witness the way in which each teacher was an educator outside of school made clear how each teacher’s Navajo-ness is a constant guide in why they teach, and why they choose to teach in the ways in which they do (Yazzie, 2002, pp. 51-52).

Conducting research under these complex and cultural conditions becomes an honor and responsibility not taken lightly.

Teachers’ Conceptions of Culturally Appropriate Curriculum

The quotes with which I began this article portray the purpose and complexity of implementing a culturally appropriate curriculum with Navajo students of

varying language acquisition and cultural knowledge backgrounds. Each teacher's words serve as a reminder of the important aspects of the process of defining and implementing a culturally appropriate curriculum in different Navajo classroom contexts: a Navajo community school, a public elementary school on the Navajo reservation, and a private boarding school in Massachusetts. Marie Dineyazhe, a 5th grade teacher in a community school, conceives culturally appropriate curriculum from a question about how to engage her students in learning academic content in school. She uses culturally appropriate curriculum in her science class as a process (not a tool) by which her students can learn school content so as to "understand it" and "use it." Erma Benally's conception of culturally appropriate curriculum is the incorporation of cultural activities that engage her students in academic learning, defining participation and purpose in learning. At the same time, she actively encourages the students in her 4-5th grade classroom to preserve Navajo culture, enacting culture by speaking the Navajo language, writing it, reading it, and incorporating the language into their everyday lives. Erma's classroom is a place where Navajo culture and knowledge can be validated, and where academic success is expected. This success takes place in a public elementary school in the central part of the Navajo reservation in northeastern Arizona. Carmela Martinez, a high school history teacher, often questions how her "Navajo-ness" shapes the content and direction of her classroom instruction at a predominantly white private boarding school in western Massachusetts.⁵ Ms. Martinez's words led me to consider examining the way in which each Navajo teacher may be the embodiment of an emergent Navajo educational philosophy and curriculum—a hidden curriculum and pedagogy that encourages seeking relationship among community, school, and individuals. These teachers contribute to our conception and incorporation of culture-based curriculum in various school and classroom contexts by allowing us to examine more closely how embodying and enacting Navajo philosophy, values, and culture in the teaching and learning context shapes our understanding of culturally appropriate curriculum in practice. Together the teachers represent the different depths of conception and implementation that stem from a challenge to engage Navajo students in academic learning, to preserve Navajo culture, and to acknowledge the "influence of being Navajo" (in a continuum of cultural identity) on curriculum and method of instruction.

During an interview, I asked Erma Benally to describe from where she developed the motivation to teach in the way that she does, from where her inspiration emerges. We were sitting in her classroom after school when Erma clasped her hands together and brought them to her chest: "It comes from a place deep inside." She proceeded to tell me her own educational, personal, and political history and how these points of intersections in her story have formed the foundation of her educational philosophy. I believe that deep inside she holds knowledge of the harsh realities Native people have faced and still face when we are discouraged in many ways

...from speaking our language and being forced to do something against our will, against our own dreams...we've suffered so much as nations all over the continent...you know? We've been spit at, walked on, trampled on and kicked around. I think it's still alive—and we need to—I need to, as a teacher, to teach my students to recognize that—to recognize it and be strong and stand up to it (Benally, 3/14/01).

Today she teaches in order to strengthen her students and to encourage social and political change. Her inner thoughts and experience with the world are evidence of the knowledge that Navajo people's lives are "always going against the grain of [American] society." Inside she is also guided by a life philosophy grounded in Navajo traditions and values: "we all have our inner strength, we all have a strong spirit." And, deep inside she holds the determination to speak her language, to teach it and to live as a Navajo person.

Likewise, Carmela Martinez's style of teaching stems from a great amount of patience to really listen to the voices of her students, just as if every word is their first breath. In this history lesson she calls upon Navajo philosophy to guide her work as a teacher.

Mrs. Martinez is speaking, "Why did the south refuse to accept wrong even though they were defeated in the Civil War? Why not now join the rest of the U.S.?" The students throw out responses: "Because of the slaves." "Equality." ... Their words are unpracticed, unfocused. Yet, Mrs. Martinez continues, drawing upon what each student says as she patiently helps them with what they may want to say. Like the classical rhythm of a practiced pianist, she plays along smoothly, waiting, holding a lingering note and if the student stops talking, she fills in information in story form. Together they create classical musical exchanges—history is their sheet music and their voices are the sounds of the careful strikes of the black and white keys embedded in this history lesson.

When students are not trying [or] enter the classroom unfocused, patience is the only option for Mrs. Martinez. She compares the importance of their words to that which Navajos say is sacred. That is, "they say when a child speaks, it's like their breath, their breathing." Navajos talk about the first breath of a child as an important stage of development and identity formation, as it informs the world of one's identity. So similarly, she follows her tradition even in how she treats students who are not of Navajo descent. "It's like the Beauty way" that speaks to the importance of words. She takes their jokes, and makes them fit into the lesson. Her approach to addressing student voice are embedded in her educational philosophy that stems from being a Navajo person:

"At the philosophical level, in looking at something like the Beauty way, and thinking about what does that mean, and thinking about what does that mean to me as a teacher? Or as someone working with children and trying to understand how I would treat people in that context. How do I bring that into my classroom? It's there. It's always there. And I think that some of the basic ideas of allowing a student to have their full breath, their full voice in class, or not letting me ever cut off

their thought, or whatever they're trying to express. It's a respect for that child's growth and thought and expression. So when they're speaking it's like they're breathing, and I have to be careful not to cut off that breath because that's part of what's teaching them to grow... And I am conscious of it... I will never look at a certain Navajo philosophy and break it down and say, 'here's the 12 objectives and let me apply it now to my...it just don't come out the same... It's something that I have to be constantly looking back to it [Navajo Philosophy], it's not 12 easy steps that I take and everyday I do it over here and look at my objectives and see whether or not that I've fulfilled them."

As she speaks her truth, her inner strength steams upward and out. Her discussion of never breaking Navajo philosophy down into separate pieces for analysis is evidence of her full understanding of its holistic form and transparency. Her consistent approach to life—the fluidity carries her to a level of respect for learning and teaching, "I think that's my power as a teacher and the power of the influence that I have over them, that I don't want to take advantage of." Her words navigate the pattern or path that guides not only her teaching but her life. And while she may have more non-Navajo students than she does Navajo students, her philosophy offers nothing less or separate than who she is as a Navajo woman of varying experiences (Yazzie, 2002, pp. 96-98).

Amazingly, the three teachers in this study—Marie Dineyazhe, Erma Benally, and Carmela Martinez—all teach from a place deep inside; who they are as Navajo women, guides what they teach and *how* they teach, and *to whom* they teach.

Dis-Entangled Meanings: From Research to Teachers' Definitions of Culturally Appropriate Curriculum

Every day teachers of American Indian students engage in conceptualizing, developing, and implementing curricula and methods of instruction in classrooms serving American Indian students. Culturally appropriate curriculum, in relation to the education of American Indian and Alaska Native students, is defined by educational researchers and curriculum developers as the incorporation of instructional and resource materials that link cultural knowledge originating in the home and community to the objectives of school (Klug & Whitfield, 2003; Lipka, 1989; Yazzie, 1999). A pedagogical approach—*how* one chooses to teach—is just as important as what is taught in classrooms serving Native students. I propose that in addition to pedagogy being an essential part of the instructional plan, the teacher's personal history and degree to which she has acquired cultural knowledge—in and outside of school—is an essential component in defining a culturally appropriate curriculum for classrooms in which Native students are educated.

Theoretical explanations for why Native students have failed to thrive academically in school have fueled the development of culture-based curriculum and its use in classrooms serving minority students at large (Trueba, 1988). American Indian education researchers, Karen Swisher and Donna Deyhle (1992) and Mary Hermes (2000), have pointed to how culture-based instructional approaches have been developed in response to theories such as the “cultural deficit model” and “cultural discontinuities.” Deficit theories hit their zenith in the mid-1970s when researchers widely believed that Native students had difficulty in school because of what they lacked. Native researchers “began to look at classroom ethnography, to investigate the interactional structure of schooling—that is, the interactional context in which students from different minority group cultures prefer to learn and demonstrate what they have learned” (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Swisher & Deyhle, 1992, pp. 81-82). The perspective that home and school are different because they demonstrate different and oftentimes conflicting values, cultures, languages, and ways of being instigated the development of a culturally appropriate curriculum. Researchers suggested that a culturally relevant curriculum would fill the gap created by conflict between home and school.

With regard to American Indian and Alaska Native education, researchers have pointed to the mismatch in communication styles, learning styles and overall cultural differences as a problem in educating Native students (Lipka, 1989; Phillips, 1972, 1983; Wax, Wax, & Dumont, 1964; Wolcott, 1984). Culturally appropriate, culturally relevant, or culture-based curriculum are concepts that attempt to bring together the cultures and languages of home and school, making home and school more continuous than contrasting for Native students.

While ethnographers have examined social and cultural factors outside schools and classrooms, their findings remain limited in that they fail to describe the essence of culture—history, philosophy, values—and its role *inside* the classroom as a part of the teaching and learning. It is necessary to look inside classrooms, in which teachers and students are central actors in the curriculum and pedagogical interaction, for the multiple ways in which using this curriculum and pedagogy impacts the learning and teaching process. I highlight the possibility of using a culturally appropriate curriculum, and the potential for that curriculum to look different and to serve different purposes in a variety of classrooms. For example, when Marie Dineyazhe spoke of culturally appropriate teaching and content, she used her social studies lesson to demonstrate her conceptualization of culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy. In her story, the fluidity between accessing knowledge found within the local community and connecting that knowledge to the school context is clear.

Basket weaving in cultural context then is more than just basket weaving. It's a way of life recognized by many Navajo people and elders. Children also recognize the significance of the basket. It is rare that a Navajo child, living on or near the Navajo reservation, does not have an opportunity to see a traditional Navajo basket firsthand, as they can be seen in the

reservation trading posts, as well as in border-town store windows, downtown pawn shops, and at Shash Yaz Trading Post (Little Bear) at the Rio West Mall in Gallup, New Mexico. Basket replicas made of yarn are not used for ceremonies but can be used as wall décor in family homes; these kinds of baskets are often sold by Native craft artists. Because baskets are viewed as crafts and ceremonial objects, they are commonly recognized and can be viewed as representations of cultural artifacts of Navajo daily life.

Mrs. Dineyazhe incorporates everyday Navajo cultural representations and activities into her classroom teaching, activities such as jewelry making, singing Navajo folk songs, caring for cows and sheep (animal husbandry), beading (a recent craft to the Navajo), pottery making, basket and rug weaving, and Navajo story telling. The project involving basket making may appear fun, but to incorporate it as a learning activity in the classroom takes planning which includes research about the baskets, finding knowledgeable people to present and talk with the students, and locating funding to support the curriculum and activities and to pay the local expert for their time.

For this project she has asked one of the “kitchen ladies” to come to her classroom to help her with this lesson. Mrs. Showa is a basket and rug weaver when she isn’t cooking in the school cafeteria preparing hot lunches for the kids at Navajo Community School. While Mrs. Dineyazhe understands the broader significance of basket making among Navajo people, she is not confident in her own cultural knowledge about the making of baskets. She wants to make sure that the kids in her classroom are guided by someone who knows, a “local expert.” Some Navajo and non-Navajo teachers do not request the help of knowledgeable persons in their classrooms and they don’t link knowledge in Navajo tradition explicitly with knowledge learned in the classroom setting. There are some Navajo teachers who can do this kind of teaching on their own, but they are an anomaly. In this classroom, Mrs. Dineyazhe’s fifth grade students have studied basket-weaving cultures found around the world, including contrasting their knowledge of Navajo baskets with the history of Hopi baskets. Their social studies curriculum is supplemented with projects like this to make the material more interesting and engaging for the children. This supplement curriculum is her attempt to make the material connect with what the kids find familiar in their local community and home environments. Mrs. Dineyazhe’s conception of culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy stems from:

“what the people do, live, and practice in their daily lives, and culturally appropriate curriculum would be the teaching of those things, such as rug weaving, basket-making, pottery making, silver-smithing, beadwork, and even livestock handling and caring for animals. These can be used in classrooms to teach writing, reading, language, speaking, science, mathematics, and social studies concepts.”

Culturally appropriate curriculum for Mrs. Dineyazhe is not only about what she teaches but also about how she teaches. She uses culturally appropriate curriculum both within school and in[corporate], “all areas of teaching; i.e., planning, designing, applying, practicing, assessing or evaluating, and

re-teaching,” and outside of school “using them [cultural knowledge and enactments] in life automatically without really thinking about it.” The notion of implementing culturally appropriate curriculum on autopilot is deeply connected with who she is as a member of her community, and it seems to make sense that because she is a Navajo woman she has been exposed to Navajo tradition and cultural knowledge that is present and learned, or handed down through socialization by family and by participation in social and cultural events. Her conception suggests that one must be intimately connected with the local scene, as well as with the deeper and more subtle aspects of the cultural scene (Yazzie, 2002, pp. 111-113).

Dineyazhe’s conception of culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy as cultural content and practice is different from Erma Benally’s conception founded in explicit teaching of the Navajo language. By becoming aware of the inherently powerful histories, philosophies, and experiences that teachers bring to the classroom context, educators can create the means to better understand the concept and practice of culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy. The exploration of the ways in which three Navajo teachers conceptualize and incorporate culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy in their classrooms presents an opportunity to sharpen our understanding of this approach to teaching. While culturally appropriate curriculum holds an important place in educational approaches, it remains an elusive yet popular prescription in addressing the needs of Native students.

Teachers, like Dineyazhe and Benally, have a variety of understandings as to what constitutes a culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy. Each understanding is different, varying with the teacher’s level of expertise in teaching, her individual life history and experience, the degree to which she is familiar with the student’s home language and cultural knowledge, the school and classroom context, and the student body. However, it is clear what can and what should not be taught, as Dineyazhe clarified, “Things we do in class do not involve the sacred teachings of the people such as healing ceremony, prayers, songs, stories... I don’t know them anyway so I can’t teach those [things that] I don’t know anything about.” Perhaps the most important influences on how these teachers define and implement culturally appropriate curriculum are the teachers’ personal and educational philosophy and depth of cultural Navajo knowledge.

Culturally Appropriate Curriculum: What is it?

Several questions emerge when educators or researchers refer to a culturally appropriate curriculum. First, to whose culture are we referring? Second, what aspects of culture are implied and incorporated in the instructional plan and materials? And, third, in what ways is this approach to instruction appropriate? And appropriate for whom?

To address these questions, I scrutinize the term “culturally appropriate curriculum,” using the voices and experiences of Mrs. Benally, Martinez, and Dineyazhe to provide examples to support my analysis.

Culture

In this study, being a Navajo woman and teacher is a shared characteristic among the three teachers. However, each teacher was raised immersed in Navajo culture—socialized to different degrees by interaction with Navajo people and thereby exposed to Navajo values, such as ritual, traditional knowledge and stories, philosophy, food, shelter, and language. Not only is culture concrete and material, it is reflected in how one interacts, communicates, perceives, and interprets the world around them. Moreover, Navajo culture is (re)invented by these teachers depending upon their context and level of access to Navajo knowledge.

Erma Benally offers a powerful articulation of what culture is. She views the essence of culture captured in the everyday use of Navajo language: “I think Navajo language is one of the most important things. . . . It is culture!” Explicitly connected to language is how culture is defined by the identity of a Navajo person through Navajo words:

It is kind [of] like the air speaks your name—there’s good air and bad air—like yin [and] yang. And we talked about all the negative and positive things in this classroom and that was something that was so amazing to me that my father told [about] . . . one of the questions that I asked him, and I said, ‘tell me’ because I knew that I was going to have grandchildren and I needed to prepare myself, ‘what am I supposed to do? What are my duties as a grandparent?’ And he said, ‘don’t forget when they’re born, before they’re born always have a ceremony and make sure when the baby is born that they—you get another medicine man and that they bless them with the corn pollen.’ And that was to let the holy people know that this was a grandchild—it’s like lifting up the grandchild to the universe or it’s like introducing them to the world. It’s like this is a good human being. And it was so amazing how he told it—I can’t go back and reword what he was saying but it was all in Navajo. And it was so amazing to me and it was so important - that one gesture of putting the corn pollen in to the child’s mouth and from then on the holy people will know who he is. And later there [are] stages where he [the baby] has to be reintroduced. . . . and they [the holy people] will know him. . . . Immediately the connection would be made and they would recognize him. It is I, ME, recognize my voice. Recognize who I am. I am your child. I am your grandchild. And I think that’s culture (E. Benally, Personal Communication, March 14, 2002).

The depth of Mrs. Benally’s understanding and articulation of Navajo culture could also be witnessed in how she instilled interest in her students to learn to speak Navajo. So when Navajo is spoken in the classroom it is not only a general indicator of culture in the space—there is also deep, specific cultural motivation and meaning from the words. Words in Navajo identify relationship to and with the world. It is this world—a Navajo world—that Erma Benally brings into the classroom. She brings it because she embodies it. The students accept it by learning to speak the language, so as to embody it as well.

There are ways of conceptualizing culture at a more surface level, such as activities associated with Navajo culture. For example, Erma Benally speaks of her

own Navajo-ness in terms of activities associated with being a Navajo person: “my culture was to herd sheep” and an important aspect of her cultural upbringing was “planting [corn]...working in the fields.” Marie Dineyazhe views culture on this level—materials, symbols, activities, and representations. Dineyazhe’s notion of culture has much to do with visual and material representations of Navajo culture, such as designs of rugs and baskets. Moreover, to live Navajo culture means to be fully immersed in local culture.

In contemporary Navajo society, the concept and experience of culture is complicated by social, political, and cultural forces. Erma Benally’s articulation of culture is evidence of the way in which Navajos embody culture in every act and word. Benally, Dineyazhe, and Martinez introduce the freedom to define culture either as embodiments of social interactions or as materials and activities (or both). However we define culture it is what shapes how we view the world. How and why these aspects of culture become important in the classroom setting is not only of great importance to both student and teacher but also is important to the educators who advocate for this approach to teaching Native students.

Culture embodied by the teachers can either be conscious or unconscious. Erma Benally and Carmela Martinez are examples of teachers who remain highly conscious and reflective of their Navajo cultural knowledge, characteristics, and values, particularly how all three shape their classroom environment and instructional approach. Marie Dineyazhe, different from Martinez and Benally, mentions time and time again how she doesn’t use Navajo culture in her classroom. And yet, she consistently speaks Navajo to the students who are emergent English language learners to explain concepts presented in different academic lessons. She also incorporates community experts into her classroom routine, recognizing their knowledge and roles within both society and the school learning context. She was clear in her views of the use of Navajo language as a tool to support her students in learning academic content; she said over and over again that Navajo language was not used as the promotion of cultural knowledge. While her use of culture and language was different and distinct from both Benally’s and Martinez’s articulations, Dineyazhe’s classroom context and pedagogy appear to be influenced by her Navajo-ness. The imprint of her Navajo-ness, cultural knowledge, practice, and experience was always clear in her classroom and interaction with students, parents, and community. When working with Dineyazhe, I found that all that she knew stemmed directly from her intimate connections to community—it was *in* community that Marie Dineyazhe defined herself as a teacher and vividly recalled her decision to become a teacher.

We are parked outside [Dineyazhe’s] community chapter house, waiting for the official start of the meeting. We have traveled about 95 miles to attend a community chapter meeting in her home community. The entire way she talked, sharing her autobiography, her intimate story. We arrived about 45 minutes ago, the windows of my truck are fogged, evidence of time passing. We can still see headlights of approaching cars, blurry through the wet windows, now beading as they condense, transforming to water droplets. We wait. Mrs. Dineyazhe has her own way of “telling” when a quorum is

reached by how many cars have arrived in the dirt parking lot. Tonight at the meeting, members will consider and vote on a proposal to name the new Fort Defiance hospital after Dr. Annie Wauneka, a legendary Navajo leader and woman. While we sit listening to KTNN 660 radio's country music hour, Mrs. Dineyazhe tells me about why she became a teacher and about how Dr. Wauneka encouraged her to become a teacher.

"I quit [college] in November and I went home and I said, 'I think I'm through with school.' So there was, during that time, just at that time, I think it was 1965, '66, during that time, the first Navajo Economic Opportunity Offices came into being and they had different programs... And there was one thing called Head Start Program, preschool program, and they needed a teacher in our local [names community] community chapter house and they asked me if I would be a teacher. And the person that really asked me was Dr. Annie Wauneka because she said, 'my daughter, my grand-daughter, there's a job for you. You went to college and you have completed some of the college work and we'd like for you to teach the preschool children here at [in our community]. At least try it,' she said to me. So I tried it and I went to a one-week training at Lukachukai, Arizona as a preschool teacher. Everything there is to know about teaching, I learned as a preschool teacher ... that's where I learned to be a teacher" (Yazzie, 2002, pp. 123-124).

Embedded in Mrs. Dineyazhe's experiences is a deep connection to local community. These complexly woven experiences in local culture emerge often in her work as a teacher, helping her to teach in ways that might be recognized as culturally based. Her active involvement in community and in school defines her as a grand-daughter to some and a teacher to others.

Culturally Appropriate Curriculum: Appropriate for Whom?

Because there are many ways in which culture can shape a person, the concept of culturally appropriate curriculum inspires the question: For whom is this curriculum appropriate? In the three classrooms in which I conducted this portraiture study, I witnessed two participants in the learning and teaching process: the teacher and students, who are central to answering the question of appropriateness. The research literature on culture-based curriculum and culturally relevant instruction has focused much attention on the student—who the students are, what the effects are of this curriculum on the students—and rightly so. In addition, we can also examine the power that the teacher contributes to this learning/teaching dynamic.

Research focuses our attention on the match between instruction and the student's learning style (Swisher & Deyhle, 1992). This approach takes into consideration that the student is different from the school and teacher. "Appropriateness" of curriculum and pedagogy is assessed in terms of its relevance to the student—the student is the center of instruction and the focus of research.

In this study I learned that, while the student's role is important, the teacher's role is equally important: She decides how and what she will teach her students. I would offer another layer of considering appropriateness: The teacher and student are central in the teaching and learning dynamic, and the instruction and materials need to reflect both participants' experiences and knowledge. In other words, culturally appropriate curriculum implies that the teacher sets the plan of instruction, formulates the content, and creates the setting *for* the student. But the missing piece is: what sets the plan of instruction, content, and educational context for the teacher? What knowledge is shared by both the learner and teacher?

I examined each teacher's educational philosophy to draw a connection between her approach to teaching and her plan to incorporate particular aspects of Navajo culture. For Erma Benally, she focuses on incorporating contemporary as well as traditional Navajo culture in her classroom instruction. A lesson focused on recycling demonstrates her awareness of how recycling happens in cities and towns off the reservation and how it can happen on the reservation through re-using items rather than dumping them in a land-fill or burning them as trash (processes that were very familiar to the students that they laughed and joked about it when it was proposed by the teacher). Discussion ensued in which the group of students and the teacher made clear distinctions in types of actions taken to recycle.

Carmela Martinez draws upon her knowledge of how tobacco is used by Navajos in ceremonies to teach her students a lesson about drug and alcohol abuse. In her classroom discussions she draws upon concrete knowledge associated with Navajo rituals or stories to support her view and to provide a lesson that engages her students.

Marie Dineyazhe's social studies lesson using baskets and local experts is the incorporation of Navajo culture through activities associated with Navajo basketry. Her inclusion of Navajo experts is an added layer of interaction for students to engage with material *and* people who are immersed in Navajo knowledge and culture. At a deeper level, the protocol to access Navajo experts is clear to her as she engages in social and cultural etiquette to make formal requests to have community elders teach history of basket making.

Each teacher is influenced by her philosophy—the way she understands and enacts her Navajo-ness. Each teacher plans carefully how to incorporate different aspects of Navajo culture in the lesson. Marie Dineyazhe, Erma Benally, and Carmela Martinez rely heavily on what they know to create a culturally appropriate curriculum within each classroom context.

I argue that cultural appropriateness of content and pedagogy impacts the teacher just as it shapes the learning experience of the student. It is the teacher's educational philosophy and life history that shapes her decision to plan and develop pedagogy that engages the student in a reciprocal teaching and learning interaction. A culturally appropriate curriculum, then, is appropriate to both teacher and student, and it is appropriate because the content, pedagogy, and participants are deeply shaped by a shared knowledge.

Curriculum and Cultural Curriculum Embodied by the Teacher

Creating a curriculum can encompass a variety of instructional activities, such as choosing content, setting goals for learning, deciding how content is to be gathered, organized, developed, taught, and evaluated. In the classroom there are various curricula at play. This study revealed three kinds of curricula at play in the classrooms: standardized school curriculum, culturally appropriate curriculum, and a cultural curriculum embodied in the teachers.

In these classrooms the teachers are required to present a curriculum (content and instructional approach) which has an objective to instruct in academic subject areas tied to state, school, and/or district standards. I refer to this curriculum as the standardized school curriculum. Second, there is a culturally appropriate curriculum, which is often viewed as supplemental to the standardized school curriculum. Teachers will use resource materials or instructional plans to engage their Native and Navajo students in learning the standardized school curriculum content. And last, I consider the teacher as the embodied cultural curriculum at play in the classroom. By making explicit the role of the teacher, we can analyze and reflect upon what the teacher brings to the classroom, in the way of experience, cultural knowledge, and philosophy, and how those characteristics contribute to the students' learning. What the teacher brings can be seen as a "hidden" curriculum: it is not necessarily a written content, per se, it is not necessarily obvious to the student or the teacher, and it may never be made explicit within the classroom.

There is an interesting link among the standardized school curriculum, the culturally appropriate curriculum, and the teacher as the embodiment of a Navajo cultural philosophy and curriculum. That is, much of a culturally appropriate curriculum is informed by the teacher's own knowledge base. Further, her purposes for using a culture-based curriculum are connected with her own examination of the limitations found in the standardized school curriculum. By understanding *why* teachers implement a culturally appropriate curriculum as a response to the limitations of the standardized school curriculum, we can better examine *how* a culturally appropriate curriculum is implemented in a classroom. The teachers are at the center and enact integral parts of the classroom curriculum.

Researchers have discussed culturally appropriate curriculum with an agenda that focuses on what ought to occur in classrooms for students, so as to address a problem experienced by Native students (that is, cultural conflict between home and school). However, *why* and *how* teachers use a culturally appropriate curriculum is missing in this body of work. Teachers can inform and demonstrate *why* a culturally appropriate curriculum should be used in classrooms serving Native students. And *how* teachers implement a culturally appropriate curriculum is shaped by why they teach in general and why they choose this particular pedagogy. The "why" powerfully fuels the "how" with respect to culturally appropriate curriculum, presenting new ways of conceptualizing and incorporating a culturally appropriate curriculum in schools where American Indian students are educated.

The How: Two Possible Ways to Think About Culturally Appropriate Curriculum

Navajo language and traditional knowledge are key elements to the incorporation of a culturally appropriate curriculum for Navajo students. If the teacher is fluent in language, she then uses the language as the mode for instructing content and developing language learning. If the teacher lacks fluency or ability to speak the language then learning about content associated with being Navajo presents the opportunity for students to develop interest in re-learning or re-examining their own cultures.

Speaking Language—Learning Content

Marie Dineyazhe and Erma Benally both use Navajo language in their classrooms. However, they use language for different reasons. Erma Benally considers her use of language as a part of her implementation of a culturally appropriate curriculum for the Navajo students in her classroom; Marie Dineyazhe uses the Navajo language so students will better understand academic concepts. For example, when a child experiences difficulty understanding a math or science concept, that has been explained using the English language, Marie Dineyazhe will attempt to explain the concept by communicating the math or science process using the Navajo language. Navajo language becomes a conduit to reach the child so that he or she can acquire academic knowledge in school.

Erma Benally, on the other hand, uses language in her classroom so as to instill pride in students of their Navajo heritage and also explains that by speaking Navajo they are collectively preserving the language and culture—speaking Navajo keeps the language alive.

For these two teachers, speaking Navajo leads to shared and different outcomes. In Marie Dineyazhe's classroom, she is furthering the goals of the school by using Navajo as a means to an end—that is, learning the standardized school curriculum. Mrs. Benally's embodiment of culturally appropriate curriculum provides enhanced academic learning and preserves the use of language. Both result in access to learning to read, write, and understand academic concepts.

Learning Content—Re-Learning Culture

Carmela Martinez does not speak Navajo fluently nor does she have to, as she works with a very different student population.⁶ None of Carmela Martinez's students speak Navajo; despite not speaking Navajo she works to implement a culturally appropriate curriculum in her high school history class. In this context, it is possible to understand culturally appropriate curriculum as learning cultural content, experiencing Native knowledge and Navajo world view, learning about cultural difference, and examining other perspectives not present in the standardized school curriculum so as to inspire re-learning of culture. In this setting, where students represent a multicultural population, it becomes clear that being exposed to difference—difference in thought, perspective, and world

view—presents an opportunity for students, regardless of cultural background, to re-learn or examine closely their own cultures. Carmela Martinez values each student's voice, or "breath," to create a classroom environment which is culturally appropriate; student voices are respected, and her perspective is a valuable contribution to the study of history and learning *about* cultures of the world.

Embodiment of Navajo-ness in Classroom Pedagogy

A powerful factor in conceptualizing and implementing a culturally appropriate curriculum for Navajo students is the teacher's embodiment of Navajo-ness. Culturally appropriate curriculum entails more than materials, more than content, more than lesson plans. Culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy is dependent on the teacher acknowledging and expressing who she is as a Navajo person, through speaking the language or living the culture, or both. Who the teacher is as a Navajo person is central to defining culturally appropriate curriculum in any classroom; be it located on the reservation or 3,000 miles away on the east coast.

There are two different ways that these teachers incorporate their Navajo-ness into their teaching. Erma Benally and Carmela Martinez consciously look to their experiences, philosophies, and essences as Navajo women to implement a culturally appropriate curriculum for their students; Marie Dineyazhe is less deliberate about how her own Navajo-ness influences what and how she teaches. The teacher—who she is, why she teaches, what she chooses to teach—plays critical central role in implementing, shaping, and effectively using a culturally appropriate curriculum.

The classroom contexts in which these teachers work are powerfully shaped by the reason each teacher holds for using a culturally appropriate curriculum. It is the teacher who has the plan, the purpose, and the power to create a space in which both students and teacher are central to the learning and teaching process in the classroom.

Teachers and students bring their experience and knowledge from outside of school to the classroom context. The interaction of teachers and students (pedagogy), the knowledge learned in the classroom (school curriculum/content), and the classroom context (space) play important roles in the implementation of culturally appropriate curriculum. Ultimately, though, the classroom context is uniquely shaped and enhanced by who the teacher is and the path she chooses to take.

Conclusion

The teachers may reach only one of the three goals of implementing culturally appropriate curriculum: preservation of language and culture, teaching academic content successfully, or both preservation and academic learning. While researchers advocate for culturally appropriate curriculum because it can lead to both preservation of language and culture, and academic learning, a culturally appropriate curriculum that leads to both outcomes is quite complex. In order to

achieve both goals through culturally appropriate curriculum, a teacher needs to be conscious of how her Navajo identity and philosophy shapes her work in the classroom, she needs to be deliberate in choosing what and how to teach, and she needs to hold both goals for her work with students. However, it is rare to find a teacher who fulfills all of these characteristics simultaneously. Also elusive is the process by which teachers become conscious of their social, cultural, and political location within the field of education and the lives of their students.

We do learn from Marie Dineyazhe, a teacher who is deliberate about what and how she chooses to teach. However, she is not fully aware of the impact of her Navajo-ness on her teaching; her focus in the classroom is to support the acquisition of academic knowledge. Carmela Martinez is very conscious of who she is as a Navajo woman, and continues to analyze how her Navajo-ness influences her teaching; even though she doesn't speak the Navajo language, and even though she teaches mostly non-Navajo students, her primary goal is teaching academic skills, while also instilling interest and developing respect in learning about the self and about other cultures within a social, cultural, and political context. Erma Benally is the teacher who embodies all three important characteristics. She is conscious of her Navajo-ness and how that shapes her pedagogy, she is deliberate in choosing what and how to teach, and she wants her students to participate in preserving Navajo language and culture, as well as to learn academic content. While the majority of this article focuses on the ways in which Navajo teachers contribute to the study of culturally appropriate curriculum there are many lessons learned and questions that may be raised which will push the discussion to focus on the process of teaching and learning. There is also the need to consider preservation of Native cultures and languages while supporting achievement of academic content as an integral part of conceptualizing a culturally appropriate curriculum. Culturally appropriate curriculum, as conceptualized by teachers, is much, much more than a means to an end, it is the means by which teachers fully examine the purpose of schooling provided to their students, knowing very well the societies into which education and schooling will provide full entrance and the fullest participation.

Native educators, who advocate implementing a culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy, bring their whole selves to their classrooms, re-learning their language, and knowing and living cultural traditions, knowledge, and stories. In order to live culture, teachers can assert and re-assert themselves in their respective Native communities. This means going home — physically, philosophically, and intellectually. By remaining physically, philosophically, and intellectually engaged with community, Native educators can be a part of their own Native culture, continually living it every day. Remembering from where one comes and bringing fully oneself to the school door, requires one to accept that it is not enough to simply speak the language and “experience” culture—but it is critical to know how one negotiates and enacts varying depths of cultural knowledge in the formal school setting. Many Native teachers have been socialized to leave their Native selves at the schoolhouse door and the time has

come to acknowledge the depth of un-learning we, as Native educators, have to do in order to fully enact language and culture so as to embody it in all aspects of our own teaching and learning contexts. Then, and only then, can a culturally appropriate curriculum for Native students become a conscious part of classroom learning, with teachers consciously and purposefully shaping education from a place deep inside.

Tarajeau Yazzie-Mintz (Navajo) is an assistant professor in Curriculum and Instruction at Indiana University, Bloomington. Her research interests include examining the ways in which teachers who teach American Indian students conceptualize culture and language in classroom instruction. Previous work with Boston public schools examined policies and instructional practices in classrooms serving English language learners.

ENDNOTES

¹This article is based upon findings from the dissertation study (Yazzie, 2002) entitled, *Culture Deep Within Us: Culturally Appropriate Curriculum and Pedagogy in Three Navajo Teachers' Work*.

²The three teachers were identified by community members, parents and other educators of Navajo children. These teachers were seen as teachers who are currently implementing a culturally appropriate curriculum for the Navajo students that they serve. The findings discussed in this article are based on a larger portraiture study of teachers' conceptions of culturally appropriate curriculum in their work (Yazzie, 2002). Selection criteria are discussed later in this article.

³Eleven is the total number of teachers nominated. However, some teachers were nominated by different people more than once. All nominations of Navajo teachers representing different geographic locations and school types on and off the Navajo reservation were received.

⁴Goodness, as described by Lightfoot (1983) and Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) is not reduced to "excellence" or "effectiveness" as defined and measured by quantifiable student outcomes. Lightfoot's argument that goodness "is not a static or absolute quality that can be quickly measured by a single indicator of success or effectiveness" (1983, p. 23) challenges educators and researchers to look holistically and generously for qualities, behaviors, words, and values deeply embedded in the teacher's classroom and life context.

⁵At this private boarding school there are three Native students from the Southwest. One of the students is a Navajo student. At the time of the study the student was in her junior year.

⁶Carmela Martinez has one Navajo student in a diverse class of 15 high school students. None of the students in the class speak Navajo. There are two African American students, one Latina student, and the rest are White students predominantly from the New England region of the United States.

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