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## When Two Worlds Collide: Shared Experiences of Educating Navajos Living off the Reservation

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## When Two Worlds Collide: Shared Experiences of Educating Navajos Living off the Reservation

### Abstract

Northridge Elementary calls into question the norm - based ideals of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). By constructing a portrait of Northridge, this study reveals the challenges indigenous students face in the age of standardized assessments. The overarching question of this study is: Do high - stakes assessments further the endemic values of colonization? The term colonization in this study refers to federal and state governmental agencies directing what indigenous students should be taught at school despite cultural relevance. This study applies the theoretical framework of Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), through video photography, observations, interviews with former students, and a teacher focus group to construct portraiture of the educational realities indigenous students face in a standardized education system.

### Keywords

Navajo, No Child Left Behind, Tribal Critical Race Theory

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## When Two Worlds Collide: Shared Experiences of Educating Navajos Living off the Reservation

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*Northridge Elementary calls into question the norm-based ideals of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). By constructing a portrait of Northridge, this study reveals the challenges indigenous students face in the age of standardized assessments. The overarching question of this study is: Do high-stakes assessments further the endemic values of colonization? The term colonization in this study refers to federal and state governmental agencies directing what indigenous students should be taught at school despite cultural relevance. This study applies the theoretical framework of Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), through video photography, observations, interviews with former students, and a teacher focus group to construct portraiture of the educational realities indigenous students face in a standardized education system. Keywords: Navajo, No Child Left Behind, Tribal Critical Race Theory*

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### Introduction

A large newspaper recently identified Northridge Elementary as the “worst” public school in the state of New Mexico, noting that less than 2% of the student body was considered proficient in math and 11.6% in reading according to academic achievement measurements set by US Department of Education (Salazar, 2010). Northridge Elementary, a kindergarten through eighth grade public school, comprised almost entirely of Navajo students, failed to meet the requirements of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in both reading and math (New Mexico's AYP ratings signal the need for reform, 2011). AYP is a mechanism of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) that includes three basic requirements: 95% participation in state administered assessments, 95% of students meet or exceed minimum performance target in reading and math, and 95% of students meet or exceed minimum targets on attendance rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). While Northridge did meet the state assessment participation requirements of AYP, they failed to meet the attendance (91.55%) and the minimum performance in reading (14.63% of students met target) and math (7.23% of students met target) requirements of AYP (New Mexico Department of Education, 2010).

Nestled in the rural corner of a large county, the Northridge community is accountable to state and federal education departments. Northridge Elementary, located in what local people refer to as the “checkerboard,” remains outside the actual Navajo Nation but surrounded by small plots of land owned by various private and public groups. The school is owned by the state, and most of the students attending Northridge live on land leased from the Navajo Nation but apart from the actual Navajo Reservation. It should be noted schools operating within the Bureau of Indian Affairs, such as schools located on reservations, are not required to report results of mandated national assessments (Warner & Grint, 2006).

Although the Northridge community culture remains rooted in Navajo tradition, the demands of high stake assessments have resulted in a cultural collision for the students of Northridge Elementary. More specifically, while federal and state education departments view education as matter of individual achievement or the ability to produce self-expression, the Navajo historically have viewed education as a more collective process based heavily on

revelations through nature (Calsoyas, 2005). The Navajo have well documented, recurring struggles with the American education system dating back to shortly after the American Civil War (Case, 1971). From 1943 through 1964 there was a Congressional effort to assimilate the Navajo as well as other American Indian groups into mainstream American society, such as the use of boarding schools, known as Indian termination policy (Tiller, 1979). The Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act (1975) eventually reversed the termination policy and granted tribal groups some educational autonomy, including the right to make their own educational decisions through a community-based schooling system; however, the act only applied to schools within the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Manuelito, 2005). Thus, American Indian students attending schools outside reservations were and continue to be subject to the various mandates associated with the standards movement beginning in the 1980's. During the first five years of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), roughly 70% of predominately American Indian schools failed to meet AYP (Zehr, 2007).

Recent efforts to provide instruction in native languages, such as the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act (2006), have helped preserve some American Indian identity through requiring bilingual instruction (Beaulieu, 2008). These efforts, however, have not resolved the reality school systems potentially face, like a reduction in funding, if Aboriginal students do not assimilate to the cultural values found in NCLB and state assessments (Agbo, 2004). American Indian College Fund President, Richard B. Williams believes the US Department of Education fails to address the needs of American Indians when compared to other racial minority groups (Anyaso, 2007). This observation becomes particularly clear when state assessments include Spanish but not Navajo translations. Even if the New Mexico state assessments were translated into Navajo, it remains significantly problematic to replicate the cultural meanings involved in the content of the language (Rosenbluff, 1976). The Navajo language is based on an oral tradition, and so to ask Navajos to read and write challenges the cultural design of their language usage (Balter & Grossman, 2009). For example, "The term Ke', for the Navajo people, encompasses respect, sharing, caring, wisdom, responsibility, relationship, compassion, and reciprocity" (Calsoyas, 2005, p. 307).

While modern American educational values often begin with a highly structured atmosphere where students gradually are expected to establish their own level of educational and economic autonomy, the Navajo begin with a more relaxed educational structure and the level of autonomy narrows as children become older (Rosenbluff, 1976). The traditional American high school student is expected to learn in order that he/she might one day leave the family to establish his/her own identity; Navajo students are expected to remain closely connected, both physically and economically, to their family and community (Gwilliam, 1958). While the American educational model calls for "instructional objectives and curricula, based on a fixed body of information, to meet the educational needs of the majority population" (Calsoyas, 2005, p. 301), Navajo education is based on personal vision quests "without relying on external distractions or reinforcements to support or control their minds" (Calsoyas, 2005, p. 304). The experience of storytelling remains a critical component of Navajo education, a non-Western practice unaccounted for in the American education model (Eder, 2007).

The standards movement particularly focuses on math and literacy skills. When a school does not perform well in math and English literacy, there is a focus on overcoming the perceived deficits. Northridge Elementary has a system designed to boost scores on the state achievement test. They have a regimented schedule with heavy doses of literacy and math, as well as after school tutoring sessions. Despite their diligence, achievement seems to always be out of grasp. Northridge faces tremendous pressure to perform well on state assessments;

they are even scolded publically for their perceived points of failure. Students leave Northridge after 8<sup>th</sup> grade, where they are asked to commute about 45 minutes to Cuney. About 98% of the students at Northridge consider themselves Navajo, while Cuney serves an array of ethnic groups. Classes at Northridge include approximately twelve students, whereas Cuney will often have between 20-30 students per class. During their time at Cuney, former Northridge students experience racism, high dropout rates, and the stinging reality that the deck is stacked against them.

The over-arching question addressed in this research is: Do standardized high-stakes assessments further the endemic values of colonization? The term colonization in this study refers federal and state governmental agencies directing what indigenous students should be taught at school despite cultural relevance.

### **Related Literature**

Native American education has received some attention in the academic community. Foster and Boloz (1980) describe various traits of effective leadership or administrative positions within the context of Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) schools, and, in doing so, they provide an overview of school dynamics for Native American students prior to the national reaction to *A Nation at Risk* (1983). The University of Arizona has published *Journal of American Indian Education* since 1961, a peer review journal dedicated to improving the conditions of native education throughout the world (Arizona State University School of Social Transformation). Research has both supported a standards approach to Aboriginal education (Akiba, Chiu, & Zhuang, 2008; Fox, 2000; Hankes & Fast, 2002) and deemed standards inappropriate (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002; Pewewadry, 1998). While there are cases where the Navajo, specifically appear to have succeeded in the standards movement (Patrick, 2008), more often the related literature describes a continuation of the historical conflicts between the Navajo and the American education system (Agbo, 2004; Balter & Grossman, 2009; Zehr, 2007).

Brayboy (2005) provides a theoretical framework, Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), “to address the complicated relationship between American Indians and the United States federal government and begin to make sense of American Indians’ liminality as both racial and legal/political groups and individuals” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 425). Brayboy based this framework on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and concludes, “colonization is endemic to society” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429). Abercrombie-Donahue (2011) applied (TribalCrit) through an ethnographical approach, where, as part of her dissertation from Montanan State University, she embedded herself among middle school teachers for three months.

To extend the research of TribalCrit, I wanted to construct Navajo educational perspectives using portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The Northridge community is particularly interesting because, unlike schools in the BIA, they report their assessment results to the state department of education. Northridge has become a topic of discussion, in terms of performance according to AYP standards, at the state level. This research explores the framework of TribalCrit and describes public education according to individuals in the Northridge community.

### **Methodology**

#### **Design of the Study**

This study employs a qualitative portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) first developed portraiture in *The Good High*

*School: Portraits of Character and Culture*. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis then designed a methodological approach for using portraiture as a qualitative form of research (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Portraiture blends "the systematic and careful description of good ethnography with the evocative resonance of fine literature" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 4). This process allows the researcher to capture the realities of life, like an artist does when painting a portrait. The researcher uses thick, descriptive language to reveal the subtle qualities and nuances of the subject matter. Portraiture emphasizes the "goodness" of the subject matter rather than what is wrong, addressing the imbalances of a situation as opposed to assigning blame (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 8).

Portraiture has been used to capture and understand cultural and racial dynamics in schools. Chapman (2007) employed portraiture and critical race theory to understand social successes and failures of urban classrooms. Through the use of portraiture Rubinstein-Ávila (2007) captured the realities of literacy practices for immigrant students. I determined portraiture would be the ideal methodology to reveal the realities and complexities of the cultural collision present at Northridge Elementary. This approach notices human qualities, such as what a person is wearing or his/her body language. I felt it was important to describe the people of Northridge, to capture the realities of their environment, and to notice the complexities of their story.

Portraiture has five major aspects: emergent themes, relationships, context, voice, and the aesthetic whole (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Similar to a journalist, the researcher first acts as a witness to the subject matter and records what can be seen and heard. From these descriptions, the researcher looks for themes in an attempt to understand the relationships and context within the field of study. The researcher then considers his/her own voice as it relates to the theoretical framework of the study. While portraiture is related to ethnographic traditions, the goals of portraiture focus more on creating a sense of empathy for the unknown perspective of the subject matter (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Finally, the researcher creates portraiture of the subject by using descriptive evidence to explain why the present conditions exist. Dixon, Chapman, and Hill (2005) refer to portraiture as an aesthetic process, where social sciences are blended with the arts. In this aspect of the methodology, the researcher attends to his/her aesthetic sensibilities in an effort to share new understandings with the audience, yet it is important for the researcher to offer enough descriptive evidence that readers can draw alternative conclusions (Lightfoot & Davis, 2007).

I sought the input from former Northridge Elementary students now considered legal adults scheduled to graduate from high school within the last five years, 2006-2011, as well as current teachers and administration at Northridge Elementary. In order to capture their realities, a purposeful sampling method, as suggested by Creswell (2007), was utilized in order to reveal multiple perspectives of the case. Through a holistic collection of data, I constructed portraiture of Northridge Elementary.

## **Researcher Stance**

This qualitative study is based on the underlying philosophy of social constructivism, "meaning is not discovered but constructed" (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). This is my eighth year as a fulltime classroom teacher in a small, rural school district, and my past experiences of teaching influenced my observations. However, prior to this research, I did not have strong or exclusive feelings regarding AYP, NCLB, and the standards movement. Northridge, New Mexico's educational system, Navajo culture, and their experiences with the standards movement remained new experiences from which to construct new meanings. While some of the meaning constructed includes my own understandings of public education, I came to Northridge with an outside perspective. I constructed this portraiture based on my

experiences from my time in the Northridge community. As a doctoral student at the University of Northern Colorado, this research was guided by a Case Study course.

## Participants

Individuals willing to participate in the research, living around the Northridge Elementary area, were invited to meet with a focus group of former Northridge Elementary students to discuss their experiences with the American education system. In order to generate a cross section of perspectives (Merriam, 2009), the current teachers, administration, and staff of Northridge Elementary were also invited to participate in a separate focus group in order to discuss their experiences and observations with Navajo education. A focus group was chosen as the interview format because of the constructionist perspective evident in the data collection (Merriam, 2009). No participants were selected from vulnerable populations, including: adolescents, people with cognitive disabilities, pregnant women, or prisoners. Pseudonyms were used in the place of all participants' names and the two schools mentioned in the study.

The Northridge Elementary principal and administrative secretary agreed to assist in recruiting participants, by providing names, telephone numbers, and basic contact information. The administrative assistant made phone calls to every potential former student participant still living around the area with available contact information; she speaks Navajo fluently and has worked at the school for past 11 years. The principal, although new to the Northridge community, offered to contact every teacher and administrator that could potentially participate in the study.

Most of the former students did not have a working phone number, lived too far away to reasonably make the drive to the focus group, or agreed to come to the focus group but did not actually attend. Two former students did participate in the focus group interviews and offered rich descriptions and details of their experiences; although, they became individual interviews. Jeremy, who now works as a ranch hand near Northridge, was an eighth grader during the groundbreaking ceremony of the new Northridge Elementary. Lila, a manager of a local trading post, initially dropped out of high school but decided to go back to earn her diploma after her daughter was born. Lila's daughter now attends Northridge as an elementary student. Both Jeremy and Lila understand the challenges the students at Northridge face, and they both know what it takes to succeed in graduating from high school.

Five teachers and one administrator attended the staff focus group, an appropriate amount considering Merriam's (2009) recommendation of 6-10 participants in a typical focus group. The group included, Sandy, Northridge's principal for the past five years. Sandy now oversees an improvement grant, which means she teaches, coordinates after school tutoring, and strategically seeks ways in which Northridge's state assessment scores can be dramatically raised. Sandy has worked with the Navajo in public schools for over ten years.

Ray, Larry, and Luanne all have taught Navajo students for decades and are considered veterans among the Northridge staff. Amber, the only Navajo represented in the final focus group, attended both Northridge and Cuney. Her softball skills provided Amber with the opportunity to play at a NCAA Division 1 college in a nearby state and a scholarship toward a teaching degree. Amber is a favorite among students and often an unofficial cultural liaison, along with the administrative assistant, to the Northridge community. Peter teaches math part-time at Northridge and at a junior college an hour and a half away.

The data for this study comes from documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, audio recordings, video footage, and physical artifacts (Creswell, 2007).

## Photography

I used video photography as a source of capturing the physical data setting of the Northridge community. The video did not include people, but rather the physical appearances of Northridge Elementary and the former site of Northridge Elementary. Some of the potential participants attended the former Northridge Elementary when it was at a site deemed unsafe by the state. Thus, it became relevant to include data from both sites. The new Northridge Elementary is located approximately five miles east of the former site. Permission has been obtained from school officials to film Northridge Elementary as well as its previous location. I hoped to find their story through observation as Stake (1995) suggests and felt a video camera would help preserve some of the data.

## Interviews

Two focus group times were scheduled at Northridge Elementary for former student participants, one per day, in a designated private meeting room reserved for the duration of the interviews. Participants were asked to pick one of the focus group times and attend that meeting. The Northridge Elementary staff focus group took place through the use of *Skype*, a video conferencing website. Initially the focus group design included only former students, but, given the difficulty in recruiting former students, I decided to recruit the staff as well. By the time I made this decision, I was back in my home state, hundreds of miles away. Rather than making the trip to Northridge twice, *Skype*, a video conferencing system, seemed like a viable alternative. One of the staff members offered to use her *Skype* account for the group to meet with me through.

Individual participants signed consent forms before participating in the focus groups. I asked each focus group semi-structured interview questions, including further probing questions, based on the individual responses. I asked participants permission to contact them individually, for the purpose of follow-up questions and member checks.

## Observations

Observations brought me to a greater understanding of the case, as Stake suggests (1995). I recorded my observations among my field notes in the research journal. The journal included observations of the physical features of the Northridge community, the schools, and the focus groups. Former students were encouraged to bring an artifact to represent their experiences with education. I used the observations to triangulate data within the analysis.

## Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis was taken from an interpretive perspective, as I attempted to understand and explain social realities (Crotty, 1998). The data consists of transcribed interviews, video footage, field notes, and collected artifacts in order to develop common themes (Merriam, 2009). The data collection provided a detailed description of Northridge (Stake, 1995), and I especially focused on the assimilating effects of educational standards (Brayboy, 2005). I chose to focus on this perspective as it pertains to the theoretical framework of the study.

The analysis process began along with the data collection. I identified elements of the data that related to my research questions, a means of creating units of data (Merriam, 2009). As recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), a unit needed to be both heuristic and “the smallest piece of information about something that can stand by itself” (p. 345). The first unit



I noticed was the importance of agriculture, particularly horses and sheep. As I began constructing units, I again heeded Merriam's advice (2009) and sought "reoccurring regularities" in the data (p. 177). This information was then used to create a categorical aggregation and establish themes and patterns (Creswell, 2007).

As I read the transcripts, field notes, and watched the video footage, I recorded notes, observations and additional ideas to explore, a form of open coding (Merriam, 2009). I looked for patterns of correspondence within the data (Stake, 1995). When categories began to develop, I tested them against Merriam's category criteria, "Be as sensitive to the data as possible, be exhaustive, be mutually exclusive, and be conceptually congruent" (p. 186).

### **Trustworthiness**

In order to ensure the analysis is both inductive and comparative, I triangulated the focus group data of the focus group transcripts, the researcher journal, and observations (Oliver-Hoyo & Allen, 2006; Chapman, 2005). As Huetteman (1993) notes, triangulation "provides a means to elicit data that might otherwise be over looked" (p. 42). Members of the focus group also were given a copy of the transcriptions of the interview they participated in and encouraged to check the material for "accuracy and palatability" (Stake, 1995, p. 115). In addition, an audit trail was employed, as Lincoln and Guba suggest (1985), in order to better explain the results of the analysis. The audit trail included all notes, emails, and correspondence regarding my investigation of Northridge.

### **Ethical Considerations**

No participants were selected from vulnerable populations, including: adolescents, people with cognitive disabilities, pregnant women, or prisoners. This study is not intended to disrupt or manipulate participants' normal life experiences. Only adults were contacted to participate in the focus groups. Pseudonyms were used for the names of all participants and schools described in the study. An Internal Review Board (IRB) from the University of Northern Colorado approved the ethical standards of this research project.

### **Findings**

Through the video photography, observations, and interview data, six major themes developed. I interpreted these themes by triangulating the data. For example, when a concept or idea developed across all three interviews, I considered that to be a possible a theme. I then used the other sources of data in order to test the theme.

The concept of relevance emerged as the first and most often revealed theme across the data sets. The teacher group especially brought up the topic of relevance. Although the video photography did not include the word "relevance," the images confirmed the lifestyle differences of the Northridge students experience from what might be a typical student. For example, the average U.S. elementary student does not have a horse living in their house and has regular access to water and electricity. Other themes mentioned across the interviews, focus groups, and observations confirmed in the video, included: assimilation, discrimination, overcoming adversity in English literacy and math, cultural misunderstandings, and intellectual misunderstandings. The themes pointed to a pattern that Northridge Elementary had more relevance to the community of Northridge in terms of providing public infrastructure than their performance on the high stakes assessment. The other sources of data as well as member-checks helped me to interpret the meanings of these themes.

## Portraiture

While the turquoise rocks resting naturally on the burnt orange soil give Northridge a beautiful, aesthetic quality, the dry dessert climate makes day-to-day living a challenge. The dirt roads surrounding Northridge are among the worst in the southwestern United States. The state government, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Navajo Nation, gas and oil, the US Department of Education, and agriculture support the infrastructure around Northridge. Running water, electricity, cell phone coverage, and Internet connection are all sporadic luxuries. There are no traffic lights near Northridge. “No drinking and driving” signs could be found every couple miles on the highway dwarfed by advertisements for local Apache casinos.

The open rolling hills of dry sagebrush are the home of a gas plant, a couple of trading posts, the occasional skinny horse, and both the current and former Northridge Elementary buildings. The new school is beautiful. Its southwest style celebrates the Navajo culture and appears clean and well maintained. The old school is by a gas plant, and the school was forced to close down for health concerns. Guarded by a chain link fence and a large padlock, the old modular homes, which once served as classrooms, looked as if they had been neglected for many years.

Northridge challenges the functionality of No Child Left Behind on a daily basis. As Sandy, a veteran administrator at Northridge, noted, “I don’t think we should be held accountable by one assessment.” Peter, a math teacher at Northridge, observed, “You can’t survive out here unless you can fix your own plumbing.” Peter should know. He and his family also work at a local mission where they provide people water by the gallon at minimal cost. In addition to the natural lack of water in an elevated, dry arid climate, many of Peter’s customers lack water because they cannot afford to pay their water bill nor the fee to turn their house water back on. At Northridge many students are just trying survive from day to day.

## A Success Story

Ms. Knight proudly introduced me to Jeremy, a tall, athletic young man dressed in ranch clothing and a black *Oakland Raiders* hat. Jeremy’s boots were well made but worn, splattered with dry horse manure. He took his hat off when we sat down, revealing dark shiny hair, cut into a short buzz. Although his teeth were a little crooked, they appeared clean and were easy to notice as he often smiled. Jeremy is one of the fortunate ones; Jeremy graduated from high school.

I asked Jeremy to bring something to represent this journey in education, and he showed me a wooden bucking horse he carved in woodshop. “That was the only thing that came out, because the rest I sold.” Jeremy was most proud of his industrial arts projects, “(I) helped them make some cabinets. I made a toolbox out of wood, a wooden toolbox, and I sold all that...saddle racks.”

Jeremy is proud of his Navajo heritage, “I just think us Navajos are lucky. We’ve got the biggest reservation in the world.” Being Navajo means family taking care of one another.

Navajo is all about family. It’s all about family, and you know, people taking care of one another. Back then my mom used to tell stories, you know, how everybody used to help each other and all that. You know, nobody was even stingy about their land. Nobody would fence up their land. Everybody would share everything. And for the last...and she’s never seen those kinds of stuff. Even when you went to go plow the cornfield, the whole family would be there.

Jeremy also takes pride in the Navajo contributions to society, such as the “Wind Talkers” during World War II.

Even though he graduated from high school, Jeremy is not interested in going to college. “I’m basically the only one that takes care of everything.” Jeremy’s family depends on him. “My brothers are out there working and all that. We have sheep, goats to take out early in the morning. It’s kind of really hard, but I got used to it.” Jeremy even struggles understanding why his cousin left for college.

You know she was forced to move. She’s been away from here for a long time. She gets homesick. I think that’s the really challenging one. Being away from like reservation or homeland, away from a place you have been raised up so long.

Jeremy accepts his lot in life and just wants to live by his people where he can raise livestock.

Graduating from high school was a big accomplishment for Jeremy, a feat most of the friends he grew up with in Northridge never experienced. Jeremy blamed the high dropout rates on shame and fear, “Ashamed of who they were and where they came from, what their family status is...they’re rich or poor, and all that. Sometimes that’s really challenging for us Navajos. We’re like afraid to go in the outside world.” Jeremy credits his social skills, “I treated everyone same. The rest of my friends, they were like prejudice, and they hated other White kids. Not me, I respected them, and they respected me. That’s how I was known.” Jeremy’s warm, accommodating personality was an obvious contributor in his academic success.

Jeremy also credits his family’s influence. His dad attended a boarding school and learned English early, “They stripped him of his identity. It took a long time for him to learn who he was and what he did and all that.” Jeremy’s mom actually ran away and hid from the Bureau of Indian Affairs when they were sending Navajos to boarding schools. Jeremy’s father speaks both English and Navajo about equally, while his mom speaks almost entirely Navajo.

But my dad, good thing he got it (education), because he speaks a lot of English, and he understands it. And mom it takes a long time for her to understand it. Sometimes I hear her saying, “Damn I wish I stayed in school.”

Jeremy laughed and shook his head.

Translating from English to Navajo is difficult. “Yeah that’s a major problem, because a little simple word can mean a long ways for Navajo. Especially computer’s, you know, it’s called Beeshnitsikeesi. It means: metal that thinks for itself.” Understanding the standardized tests were challenging for Jeremy, where he only understood about half of the words. “About 50% of it. But the, you know, after I finished, I looked up the words in the dictionary and found them out.” While Jeremy did find the test difficult, he found studying was the key to his success, “It was pretty hard. Yeah, pretty hard. But, studying was the best, the best way to get over it.” Jeremy would like to see the federal government do more to encourage and inspire children, but he holds a positive opinion about standardized tests.

Jeremy also believes in heavy doses of reading (English) and math, “More reading, math...yeah the four basics: science, history, math, reading, those are the mains ones. Reading is the main one, because like 75% of our tribe don’t speak English.” Jeremy notices the effects of content knowledge on his friends’ graduation rates, “reading and math. They lack in all that. They just messed around. They played around and all that. Me, I just stuck, I

just read everything.” However, Jeremy also feels Navajos are asked to give up too much of their identity in order to survive in public school. “It means a lot being a Navajo, you know. Sometimes it’s hard, you know. We face discrimination, and all that.” This was especially true for Jeremy when he left Northridge and began attending Cuney High School.

Jeremy would also like to see the Navajo Nation play a major role in education. “I think the Navajo Nation should play a major in education, because we lack a lot of stuff in our reservations: doctors, law, law enforcement, and, what is it...law too. The Navajo Nation’s law, we need to better it up.” But, ultimately, Jeremy cannot remember better days for Northridge. During Jeremy’s first nine years of school, he attended the former Northridge Elementary, where the only neighbor for miles is a giant gas plant across the highway.

The current Northridge Elementary is a vast improvement from the old site that looks more like a miniature trailer park than a school. Friendly Navajo and English translations are peppered throughout the texture of the southwest walls in the new Northridge Elementary. The large stucco building felt both secure and warm, it was difficult to understand the claims that this was the worst school in the state. Celebrations of learning, culture, and achievement hang throughout the classrooms and hallways. As we sat in a modern library, surrounded by *Apple* computers, Jeremy reflected on the transition, “I was an eighth grader, and then I was here for the groundbreaking- groundbreaking ceremony. And then I reached sophomore, and that’s when I first reached through those doors. Then, there was an open house, and we walked around...wow.” Jeremy smiled as he looked around library of the school.

### **The Comeback Kid**

Lila knows quite bit about the peaks and valleys of Navajo education. Like Jeremy, Lila came from a home that spoke both Navajo and English. Lila struggled with school but still managed to graduate for high school. “Well, I dropped out, and I don’t know if it is just a Native American thing, but I dropped out so many years. Then I had to go back and push myself through the alternative system that Cuney High School has, and that’s how I finished.” Lila credits her daughter for motivating her to go back and earn her high school diploma. Lila thinks it paid off too. After working at the local trading post the past four years, she has been promoted to manager. While only about five feet in height, Lila had a strong presence about her. She too had shiny dark hair and wore it long. Lila’s daughter now attends Northridge Elementary.

Lila is pretty satisfied with her daughter’s education at Northridge. “I think it’s good they have bilingual education, because most of the Navajo young children only speak English. And it’s hard for our elderlies to talk to them in Navajo, because they don’t understand.” In fact, Lila thinks American education has been good for the Navajo. “We’ve moved from a long way. Before they didn’t have anything, but them learning the American ways. They’ve achieved more than what they have.” She even has favorable opinions about No Child Left Behind. “No Child Left Behind means that all the children have to go to school, they got to get their education, instead of being left out.” Although more emotionally reserved than Jeremy, Lila thought highly of the federal and state education systems.

Lila said she felt somewhat discriminated when she attended school, but noted appreciation for the way Northridge considers Navajo culture. Lila likes the free lunches provided by the school. Because so many students at Northridge qualify for free lunches, Northridge feeds all students breakfast and lunch for free. She agrees reading and math are the keys to graduating from high school.

When I first started, freshman year, I was really into math. I really didn’t like English, but, by the time I got to my 12<sup>th</sup> grade year, math was...it switched

around. Because I had already finished my English classes the previous years, and math was all I had, that's when my discomfort of math and English switched.

Lila likes the tutoring programs afterschool at Northridge and admits that her daughter does not always get the homework support she needs at home.

## **The Teachers**

The teachers of Northridge stated several times they were not scared of accountability or using data to drive instructional decisions, but they do have some reservations about the weight of high stakes assessment.

It needs to be different...then the way it's written now. Not one assessment that's language based is the whole key to our kids are smarter and much more successful than 9% and 17% (proficient). But we can't prove that because they're only going to look at that one test. We had 60% of our kids anywhere from 49-60% on other tests showing proficiency. Those don't count.

The language based translation issue was a theme throughout the related literature, field notes, interviews, and artifacts.

It takes a great deal of energy and flexibility to work at Northridge. Attendance is an on-going struggle. The rugged roads surrounding Northridge make transportation a gamble. A few times a year it does rain, and roads often washout and can only be navigated with lifted four-wheel drive vehicles. Northridge is about 7,000 feet above sea level, so they also see an occasional snow blizzard. The school buses often get stuck, and, even when the roads are dry, driving is more of an adventure than a certainty.

Students often miss school for other reasons as well. "Some of these guys, you know, they are just staying home. Some of them are babysitters." Ray noticed home environments play a big role in education, "Our kids have a lot of issues with home. They have live with grandparents or uncles and aunts. So, they really have a lot of issues at home." It is difficult to work under the conditions of Northridge under the scrutiny of the accountability movement. One participant even mentioned losing her hair because of the stress of her position.

The staff would like to see more vocational opportunities and cultural relevance in school. As Larry noted,

This is just my opinion, but, if we had more culturally relevant education for these students, these particular students, they might succeed out in the real world. But, all they know at this point is the way they live in their community. And they're not being taught that here at this school or any other school like this school.

The students of Northridge do not fit the mold of traditional American students, and the teachers of Northridge would like their curriculum expectations to reflect that. Luanne stated, with what appeared to be unanimous agreement,

They (high school students from Northridge) need to take a building trade course and something else. And I think we need, our job as a K-8 school, is to build that foundation so they are ready for those choices and have some idea about that they have choices. Right now they don't have a choice. And the choice they have is something that makes no sense to them whatsoever.

The staff present repeatedly agreed that a different educational model, one that allows high school students to choose a vocational track, would be the most helpful to the students of Northridge.

### Discussion

Northridge Elementary faces challenges on a daily basis. However, the data kept reflecting Northridge Elementary has become a critical piece of infrastructure to the existing community. In some ways the school even helps preserve the Navajo language, as Lila noted and the *Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act* (2006) mandates. Northridge provides two meals a day, which many of the students depend on for survival. The school even provides donated clothing, resources and holiday presents. Northridge is dependable infrastructure in a world that lacks both dependability and infrastructure.

I spent most of a day in the front office of Northridge while the administrative assistant and I tried to contact former students. Teachers, even the veterans, were clearly busy throughout my time there. They talked to each other as teammates; there was a clear sense of purpose. At the time it seemed asinine that this school was considered a failure. I noted similar observations throughout my research journal.

Students attend this warm, yet segregated, environment from kindergarten to eighth grade, and then they are asked to travel a substantial distance to a large diverse high school. Jeremy, Lila, and the teachers all agreed college is not usually an option for the students of Northridge. Amber is the local girl that went off to college and came back to live in the community, but for most families, college means someone they love and depend on is leaving for good. While reading (English) and math are important curriculum qualities, students need school to prepare them for life at a local level.

Northridge Elementary teacher, Peter, noticed Navajo students struggle with superlatives and abstractions because their language and life experiences are so literal. As it was said repeatedly during my time in Northridge, "You cannot create a standardized test in Navajo, because the language is not standardized." When you watch a Navajo speaker, he/she uses hand motions and body language to account for the lack of modern technical words within the Navajo language. Hand gestures are simply not an option in the delivery of state assessments. According to Peter, the life experiences of the Navajo also contribute to their struggles with standardized assessments. The standardized questions assume students have certain social and economic values unfamiliar to the typical Northridge student.

Northridge challenges the legitimacy of the standards movement. Students overwhelmingly underperform on high stakes tests, written for and by a dominant culture, and often they do not want to go where the standards movement is designed to take them. They want to live by their Clans, raise horses, and live the rural Navajo lifestyle. Northridge is scrutinized by the public for not churning out students proficient in reading and math, but people do not realize, as Peter observed,

The challenge is the children here are starting from a different place than most of the rest of the nation that everything is normed by. And they are going to go to a different place for the most part. It's on both ends. They don't begin with

the same language skills; they don't have the same tools in the box, because of where they come from.

According to the data from the state and federally mandated tests Northridge has failed to adequately educate their students, but the data from this research paints a very different picture. Northridge must walk a fine line between preparing students for high school at Cuney and preparing students for life. Rather than scolding Northridge through public report cards, the community I observed would like a little more flexibility and positive encouragement from the standards movement.

Standardizing education does further the endemic values of colonization for Northridge. Students and school personnel either assimilate to the educational values of national and state standards, or they face penalties and public scrutiny. This dynamic reinforces Brayboy's conclusion, "colonization is endemic to society" (2005, p. 429). While the Northridge case is unique, generalized meaning exists. A national, state, or providence definition for what constitutes knowledge or learning devalues perspectives outside the dominant culture. As educational systems apply standardization principles, indigenous populations face cultural and intellectual subjugation.

### **Limits to the Study**

Unfortunately there were not as many participants as I had hoped for. I found it difficult to get in touch with people or convince them to drive to a central location. As Jeremy and Lila mentioned coming from a school system and home that valued and supported American education, their ideas should be read with the context of cultural reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1973). Thus, they seem to adhere to norms and values expressed by the dominant Western culture as part of their socialization process (Bourdieu, 1973). This could limit the study, especially with regard to understanding the assimilating effects of high-stakes assessments, because they may not have been as critical with their experiences as other students from Northridge. Both Jeremy and Lila expressed success stories, so their experiences may be out of step with the students that did not experience similar levels of academic success. By including the perspectives of more former students, particularly students that did not graduate from high school, perhaps their shared experiences could lead to a more complete understanding of what high-stakes testing means to the students of Northridge.

### **Future Research**

It would help confirm some of the attitudes and perceptions revealed in this study if it were on a larger scale. Both former students expressed very positive, accommodating views of American education, so it would add context to see if non-graduates felt as supportive of U.S. policy. It would also be of great interest to follow a group of students' educational journey, especially to include both experiences at Northridge and Cuney. As students transition from Northridge to Cuney, what cultural changes take place? What factors are critical in determining whether students succeed or fail at Cuney? What type of attitudes do students take with them to Cuney, and how are these attitudes affected by their experiences at Cuney? As the current study looked only at Northridge Elementary, and the data suggests Cuney is also significant in the educational journey of the students from Northridge, it would be interesting to examine these questions because it might reveal a deeper understanding about Navajo students attending school off the reservation. Cuney is a different setting than Northridge, and there are additional circumstances for students as they move from Northridge

to Cuney. Further research would also help establish a deeper understanding if one were to take an ethnographic approach, where the researcher is “immersed in the day-to-day lives of the people” (Creswell, 2007, p. 68). While I was able to gain insights during my five days at Northridge, full immersion into the Northridge community and Cuney High School could further reveal the social dynamics for the Northridge learning community.

An ethnographic approach could potentially allow for the researcher to earn greater trust within the community, in order to further understand the complexity of Northridge’s unique educational dynamics. This could include a greater sense of family and community life, and how those relationships influence feelings and values about education. As this study included students and teachers, it would be beneficial to involve more shareholders within the Northridge learning community.

As a veteran teacher, I also felt the failing school label was misleading. After deliberation, I found a methodology, educational connoisseurship and criticism (Eisner, 1998), which I plan to reevaluate Northridge with as well as other so-called “failing schools” for my upcoming dissertation. This methodology seems to be an appropriate new lens to view Northridge under because calls the researcher to look for the subtle qualities and flaws of the educational environment (Eisner, 2002). Perhaps this approach could present a different picture regarding the educational functionality of Northridge Elementary in a way that would honor different ways to knowing.

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### Author Note

Dan Conn recently completed his ninth year as a regular classroom teacher in a rural K-12 school. Dan's duties have included teaching both elementary and secondary students. As a doctoral student at the University of Northern Colorado, Dan also works as a graduate assistant. He will propose his dissertation during the summer of 2013 and plans to focus on how achievement labels affect learning environments. Upon completing his doctorate degree, Dan plans to teach education courses at the university level. Correspondence concerning the article should be addressed to Daniel R. Conn, P.O. Box 352, Fleming, Colorado, 80728 or at [conn0906@bears.unco.edu](mailto:conn0906@bears.unco.edu)

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