Re-visioning the Future of Education for Native Youth in Rural Schools and Communities

Susan C. Faircloth
The Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Faircloth, S. C. (2009). Re-visioning the future of education for Native youth in rural schools and communities. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 24*(9). Retrieved [date] from http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/24-9.pdf

In *Learning to Leave,* Corbett (2007) argues that (1) education has served as a tool to disassociate students—both physically and culturally—from the places from which they come, particularly if they are from rural places, in effect creating an ambivalence toward education; (2) the ways in which individuals express this ambivalence is shaped, in large part, by factors such as socioeconomic status and gender, and I would argue race and ethnicity; (3) the purpose of schooling is often in conflict with the values and beliefs of rural communities (i.e., formal education may run counter to local forms of social or cultural capital, and it may also be locally perceived as having little effect on the ability of students to increase their economic capital within the rural context); and (4) the effects of globalization are found in many rural areas as evidenced by increasing access to services typically found in more urban areas; thereby decreasing individuals' need to migrate out of these areas.

Guided by these themes, each of the authors in this special issue were asked to consider the following questions: (1) How do rural community members, educators and students resolve the tensions between preparing students for success in an increasingly globalized world and maintaining their commitment to the places from which they come? (2) What does this mean for the sustainability and growth of rural communities and schools? and (3) How will this affect rural schools and their relationship(s) with the communities they serve? I attempt to respond to these questions using the tradition of storytelling found in Native communities around the globe.

Susan C. Faircloth is Associate Professor of Education at the Pennsylvania State University where she co-directs the Center for the Study of Leadership in American Indian Education. She may be contacted at scf2@psu.edu.

This commentary is part of a series in response to Michael Corbett's 2007 book *Learning to Leave*, as well as Corbett's article, "Rural Schooling in Mobile Modernity: Returning to the Places I've Been," published in the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, vol. 24, no. 7.

Our Story[1]

Globalization is not a new concept for Native people in the United States. We have experienced the encroachment of outside forces on our lands and our peoples for more than 500 years. We have lost or been taken away from our lands, lands that hold the key to who we are in ways that are difficult to describe in words. We've endured the long march of the Trail of Tears in which thousands of Native people lost their lives as they were forced to march in harsh conditions from the mountains of Tennessee and Georgia to the plains of Oklahoma. Educationally, we've witnessed our children forcefully removed from their families and placed in boarding schools operated first by religious groups and then by the federal government. Never were we asked what we wanted for our children or what we dreamed for their future. Instead, our hair was cut, we were dressed in new clothing, our languages were silenced, and our spiritual and religious practices were banned. In spite of the damaging effects of globalization on our tribes and communities, Native people have continued to survive—demonstrating our resilience and determination to thrive in the face of seemingly insurmountable conditions.

My Story

The effects of globalization on Native peoples are glaringly evident among the Native tribes and communities scattered along the eastern coast of the United States. These are the tribes that first encountered the colonizing forces who came from across the seas in search of religious freedoms, land, and wealth. Encounters with these forces resulted in the loss of life, land, language, and some would argue culture, forcing many Native peoples to acculturate, assimilate, or die. Many of those who survived turned to farming and other land-based means of subsistence in rural and remote areas. I am a descendant of one of these tribes—the Coharie People of North Carolina.

[1] See Lomawaima (1999) for a brief history of Indian education in the United States.

Growing up in rural North Carolina, I never imagined that I would one day work in a university far removed from my family and community. To many of my public school teachers, success for me would have been graduating from high school and working in the same meat packing company my mother had worked in for 37 years. However, my mother and father had aspirations for me that spanned outside our local community. There was never any doubt in their minds that I would go to college, it was simply a question of where I would go. Today, I find myself immersed in the day to day challenges of navigating academia[2] while striving to do work that is meaningful to me, my community, and the larger field of education. In doing so, my work is informed not only by scholarly and academic research, but by my own personal experiences as an American Indian woman, one of the first in my family to attend and graduate from college, coupled with the Indigenous knowledge[3] and ways of knowing that were introduced to me by the members of my family, tribe, and community. As I do this work, I am often reminded of my own experiences in education as well as the stories of scores of children, both Native and non-Native, who have fallen through the cracks of the educational system. These experiences bolster my commitment to finding ways in which to successfully nurture the emotional, cultural, linguistic, physical, and academic needs of Native students.

I first came to Penn State as a graduate student in the American Indian Special Education Teacher Training Program. I returned to Penn State twice more, first as a doctoral student and finally as a faculty member in the Educational Leadership Program. My time at Penn State has been challenging. The more educated I've become, the more distanced I sometimes feel from my community; not so much in terms of physical distance, but in the communal sense of shared identity, beliefs, and values. I am in essence a border crosser—not completely comfortable in either the world of academia or in the community in which I spent the bulk of my childhood and early adulthood. Education has provided an opportunity for me to see and experience a world I had never seen before, but it has also distanced me from the world in which I grew up in. I often find myself asking, "Can I go home? And, if I do go home, what will I do?" Nearly 15 years after beginning this journey, or what Corbett would term as my outward migration, I continue to grapple with the idea of going home and giving back.

Four years ago, my niece, Kanani, which means "Beautiful Little One" in Hawaiian, was born. During Kanani's first pow wow, at the age of 5 months, our family danced her into the circle, surrounded by members of our community. Kanani was dressed in a regalia, made of a Hawaiian print, representing her father's heritage. As the dance ended, my sister performed a give-away, a Native tradition of giving gifts to those who have given of themselves. The give-away included blankets and cards for the elders and candy and small toys for the children. For me, this day symbolized not only a blending of cultures, but a type of coming home, back to our roots in rural North Carolina. As I held Kanani on a blanket on the ground, I began to realize that coming home, for me, has as much to do with remembering and reclaiming a sense of place in my heart, spirit, and mind as it does with the land that is attached to that place called home. When I'm struggling with the writing of an academic paper or presentation, I close my eyes and recall the sights, sounds, and scents of my grandmother's kitchen on a Sunday afternoon. That's home for me. However, when I travel the physical distance back to my home community, I am constantly asked, "When are you getting married and having children and when are you coming home for good?" Having recently gotten married, I can answer the first question, but I often find myself avoiding the subject of returning home. How can I tell my family and community members that I may never be able to return home permanently in the physical sense? How do I get them to understand that the work I do is done in the hope that future generations of our children will not be forced to leave their home communities to evade the racism and discrimination so rampant in many of our communities, to pursue higher education, or to earn a living?

When I see Kanani at home with my parents, I see a child who has not grown up in our rural home community, but who is able to code switch between her urban Hawaiian culture and way of life to the life ways of a rural, Native community. She has the social and cultural mobility that I strive to achieve even as an adult. Unfortunately, formal education did not prepare me to navigate the borders between my rural community of origin and the larger world. In contrast, it attempted to reinforce the notion that this rural place in which I was born was my place—a place from which I had no right to venture out. The histories that I learned were those told by the majority—histories that I believed until becoming a history major as an undergraduate and being introduced to the concept of revisionist histories. At that point, I understood for the first time, that our people, Native people, were not discovered, but in essence were the discoverers of a conquering force that paved the way for globalization as we know it today. This realization of

[2] I am the co-director of a personnel preparation grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Indian Education aimed at preparing students to assume leadership positions in educational organizations serving American Indian and Alaska Native students. This program is administered by Penn State's American Indian Leadership Program (AILP), the oldest continuously operating leadership program for American Indian and Alaska Native students in the nation. Since 1970, the AILP has graduated approximately 220 Native students. See http://www.ed.psu.edu/educ/eps/ailp for additional information regarding the AILP.

[3] See Battiste and Henderson (2000) for a discussion of Indigenous Knowledge.

our true histories made me even more distrusting of the education I had received as a youth.

As I read Corbett's arguments in *Learning to Leave*, I was struck by my re-realization of how difficult it is for me to make sense of the work we do as educators when education has been used as a tool to colonize and decimate many of our Native life ways, traditions, and lands. As an educator, I see the importance of learning and knowledge, yet as a Native person, I view learning and knowledge as more than what is presented in a formal classroom environment. For me, my first and most important teachers were my mother and grandmother. My mother nurtured my desire to learn the academic ways of the world, while my grandmother passed down the traditions of our community, not in writing, but in the stories that she told of the old days as I sat by her side on a Saturday night or Sunday afternoon—stories that I fear losing as my grandmother is now in her 90s.

The story I tell here is not simply my story, but an example of the stories shared by countless numbers of Native people living in rural and urban areas across the nation, many of whom have struggled and continue to struggle with the inherent contradictions of education. My story is individual, yet not that unique or different from my peers. Many Native youth continue to struggle as they work to navigate the educational system, wondering how they can maintain their sense of self and place, while being successful academically. Unfortunately, their stories are seldom heard outside their own communities, as their relatively small numbers have tended to render them statistically insignificant in large scale studies of the condition of education in both rural and urban settings.

Changing the Future of Rural Education for American Indian and Alaska Native Students

Today, there are more than 650 state and federally recognized tribes across the nation, each with their own culture and many with their own language. Although geographically dispersed, American Indian and Alaska Native students are more likely than their peers to attend schools in rural and remote areas. According to DeVoe and Darling-Churchill (2008), 46% of Native students attend schools in rural areas, compared to 30% of Whites, 14% of Blacks, 10% of Hispanics, and 9% of Asian/Pacific Islanders.

To reform the education of Native people in rural schools and communities, we must reflect on the lessons learned from the eras of self-determination and local control; movements that were in full swing in the 1960s and 70s. These movements brought with them a call for local control of Indian education—a call that continues to ring strong among Native communities across the nation. Local control and self-determination are founded on the belief that local tribes and communities have the right to determine and shape the future and direction of our children's education.[4] Tribes and communities have a history of educating our children, through songs, dances, and stories, by doing, listening, and watching. Yet, there have been limited attempts at the federal and state levels to tap into these "funds of knowledge" (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992).[5]

Local/tribal control holds the keys for the design and delivery of a truly Indigenous education for Native youth. Through local control, those who are affected most—rural families, children, and communities—are empowered to define the purpose and direction of education. This requires a change in both philosophy and practice at the federal and state levels. In addition to academic skills, our goal should be to equip all of our beautiful little ones to be proficient in their Native cultures and languages; without these funds of knowledge, the sustainability and growth of our tribes and communities is increasingly at risk. To do this requires what Wildcat (2001) described as the indigenization of the educational system: "… the act of making our educational philosophy, pedagogy, and system our own, making the effort to explicitly explore ways of knowing and systems of knowledge that have been actively repressed for five *centuries*" (p. vii). In essence, education must be used as a means of decolonizing (i.e., facilitating children and youth's ability to attain and maintain social, economic, and cultural capital within both the local/tribal and global communities) rather than colonizing (i.e., reducing or diminishing social, economic, and cultural capital) Native children and youth.

Sustainability and Growth of Rural Communities

A return to local control of education will not ensure that all Native youth will be academically successful nor does it ensure that they will remain in their communities of origin. However, it does provide a vehicle by which children and youth have the social, cultural, and economic capital[6] necessary to be successful wherever they choose to reside—both in the physical and philosophical sense. For me, the future of our rural communities is dependent

[4] Born out of the self-determination and local control movements of the 1960s, tribally controlled colleges and universities, many of which are located on or near reservations, provide a unique opportunity for Native people to pursue higher education without leaving their communities. Tribal colleges help to "educate the mind as well as the spirit." (Quote excerpted from the American Indian College Fund. See http://www.collegefund.org for additional information.) Similar movements are occurring in Canada and New Zealand. See http://www.win-hec.org/ for information regarding the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium.

[5] Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992) define funds of knowledge as the "strategic and cultural resources … households contain" (p. 313).

[6] See Bourdieu (1986) for a discussion of economic, social, and cultural capital.

upon our ability and willingness to revision, repurpose, and restructure education in ways that enable our youth to utilize the skills they are taught locally as well as globally. In essence, education has the potential to be used as a tool for learning to leave, learning to stay and learning to return—skills that are not at odds, but are necessary in an increasingly globalized world.

References

Battiste, M., & Henderson, J. S. Y. (2000). *Protecting Indigenous knowledge and heritage: A global challenge*. Saskatoon, Canada: Purich Publishing.

Bordieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-58). New York: Greenwood.

Corbett, M. (2007). *Learning to leave: The irony of schooling in a coastal community.* Canada: Paul & Co. Publishing Consortium.

DeVoe, J. F., & Darling-Churchill K. E. (2008). *Status and trends in the education of American Indians and Alaska Natives: 2008* (NCES 2008-084). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

Lomawaima, K. T. (1999). The unnatural history of American Indian education. In K. S. Swisher & J. W. Tippeconnic, III (Eds.), *Next steps: Research and practice to advance Indian education* (pp. 3-31). Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural and Small Schools.

Vélez-Ibáñez, C. G., & Greenberg, J. B. (1992). Formation and transformation of funds of knowledge among U.S.-Mexican households. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 23*(4), 313-335.

Wildcat, D. R. (2001). Prelude to a dialogue. In V. Deloria & D. R. Wildcat (Eds.), *Power and place: Indian education in America* (p. vii). Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing.