

Cultural Identity and Schooling in Rural New Mexico

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Following the Río Grande north from New Spain in 1540, Francisco de Coronado entered what would become New Mexico, searching for the fabled seven cities of gold. What he found instead was a poor, if hauntingly beautiful landscape where native peoples, living in cities of sophisticated pueblo design, had long ago learned to live in harmony with their often harsh, unforgiving land (Kessell, 2002; Nabokov, 2006). European colonization was slow but inevitable thereafter. Adventurers Oñate and Peralta, following in Coronado's footsteps, eventually established a colonial capital at Santa Fe in 1610. Nearly one hundred years later in 1706, a period during which the Spanish immigrant and *mestizo* populations had nearly succeeded in subjugating the indigenous peoples of the North, the colonial outpost of Albuquerque was founded.

Thus we see the making of a dynamic that to this day creates cultural and political tensions in the state: more than 11% of the population are Native Peoples living on reservations; nearly 54% are Hispanics, including a substantial group of "Spaniards" who proudly trace their ancestry back to the 16th century and the arrival of the Europeans (New Mexico State Department of Education, 2001). In more recent times, *anglos* from all over the United States have settled in the state, particularly in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and other middle-size towns (36% of New Mexico students are *anglos*). And finally and particularly in the southern part of the state, undocumented immigrants from Mexico have begun to arrive in substantial numbers. To discuss rural education in New Mexico is first to understand that these groups, each with its unique history and interests, have distinct cultures—and often languages—with differing expectations for the education of their children.

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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.

Summarizing the findings of his study in southwestern Nova Scotia coastal fishing villages, Mike Corbett (2009), in his article "Rural Schooling in Mobile Modernity: Returning to the Places I've Been" lays out several arguments, including the following: First, that formal education "has been and continues to be ... a key institution of 'disembedding,' loosening ties to particular locales and promoting out-migration from rural places" (p. 1). Second, the ambivalence about this process "is experienced in different ways by differently positioned social actors in the rural community" (p. 1). On the face of it, one might suppose that Nova Scotia and New Mexico would have little in common. And indeed, in terms of history, geography—and even language to some extent—they are quite distinct. Yet both are largely rural and thus confront economic and cultural trends that are increasingly common across rural North America. Following Corbett, in this commentary I take the opportunity to reflect on the implications of these arguments for rural people, rural communities, and rural schools in the context of the U.S. Southwest, in New Mexico.

Albuquerque, New Mexico today, including its suburban communities, has an estimated population of 700,000. Of New Mexico's nearly 2 million residents, Albuquerque, together with the other urban centers, now constitute nearly 70% of the state's population (U.S. Census, 2000). Not surprisingly, these urban areas have grown to be the commercial centers of the state and thus, because they offer greater economic opportunity, a magnet for people from all over, but particularly from rural areas. Nevertheless, New Mexico remains a highly rural state containing large areas with broadly dispersed populations and scatterings of small towns. What do these demographic and economic trends mean for rural New Mexicans, especially those who are Native and Hispanic? What role has rural education played in these demographic and economic trends? And what role might it play?

Native Americans and Rural Education

The history of Native peoples and formal schooling has been, until rather recently, a history of brutal dispossession and assimilation. A series of treaties between the U.S. and Native tribes in the 19th century left the federal government responsible for the education of Indian children. In practice, however, the actual schooling of Native children was carried out by the state, in Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) boarding schools (situated off the reservations), and in local public and even independent schools. Native children attending Bureau of Indian Affairs schools (BIA) and public schools were systematically subjected to curricula and behavioral expectations that set as their expressed goal the separation of Indian children from their tribal languages, traditions, and religious practices: that is, to remake them in the image of their European conquerors (Cajete, 1994; Emerson, 1983; Fuch and Havighurst, 1972; Szasz, 1977; Trennert, 1988).

Whether employees of the BIA or the local public school district, the Native children's teachers, particularly in boarding schools remote from students' homes, exercised near total control over the lives of their students. This is not to say that their campaign of cultural subjugation did not meet with resistance, by students, their families, and tribes—it did, and does so today (Mondragón & Stapleton, 2005). Nevertheless, students who attended these schools were frequently “disembedded” from their communities, not only physically, but also culturally and linguistically. Too often Native children, as a result of assimilation efforts in their schools, found themselves living on the socioeconomic border between both White and Native societies, totally accepted by neither (Szasz, 1977).

In 1890, the superintendent of the Carlisle Indian School, the first boarding school for Native Americans, testified before a congressional committee that between 25% and 30% of the school's students found jobs and made lives for themselves outside their reservations. Even a year or two at the school, he informed the committee members, “gave the students a new life, and only a small percentage” returned to the reservation (Deyhle, 1995, p. 418).

Seeking to explain the persistent achievement gap between African-American and White students, John Ogbu (1978) hypothesized that the issue had to do in part with the cultural and political history of minority groups. Children whose ancestors had come to the United States as voluntary immigrants usually embraced membership in the majority culture and were more easily assimilated into the mainstream. For involuntary immigrants, however, including groups such as Africans and Native peoples and many Hispanics, the process of becoming “American” too often occurred through military and political subjugation. Even then, the children of these groups were often stigmatized and as a result, experienced segregation and

alienation from mainstream American society. In response and as a way of protecting and asserting their own identities, they often resisted middle-class, White education. One form of resistance was to reject the values and cultural norms of public schools, as hegemonic agents of the state (Ogbu, 1978). Thus, we see in the schooling experience of Indian children parallels with that of African Americans, and other involuntary minorities (Ogbu, 1978).

Today, only 3% of New Mexico's teachers are Native American (New Mexico State Department of Education, 2001). Nevertheless, walking the halls of Native children's schools today, one is likely to find student art work and banners and posters with portraits honoring the history, the art, and culture of American Indians. Occasionally, one might even find Navajo, for example, offered as an elective course in the curriculum; it is rare, however, to find content area subjects (math, science, social studies, etc.) taught in Native languages. Native teachers, speaking among themselves, might do so in their tribal languages, but their students, though they often understand the languages, no longer speak them fluently, particularly those students who do not live on the reservations. Programs at the state and federal levels in New Mexico have been instituted to reclaim Native languages and cultural practices. But support for the programs in public schools is not universal, not even in Native communities: some tribal leaders approve the efforts while others do not. Those who do not would often prefer that public schools leave language and cultural instruction to the students' respective tribes (Mondragón & Stapleton, 2005).

As in rural and small town communities across the country, Native residents who choose to remain on the reservation, do so knowing that their economic opportunities will be limited as a result. Leaving, however, will mean abandoning the security of their tribe, their families, and the land that is, in a quite literal sense, sacred (Nabokov, 2006). The compromise many young Native people strike, one common to rural people across North America, is to live and work during the week in cities, but return at weekends and festival days to the reservations, to renew their bonds and so maintain their cultural identities. Even so, many young Indians who leave for the cities never return, at least not permanently (Deyhle, 1995). And thus the integrity of their language and culture is inevitably compromised.

Spanish and Hispanic Rural Education

Culturally, New Mexicans of direct Spanish origin, those whose families settled the land grants set aside by the Kings of Spain in the 16th and 17th centuries, call themselves *Spanish*. This is the term they employ to distinguish themselves from Hispanics or *Latinos* who arrived later from Mexico and countries south of the Río

Grande. Villages radiating out from the colonial capital of Santa Fe bear today names such as Madrid, Española, and Albuquerque—named for the Spanish Duke of Albuquerque. In these and a hundred other villages and small towns in the Sandia and Sangre de Cristo Mountains in the north of the state, descendants of the original Spanish adventurers and settlers proudly trace their lineage back to these early Europeans.

Oscar Handlin (1941) early identified the threat that minority populations of long tenure often experience upon the arrival of newcomers. The first African Americans in Boston, for example, were petit bourgeois shopkeepers whose small community there predated the Revolutionary War. Calling themselves *Brahmins*, they rejected outright the former slaves who arrived after the Civil War, seeking freedom and economic advancement (and whom they named the *homies*). Similarly today, the old “Spaniards” of New Mexico deeply resent the more recent Hispanic economic immigrants and use every opportunity to distinguish themselves from them.

In the southern parts of New Mexico, in towns such as Las Cruces and Truth or Consequences, and in urban Albuquerque, we find the strong influence of the Mexican culture and language, and increasingly in the public schools, the children of the undocumented immigrants from Mexico (Kessell, 2002). These recent immigrants are almost invariably *economic immigrants*, that is, they have travelled north, looking for jobs and housing and educational opportunities for their children. In total, students in New Mexico’s schools, broken down by ethnicity, are more than 54% Hispanic. This number includes the *Spaniards* of the North (Pew Hispanic Center, 2006).

There are 89 school districts in New Mexico, with the great majority located in small towns and rural communities. Hispanic students drop out of school at the rate of 50.5%, the highest in the state (New Mexico State Department of Education, 2007). Viewed through the lens of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), this might well be understood as simply an issue of schools failing to meet the academic needs of these students. But examined more closely, there are more nuanced ways of interpreting this number.

New Mexico, even with its complex ethnic and linguistic tapestry, still suffers at the classroom level from its history of economic hegemony by the dominant *anglos*. Even though 54% of the state’s K-12 students are ethnic Hispanics, 68% of the teachers are *anglos* (New Mexico State Department of Education, 2001). This frequently means that children are taught by teachers who are unfamiliar with their language, their culture and traditions; a full 62% of Hispanic children live in families where Spanish is spoken at home (Pew Hispanic Center, 2006). As has been the historical case for Native American children, these Hispanic students are educated to the norms of middle class, *anglo* America.

The *Latino* and *Spanish* families of New Mexico, because their socioeconomic histories are different (the former, “voluntary” immigrants and the latter, “involuntary” immigrants, in the formulation of John Ogbu), adapt to their schooling experience in different ways. Recent immigrants of Mexican origin come to the United States with the expectation of dramatic change, that is, families expect that their children will learn to speak English, that they will adopt the ways of mainstream American culture—even, in many cases, when this comes at the expense of their original culture (Rodriguez, 1982; Santos, 2006). The implicit pay-off for these families is one of economic and social opportunity for their children.

For the involuntary *Spaniards*, however, the dynamic is often more complex. Public schools, following the mandates of NCLB, teach a curriculum that promotes the *gesellschaft* values of competition and social mobility, even though the families of these students frequently place greater value on community, allegiance to place, and interrelationships—*gemeinschaft* values (Woodrum, 2004). The NCLB curriculum largely equips students for lives beyond their rural communities. Thus, these *Spanish* families are faced with a dilemma familiar to many rural youth: whether to seek economic opportunity in urban areas far from their families and homes, or, to remain at home and face the bleak prospect of a limited economic future.

Like many Appalachian families of West Virginia and eastern Kentucky who follow Route 23, the “hillbilly highway” north to jobs during the week in cities such as Cincinnati and Columbus, Ohio, only to return at weekends to their homes in the South, the *Spanish* youth often lead double lives (Woodrum, 2004). During the week they might work in Albuquerque or Santa Fe and return to their homes and extended families at weekends and holidays. As in the case of Native Americans, however, this choice, over time, can result in the loss of their native language, their ties to community, and local values. It is not at all uncommon today to find the adult children of the *Spanish* who no longer speak Spanish but who, like Irish- or Italian-Americans, continue to honor their ancestry through religious and cultural practices.

Schools and Loss of Culture

As we move ever closer to a national curriculum for American schools, rural students, especially those from cultural and linguistic minorities, run an increasing risk of being “disembedded” from their historic roots. No Child Left Behind curricular mandates and standards of accountability invoke the language of access and equity for all children. The assumption is that by standardizing the curriculum, the state can ensure the quality of education for all students. In fact, the curriculum has a differential impact on rural

students generally, but on cultural and linguistic minorities in particular. The standardized curriculum advances the values of social mobility and competition, eschewing these groups' historical allegiance to place, community, and historical identity (Woodrum, 2004).

If less direct than the assimilation curriculum of the 19th and 20th centuries, today's NCLB curriculum still promotes values that are often antithetical to the historic identity and allegiance to place for Native Americans. Native children who would be "successful" in a modern, *gesellschaft* sense, are usually forced to seek a life beyond the reservation. There, they find themselves cut off from their tribal culture yet not entirely accepted into *White* culture either.

For *Latino* families who immigrated to the US seeking economic opportunity, the school and its standardized curriculum is often perceived to be the instrument of socialization for their children, and thus the door, to the middle class. This tradeoff, while accepted as necessary, often comes at great cost to the families. Richard Rodriguez (1982), though accepting that his assimilation was inevitable, even now looks back in pain: "I remember what was so grievously lost to define what was necessarily gained" (p.6).

For the old *Spanish* families of New Mexico, schooling is often necessary for economic advancement yet resented, for, once educated, their children frequently abandon

their homes and culture. Even so, the elites of the *Spanish* communities, unlike their working-class cousins, are able to provide jobs for their educated children, in schools, business, and various levels of politics. The elites can maintain a foot in their traditional culture, even as they enjoy the economic benefits of the *anglo* world outside. This is seldom the case for the poor and working-class *Spanish*.

For working-class *Spanish*, the public school is frequently little more than an institution of the dominant *anglos*, there to change their language and discredit their values and traditions. And hence we see the deep ambivalence that the poor *Spanish* feel toward public education, mediated by what Corbett calls their "position as social actors."

Corbett (2009) invites us to question not just what schools actually do in the education of rural children, but more disturbing perhaps, whether they as institutions "can really foster anything else" (p. 2). Since the coming of common schools in the era immediately following the Civil War, the trajectory of public education, both philosophically and organizationally, has been toward an ever more normative, homogeneous institution, sported by and reflective of the values of White, middle-class America. For those rural communities and peoples of New Mexico particularly who are neither White nor middle class, the result has often forced upon them a wrenching choice between their cultural identities and economic survival.

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