

Critical Theory, Red Pedagogy, and Indigenous Knowledge: The Missing Links to Improving Education

Response 1

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“The first and foremost need in Indian education is a change in the point of view.”

—Meriam Report, 1928

“American Indian tribes and Alaska Native communities are nations at risk. Our schools have failed to nurture the intellectual development and academic performance of many Native children.”

—Indian Nations At Risk Task Force, 1991

When asked to contribute to the tenth anniversary edition of *Red Pedagogy*, I felt honored to be a part of the seminal scholarly work that has made a difference in reframing and applying theory, critical pedagogy, and critical thinking to education since it was published in 2004. I am an educator, part Cherokee, and a member of the Comanche Nation. My experience has been primarily in education systems at the school, federal, and higher education levels, including tribal colleges.

I have been a participant and observer of Indian education for a long time. One conclusion is evident: tribal nations and communities are different and any effort to address education must be based on the local context. My comments below are based in practical experience with the hope that critical theory and *Red Pedagogy* will someday make a significant difference in how American Indian¹ students are educated.

Sandy Grande clearly and emphatically states that the connection among critical theory, American Indian intellectuals, and American Indian education is needed so we can discover, renew, or further develop and apply critical thinking as a way to improve schooling for Indigenous students, and to use theory and critical pedagogy when examining why too many students continue to struggle and fail in contemporary schooling. And, to think about what is missing in the numerous past and current studies and reform efforts that attempt to improve education so “no child is left behind,” and why schools fail too many Indigenous students and deny them the fundamental right to an education. In essence, critical pedagogy leads us to ask questions like: What is the purpose of formal education in schools? Who is in control of education? What are students learning in classrooms? How has colonization impacted education? And, how do we decolonize education?²

Formal education within the enclosed walls of schools continues to be a forceful weapon used by dominant powers to create boundaries to control and mold the minds of youth and adults, to eradicate or weaken their Indigenous identity, and to assimilate them into mainstream society. Various American Indian policies (including self-determination), acts of Congress, court decisions, and approaches over time to educate American Indians has resulted, today, in the failure of the education enterprise to prepare students that are successful in life as grounded tribal citizens, knowledgeable in their Indigenous ways, and with the necessary reading, writing, math, and science skills to have a good life, to think critically, and to make changes to maintain, to revitalize, and to sustain what it means to be an American Indian person now and into the future.

I have been involved in the education of American Indians and Alaska Natives for over forty years and have experienced the frustrations, discouragement, hope, small victories, loss of hope, and anger as to why we have not been more successful in educating Indigenous students, especially at the kindergarten through twelfth-grade level. Yes, there are more students who are very successful and graduate from high schools and colleges than ever before. However, there are far too many students who struggle and are not successful. The challenge in Indian education today is similar to those of years past, mainly to decolonize Western education by taking control of schools with Indigenous traditional knowledge as the foundation for teaching and learning.

INDIAN EDUCATION STRUGGLES CONTINUE

There have been changes in the education of American Indians and Alaska Natives and the connection between education and critical pedagogy is stronger since *Red Pedagogy* was published in 2004. Self-determination re-

mains the federal policy, although in education, the results today are not what we hoped for in the 1960s and 1970s. After Indian education was declared a “national tragedy and a national challenge,”³ Indian control of education, with Rough Rock Demonstration School on Navajo as the model, was recognized as an alternative to public and Bureau of Indian Affairs education with the hope that Indian education would be improved. McKinley, Bayne, and Nimicht (1970, p. 22) expressed the importance of controlling education by stating, “if a community is to control its own destiny, it must have control of its children.” Indian control of education continues to be a strategy to improve Indian education.

Today, 125 of the 183, or 68 percent, of the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools and dormitories are Indian controlled, an increase of only 5 schools since 2004.⁴ The slow growth in the conversion of BIE-operated schools to Indian-controlled schools raises questions about whether there is real and total control, especially when the federal government controls funding and the curriculum through promoting and essentially mandating national standards. The best examples of Indian control are the tribal colleges and universities; since 2002, four tribal colleges have been established in Oklahoma.

In addition, since 2004, the number of students in BIE schools decreased from 47,909 to 41,000—with the majority of schools not meeting academic standards as measured by No Child Left Behind criteria.⁵ This represents a crisis situation for students and their communities, but also for the future of the BIE federal school system at the kindergarten to twelfth-grade level. The dwindling student numbers and the poor quality of instruction threatens the end of BIE and in the process the erosion of tribal sovereignty, the trust responsibility, and the federal responsibility in education.

Approximately 650,000 students attend public, BIE, charter, and private schools. Students attending public schools continue to increase while those in BIE-supported schools decrease. A large majority of students, around 93 percent, attend public schools while 41,000 are at BIE schools. A smaller number attend private and charter schools. An increasing number of American Indian students are attending public schools in urban areas where often they represent a small part of the student body and where there might be a number of tribes represented. The significance of this is that a vast majority of students are in public education where education is a state responsibility and sovereignty has limited, if any, authority and the voices of tribes and parents receive little consideration.

Changes in higher education include more students: the Chronicle of Higher Education⁶ reports approximately 210,160 American Indians/Alaska Natives enrolled; there are also more tribal college students. Tuition and fees have increased and there has been a strong focus on the science, technology, engineering, and math fields. Student access, retention, and graduation re-

main challenges, with retention being the major issue.⁷ The corporate or business model with its profit motive is on the rise in education where programs are expected to raise funds to sustain themselves and students are viewed as sources of revenue.

THE EDUCATION PEDAGOGY IS NOT RED

Teaching in public and BIE kindergarten to twelfth-grade schools has become more entrenched in standardization and embedded in one-size-fits-all direct instruction approaches where student test scores in reading, math, and science are accepted as the key measures of academic success; there is little flexibility to include culturally responsive pedagogy in schools. No Child Left Behind has not only narrowed the curriculum to reading, math, and science, but it has also had a negative impact on creativity and adapting education to local community needs. Common Core standards are now the rage; their implementation is likely to have the same results for Indigenous students.

The failure of schools and systems to educate American Indian students is well documented; the latest sources are the National Indian Education Studies and a recent report by The Education Trust. American Indian students continue to score lower in math and reading compared to non-Natives. Dropout rates remain high, attendance low, and parent involvement weak. The lack of strong academic programs at the kindergarten to twelfth-grade levels carries over to higher education, where many students are often not academically prepared to complete college-level work.

A major reason for this continuing tragedy and mounting crisis in Indian education is the strong resistance from the educational establishment to include critical theory in the discourse of educational reform. During my years in education, the consideration of critical theory and critical pedagogy were extremely rare in any efforts to develop strategies and programs to improve education for American Indian students. The approach usually was to take the established Western goals and strategies and "Indianize" them by adding acceptable references to Native languages and cultures.

Schools are so tightly structured and controlled that teachers, administrators, and others are consumed with immediate situations, they are in the moment reacting to demands, mandates, standards, and student academic achievement as measured by test scores. There is little time to be proactive and think critically about education.

Also, programs in mainstream colleges and universities that prepare educators are based on certification standards with little room for critical theory, critical pedagogy, and Indigenous knowledge. The purpose of education remains to assimilate Indigenous peoples into the mainstream without serious

consideration to cultural, linguistic, values, and the devastating and disrespectful treatment of Indigenous peoples since colonization.

IDENTITY AND INCREASED COMPLEXITY

The complexity of Indian education has intensified over the past ten years and will become even more complicated in the future. Education is greatly influenced by political and economic agendas, social conditions, health disparities, legal issues, changing demographics, geographic location, the rapid growth in technology, and social media. Families and communities are also influenced by these factors and students bring their life experiences into classrooms, which make teaching and learning very complex.

A major reason for this complexity has to do with the identity of American Indians, both individually and collectively, as members of tribes. As Sandy Grande notes in *Red Pedagogy* (p. 92), the preoccupation with identity politics prevents a critical discourse on oppression and power. True, but the obsession with identity will continue as American Indians grow in numbers, become tribally and racially mixed, pursue tribal membership, and seek eligibility for real or perceived benefits for tribal members. Indian identity politics will continue to be divisive, especially in the distribution of goods and services, decision-making, and with political and economic agendas.

In education, individual tribal identity is a challenge for schools, especially schools with multitribal representation in their student bodies, often found in urban areas. It is difficult for such schools to focus on a particular tribal language or culture, and what usually happens is "common" Indian values are developed and used, which is okay, but does not get at a deep specificities and meaning of Indigenous identity.

MAKING THE CONNECTION

During the past ten years, there has been some movement to connect American Indian educators and critical theorists, and between critical theory and Indigenous education, although I do not think the connection has been strong. The connection primarily comes from Indigenous scholars in academia.⁸ For example, I have noticed an increase in the use of Safety Zone Theory (Lomawaima and McCarty, 2006), Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), Indigenous methodologies (Smith, 1999), and Indigenous education (Battiste, 2013; Cajete, 1994) in academic publications and graduate student research.

Faculty in American Indian/Native American/Indigenous studies programs have taken the lead in making the connections; most embrace critical

theory and critical pedagogy in their scholarly work. The American Indian studies program at Arizona State University is a prime example. We developed an American Indian studies (AIS) paradigm⁹ that is the foundation of our academic program. The paradigm states in part:

AIS is grounded in the experiences of American Indian nations, peoples, communities, and organizations from American Indian perspectives. Its principles are rooted in the concepts of sovereignty and indigenism. It recognizes that disparate worldviews, literatures, knowledge systems, political structures, and languages characterize Indian societies within the United States but that they share commonalities that link them with other indigenous peoples of the world. It acknowledges that colonialism has impacted the sovereignty, human rights, landholdings, religious freedom, health, welfare, and cultural integrity of Indian nations . . . and focuses on the protection and strengthening of Indian sovereignty, self-determination, self-sufficiency, and human rights . . . provides a curriculum for the intellectual, ethical, and social development of students so they will acquire a comprehensive and practical understanding of U.S. Indian law and policy, colonization/decolonization, and nation building.

It is expected that our students will emerge as critical thinkers who will make differences in their communities.

That being said, there remains a noticeable disconnect between critical theory and kindergarten to twelfth-grade education in public and BIE schools. If critical theory and *Red Pedagogy* have implications for school improvement, and I think they do, then the connection needs to be made with educators in schools. Critical theorists need to work with teachers, counselors, school administrators, school boards, educator training programs at colleges and universities, and policy makers at local, tribal, state, and national levels to apply their theories, pedagogies, and methodologies to promote and implement critical pedagogy in schools.

A DAUNTING TASK

The formal education of American Indians is at a crisis level; it is not acceptable to have schools fail a large number of students and get away with it. Such failure has been a recurring theme for years with little overall improvement with the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge as part of the regular curricula of schools still sparse. There is scarce, almost nonexistent acknowledgment and critical discussion among educators about the impact of colonization and continues to have in present day Indian education. As Marie Battiste (2013, p. 186) notes, attempts “to decolonize education and actively resist colonial paradigms is a complex and daunting task.” If the overarching goal of *Red Pedagogy* is decolonization (p. 166), then the hope is that education of American Indian students can be fundamentally changed through the

integration of critical theory, critical pedagogy, and sovereignty in the efforts to improve Indian education. The connection needs to be made.

NOTES

1. “American Indian,” “Native American,” and “Indigenous” are used interchangeably for the purposes of this chapter. It is acknowledged that there are differences in meaning and use.
2. *Decolonizing Education, Nourishing the Learning Spirit* (2013) by Marie Battiste is an excellent source when responding to this question.
3. Known as the Kennedy Report, published in 1969, the U.S. Senate Special Subcommittee on Indian Education conducted an investigation into the problems of education for American Indians and titled their report, *Indian Education: A National Tragedy—A National Challenge*.
4. The number of BIE schools was obtained from the Bureau of Indian Affairs annual budget request to Congress, known as the green books, found at <http://www.bic.edu/Schools/index.htm>.
5. The larger concern is the No Child Left Behind criteria and the resulting failing schools beyond BIE schools: even wealthy suburban schools are being deemed as “failing,” which points to how unjust the criteria was, possibly revealing the actual rationale to privatize public education.
6. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* publishes an almanac of higher education annually that reports enrollment and other data. The enrollment information is taken from the August 31, 2012, edition.
7. Two recent books, *Beyond the Asterisk: Understanding Native Students in Higher Education* (2013) by Heather Shotton, Shelly Lowe, and Stephanie Waterman, and *Postsecondary Education for American Indian and Alaska Natives* (2012) by Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, Amy Fann, Angelina Castagno, and Jessica Solyom, address these issues in detail.
8. Scholars like Brian Brayboy, K. Tsianina Lomawaima, Teresa McCarty, Marie Battiste, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Maria Villegas, Gregory Cajete, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, and Tim Begaye are among the academic scholars leading the way.
9. See the article “An American Indian Studies Paradigm Statement” by James Riding In published in the Fall 2011 issue of *Wicazo Sa Review* for the full text of the AIS paradigm.