

NAVAJO PHILOSOPHY AND ITS APPLICATION IN EDUCATION

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Certain knowledge in Navajo philosophy is kept within the ceremonial circle and cannot be shared with the public (Benally, 1994; Edsel Brown, 1998, Navajo Community College). This is an important point because it alerts us that whatever information of Navajo knowledge (ceremonies) is shared with outsiders might be incomplete. It is also important for the purpose of this paper for the exact same reason. Presented information and theories might explain only a fraction of the whole. Also valuable to keep in mind are the essential differences in Western tradition of learning and the Navajo approach in learning (education). Western tradition emphasizes the division of the sacred and the profane knowledge; while in the Navajo tradition, no division exists. Life itself is sacred; therefore, knowledge, the process of learning, is sacred (Benally, 1994). Holism, as a way of life, as an expression of beauty and interconnection, recognizes that if one part falls out of place, it will affect all the other parts, and therefore the cycle itself becomes dysfunctional.

Pinxten, van Dooren, and Harvey point out, "a basic characteristic of the Navajo world view, inherent in all particular phenomena it distinguishes, is the fundamentally dynamic or active nature of the world and anything in it" (1983:15). In the Navajo universe, there is a constant movement inherent in all things. Nothing is static, every aspect of life underlies a basic concept of dynamic change. Pinxten states:

The idea is illustrated in the traditional belief of the creation of the world. After things had been placed on Earth, it is said that First Man and First Woman pulled out a feather from Bald Eagle and blew on it, saying: From now on everything is on the move. Nothing will be still, not even water, not even the rock (1983:16).

Human beings are perceived to influence this fluidity with their actions. These actions can change a movement to a certain direction. This represents an important notion because it creates the necessity of ceremonies, bringing back a certain order in the moving continuum, or change something that has been thrown out of place.

Benally describes in his reference to sources of Navajo knowledge part of the creation myth, which proves to be essential in understanding the philosophy as well, in the following:

In the beginning, the gods took dust and light that floated like a cloud and made the physical earth and organized the celestial bodies. They placed light in the four cardinal directions. They placed dawn toward the east. They placed blue twilight toward the south. They placed yellow evening twilight toward the west. And they placed darkness toward the north. They also assigned the Wind Spirits as guardians to the east, south, west, and north. When the celestial body and terrestrial body (earth) were formed, they were endowed with all conceivable things that would be beneficial to man. And when the endowment was completed, the spirits of Father Sky and Mother Earth entered these bodies and the four Wind Spirits became their breath, and Father Sky and Mother Earth both became living beings. A male deity entered the celestial body and the union of the two became the Father of the Upper

Darkness. A woman deity entered the earth body and the union of the two became Mother Earth. Mother Earth then spoke and identified the essence of her being, which she placed within the cardinal directions for the earth surface people who would come later. She did as follows:

1. Bik'ehgo da'iinaanii (**that which gives direction to life**), she placed with the dawn toward the east;
2. Nihigaal (**sustenance**), she placed with the blue twilight toward the south;
3. Alha'ana'oo'niil (**the gathering of family**), she placed with the yellow evening twilight toward the west; and
4. Haa'ayiih doo hodilzin (**rest and reverence for all creation**), she placed with the darkness toward the north (1983:23,24).

According to Benally, these are the sources of knowledge, which provide the basis for achieving *Hozhoogo Ina* (Blessing Way). The Blessing Way, or Beauty Way, represents the female part; the harmonious, peaceful, and happy way of life (Edsel Brown, 1998, Navajo Community College; Benally, 1994).

The concept of dualism is expressed in the language itself, the sacred words of *Sa'ah Naaghai* (SN), as the male concept, and *Bik'eh Hozhoon* (BH), as the female concept. The two concepts do not exist in isolation. They complement each other. Each person embodies both parts of the whole. Benally points out, "our elders have always believed that we are the literal sons and daughters of the SN/BH, the gods who created this world. We spiritually call ourselves the Holy People on the face of the earth" (Benally, 1994:24). Navajo identity, and Navajo way of life is expressed in this concept. The sacred words SNBH represents the Holy People as a whole, which are made up of male and female eternal beings. The male concept, SN, represents a negative force (not in the literal meaning of negative), the protective and aggressive side in a person; the female concept represents the positive force; and it is defined as being the director and cause of all that is good; one's nourishing side (Benally, 1994; Edsel Brown, 1998). Benally points out further:

The left side of a man's body is associated with the side that bears the shield. The right side is associated with nurturing. The right side of a woman's body is associated with the male or protective side. Her left side is associated with nourishing. On this side she carries cooking utensils to ward off hunger and disease. When a man and a woman stand side by side facing the east, both their aggressive sides are on the outside, and their nourishing sides are on the inside. Children are raised within the protective side of both male and female side. When our aggressive side is checked by our gentle nature, we find balance, harmony, and beauty in life (1994).

In order to find happiness and harmony in one's life, both parts/qualities/forces must be balanced. All life, including the universe, is governed by those forces, negative and positive (male and female) In fact, it represents the force out of which the universe is constructed; the power of creation (Benally, 1994). Prayers and ceremonies are essential to reaffirm and celebrate the notion of duality, and the descent of the Holy People.

The Blessing Way SN/BH, the life way of the Holy People, represents an emotional and physical intact life; ensuring security and economic well-being. Following the paths of the Holy People promotes harmony with the universe; and, consequently, "learning"

means to internalize the knowledge of the Holy People, the Blessing Way (ceremonies, prayers, stories, which all embrace the knowledge of how to live a life in happiness and beauty). Learning is how to become a human being, how to evolve into one's true self (Benally, 1994). Once again, the sacred and the profane distinction does not exist. Life itself is sacred, including learning as an ongoing process.

As direct descendants of the Holy People (sons and daughters), the Navajos are endowed with minds, physical bodies, and emotions. These endowments make them subjects to the natural order of the physical world (Benally, 1994). Because of these endowments, it is necessary that Navajos learn the knowledge they need in order to survive, but also in order to understand their relations to the universe. According to Benally (1994) and Edsel Brown (1998), there must be knowledge that provides for the following needs:

1. The proper development of the mind,
2. Skills that will enable survival,
3. Understanding and appreciation of positive relationships, and
4. Understanding and relating to one's home and environment.

These four areas of endowment must be met to bring about peace of mind, physical health, emotional health, and ecological awareness. If any of those areas are not met, life will be out of balance, and happiness cannot be reached (Benally, 1994). This represents a particularly important approach when it comes to the unit of the family. If a family fails to meet the child's needs, they also fail to imprint the guiding principles for obtaining and maintaining a good life, a life in happiness and beauty (Benally, 1994). This failure takes away the child's primary support system, and in essence the child is being left alone. This being left alone, the feeling of being abandoned has a tremendous influence on the child's self-perception and self-esteem; and because good grades heavily depend on a child's self-esteem, it becomes very likely that the child experiences his/her first problems. A negative cycle has started. In the mythological age, "the child of Mother Earth and Father Sky is not left by himself in a cold and hostile world" (Benally, 1994). Again, all four branches of knowledge put in place by Mother Earth (direction in life, sustenance, gathering of family, rest and reverence for all creation) are interrelated; they are not arbitrary, but are part of the whole. The absence, or lack of any of the four create an imbalance for the individual (Benally, 1994; Edsel Brown, 1998, Navajo Community College).

In Navajo pedagogy, the first knowledge, **that which gives direction in life**, represents the principle that puts one on the path of happiness. "When one is firmly grounded in spiritual teachings and traditional wisdom, that person finds strength and stability. He or she develops a consciousness and spiritual awareness providing a basis for learning and living" (Benally, 1994:26). This first knowledge is according to Benally and Edsel Brown associated with dawn, the beginning of light, awakening and growth.

The Navajo make white corn meal offering at dawn to prayerful reaffirm and recommit to the principle of Hozhoogo Ina. Those who maintain order in their lives and wait upon the gods are rewarded with wisdom, strength, and prosperity. . . . if you do none of these things, the gods will pass you by and you will be left to fend against the spirits of laziness, sleep, hunger, poverty, and disease. . . . the closer one aligns one's life with the harmonious principles of Hozhoogo Ina, the closer one's judgement becomes aligned with peace and

harmony. . . . The elders have added another dimension that grounds traditional knowledge. . . . Navajos believe that running at dawn is a spiritual act and that runners are rewarded with physical health and prosperity by the gods of the dawn. . . . As more of the people have embraced Western ways, however, it has almost stopped (Benally, 1994; Edsel Brown, 1998, Navajo Community College).

The second branch of knowledge *nihigaal*, **sustenance**, is connected with one's physical body and needs. *Atsiis baa'ahay* (taking care of one's health) stresses mental, physical, emotional, and environmental well-being (Benally, 1994). Similar to the first branch/principle of knowledge, any deviation of the teachings can create emotional, mental, and physical stress. It can also lead to environmental abuse. The Blessing Way ceremony is prescribed to help an individual to clear the spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional system (Benally, 1994). "Certain foods and herbs are known to remedy health ailments. Spring has always been the time for cleansing and invigorating the bodily system by taking medicinal herbs during a ceremonial sweat. . . . harmful substances are expelled from the body" (Benally, 1994:27).

The third area of knowledge, *Alha'ana'oo'niil*, **gathering of the Family**, is associated with the evening twilight, and meets the third area of human endowment: emotion (Benally, 1994). It is concerned about the developing, enriching, and deepening of relationships within the family, but teaches consequently about other relationships as well. "It is in the family that the individual learns to accept and express feelings" (Benally, 1994:28). Further, Benally writes:

A child must hear and feel appreciation. Mixed signals about a sense of belonging create doubt, which breeds alienation, loneliness, frustration, and anxiety. These conditions are later expressed in rebellion, defensiveness. . . . In Navajo tradition, names were not used in addressing another person. Calling someone by his or her name was a sign of disrespect. Instead of names, K'e terms were used. . . . In Navajo tradition one would say, "This is my little brother", (or sister, etc.). Subsequently, all greetings utilize kinship terms. . . (1994:28).

The *k'e*, kinship system, clearly takes care of the roles and responsibilities of each individual within the family, or kinship group. In the past, the maternal grandfather and grandmother took care of members of the family and directed them into their proper roles. For instance, vulgar language would not be allowed, and is still not tolerated. Words and thoughts are thought to be alive; they possess certain powers, and, therefore, must be used wisely (Benally, 1994).

Both, the kinship system, the family being the primary support system, and the concept of the inviolability of the individual are essential themes of living in balance and harmony. In fact, "despite close and absolutely essential familial ties, the Navajo remain a highly individualistic people" (Downs 1972:24).

Haa'ayiih doo hodilzin, **rest and reverence for all creation**, represents the fourth area of knowledge. With this knowledge comes an understanding of one's relationship to home and the environment. "Establishing an intimate relationship with nature begins with the acceptance that all creation is intelligent and beneficial in and of itself (Benally, 1994:28). Actions have to be guided by respectful intentions. Nature, and living with nature, is part of a reciprocal system. Once the reciprocal system is understood by the individual, her/she will be part of the "great universal consciousness" (Benally, 1994:28).

Father Sky and Mother Earth were blessed with untold wisdom and wealth to be used by man. For instance, the mountains were endowed with strength, wealth, teachings, and processes by which man can access their strength and resources. Nitsahakees (thinking), nahat'a (planning), iina (life) and siihasin (fulfillment and contentment) are stages of process that were placed in all creations (Benally, 1994).

All of the discussed areas of knowledge together create Hozhoogo Ina (a way of happiness). It is assumed that the individual who is thoroughly familiar with the teachings in all four branches will act and live in honorable ways (Benally, 1994).

After having given some insight into theoretical aspects of Navajo philosophy, as it is especially applicable to pedagogy, I will discuss "knowledge as a process" (according to Navajo philosophy), and the opponent perception of knowledge in Western thought, and Western pedagogy.

The most important differentiation of how learning is perceived in the Western world as opposed to the Navajo World, is again the notion of the sacred and the profane. As I have pointed out before, the Western tradition separates the two; yet, in Navajo tradition, no division is made. Therefore, all knowledge in Navajo perception is sacred. Subsequently, knowledge must be internalized, because it is perceived as being sacred (Benally, 1994). Life, as a whole, is seen as a process guided by the four principles of knowledge. Life becomes the knowledge itself because everything in life is part of the four branches of knowledge, the four stages of maturation, the four cardinal directions; "life processes are holistic and the focal point of the four great branches of knowledge," which are synthesized into the four basic life processes: thinking, planning, living, and fulfillment (Benally, 1994:29; Edsel Brown, 1998, Navajo Community College).

Considering that the process of internalizing knowledge, and the ways to reach this goal become one's life; one's identity, how and in what ways are schools fulfilling their obligation to convey this knowledge?

The re-invention of Navajo culture and Navajo identity has started out as a continuous process not too long ago. One Navajo teacher in Bloomfield, New Mexico, states, "Give us a little time to undo those 130 years. Right now, Navajo parents are just beginning to learn how to be involved with our children's education" (Lynch in Trimble, 1993). Parent involvement and bilingual programs began in the sixties, almost one hundred years since the reservation land was guaranteed (Trimble, 1993). From then until now, Navajos have decided to take the education of their children back into their own hands. "They have created impressive programs to fight what Navajo educator Gloria Emerson call the trend toward educating Dine to become 'biological Navajos' without knowing their tribal history, culture, language, or land" (Trimble, 1993).

Rock Point was the first school (former contract school and funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), where the community sought gradual control. Since then, Rock Point has added a high school and "has become a bastion for weaving Navajo culture into its curriculum" (Trimble, 1993). Classes in reading and writing, and social studies are held in both Navajo and English from kindergarten through the twelfth grade. Math classes are held in English, but do not begin before grade three. Also, English reading starts with grade two after the children have experienced their native language well enough (Stella Tsinajinnie in Trimble, 1993). But the bilingual program goes one step further. In elementary school, every child is obligated to write and illustrate a book every nine-week quarter in both, English and Navajo! This holistic approach towards a bilingual program, where all fields (besides math) are conveyed in two languages represents the attempt of a true bicultural approach. The goal of a

program at Rock Point (and there are other examples as well) lies in mastering, and becoming successful in two worlds, one's own (Navajo identity), and one's surrounding (mainstream American) culture.

There is no doubt about language being a crucial factor in understanding, whether one's own culture, or another culture. Language is an entry door; the point of departure for gaining cultural knowledge. However, as important as it is, it cannot stand alone, which means within the bilingual program must allow enough space for a curriculum that is oriented to and based upon Navajo thinking. Schools like Rock Point have received much praise for their innovative programs, but recent notions go even further, stating that current curriculums must be revised based on Navajo philosophy/value system.

Robert W. Rhodes, in one of his articles on Navajo education, criticizes the system for concentrating too much on issues of school governance, control, and funding instead of what actually goes on in Navajo classrooms (this also represents a major issue in mainstream American schools). But what goes on in Navajo classrooms? High dropout rates indicate that a system which emphasizes success in subject areas (language, arts, mathematics, science, social science, etc, and imposed by the dominate culture does not work (Rhodes, 1994). Rhodes points out further:

The curriculum for Navajo students needs to be based on Navajo thinking. The current subject matter division that are used in schools come from another culture and should not be used to focus the initial curriculum development process for Navajo students. The subjects currently used in schools have the value system of the dominate culture implicit throughout their materials and processes, . . . it would be helpful to start with a different approach (1994).

I have discussed previously that in Western thought space is divided into segments. Our Western World is structured according to types of objects, units, and atoms. The notion of "division" stands in opposition to the Navajo notion of the "fluidity and interrelatedness" of all things. An effective curriculum, however, must consider those basic notions of Navajo philosophy.

Rhodes follows up a suggestion for a new curriculum based on Navajo thinking by Jerome Bruner, proposed in 1968. Bruner had developed four major concepts for a different approach in learning (Rhodes, 1994). The first concept would be based on *same and different*; this would encourage students to observe and compare. By comparing, they can categorize objects, or groups of objects; they can find out contrasts, and learn that things might fall in more than one category. The goal of this learning approach would be the education in tolerance and flexibility. The second concept would be based on *structure and function*; each structure has a function and each function has a structure. For instance, "people's need for water in the city requires a system for providing water and for taking away waste" (Rhodes, 1994:41). *Cause and effect* builds the third concept. Everything that happens has a cause and an effect. This concept is actually universal; it is present in any world view and culture (Rhodes, 1994). The fourth concept would be based on *pattern*, "recurring elements in nature, design, and human behavior. The awareness of these patterns helps to discern order in our surroundings and develop understandings of our physical and social environment" (Rhodes, 1994:41).

Conveyed knowledge based on these concepts would meet the knowledge demands found within the philosophy; the proper development of the mind, skills that enable survival, understanding and appreciation of positive relationships, and understanding and relating to one's home and environment. The holistic view, the notion of interrelatedness, meaning that

nothing stands alone, nothing happens in isolation, could be fostered and developed with this curriculum approach. An in depth look at Navajo culture would also encourage a rethinking of the actual instruction in the classroom. For instance, relying on the extended family represents a vital part in Navajo culture; also older siblings taking care of their younger brothers or sisters. This notion could be utilized in *multi-age settings*. According to the *Navajo Traditional Stages of Child Development* (Begay & Begay, 1982), "children of ages four to six 'become self-aware', children of the ages six to eight 'begin to think and do things on their own', for learners from ten to fifteen 'one's thought begins existing', and 'individuals' from fifteen to eighteen 'begin to think for themselves' (Edsel Brown, Navajo Community College, 1998; Rhodes, 1994).

Besides the grouping of children in particular age settings based on traditional pedagogy, *cooperative learning* activities through local research represents yet another important factor in the classroom (Rhodes, 1994). And, again, a supportive factor for this particular approach comes from the culture within! Navajos have a strong cultural obligation to help others, in particular those within the family and/or clan (Rhodes, 1994). Rhodes further:

Schools can easily tap into this potential resource by allowing cooperative learning opportunities within the classroom setting and by encouraging research and assistance across generations and outside of school. Parents and family members are an invaluable source of local, tribal, and clan histories, as well as family relationships and interrelationships (1994).

Working from students strengths and multiple sources of learning are also important factors. Students can build up self-esteem by utilizing their particular strength in helping others, and become in the process encouraged to seek the help of their classmates in return. It is important that students remain individuals, they should be allowed to start on their baseline and expand from there. Progression should be individually based.

Based on the notion that life itself resembles a continuous process of learning does not start or end in school. This notion must be utilized. Learning can take place on other occasions and locations. It is of greater importance "what" students learn, and not "where," "when," or "how." Learning in Navajo culture is seen as an active process. Observing the butchering of a sheep represents a process of learning, observing family, listening to family, local, tribal stories, etc. are perfect example of learning outside the realm of a formal institution (Rhodes, 1994). Observations made outside the school setting can be helpful within the school, they can encourage discussion evolving around one's culture, which deepens one's understanding of who they are as a people and as an individual.

Last, and most important: the *holistic learning* approach! Students must know what exactly it is they are doing and why they are doing it, which is all too often absent. Students need to be allowed to make leaps and to follow their individual capacity. The main goal must be that students become motivated, practiced in goal setting, familiar with utilizing problem-solving strategies, and are able to determine and find possible resources (Rhodes, 1994).

A main goal of the system must be to prevent early drop out in order to prepare students sufficiently for the adult world. However, Navajo children face a more complicated situation than their non-Navajo peers. They must be successful within their culture and with the mainstream culture, since interaction is not limited solely to their own culture. Therefore, the complexity of education is enormous. Students educated in the Navajo

system should be able to communicate well in both languages, orally and in writing. What becomes apparent by now is the enormous complexity of bicultural education. A bilingual program, however, that is merely introducing single Navajo words or isolated phrases, is still based on mainstream culture, mainly concerned about standardized test results, is unable to familiarize students with their cultural knowledge, because intimate knowledge of the language is the prerequisite for knowing the philosophical teachings. In addition, the concept of competition instead of cooperation, in particular regarding test evaluation, is of great importance in mainstream American culture. Students educated in such a system will probably adjust better to the outside world (mainstream culture). On the other hand, those students will lack a close understanding of an important concept coming from within their own culture. Students educated bilingually, in a system based on the above discussed curriculum (based on their culture/philosophy) may or may not be successful, outside their world in mainstream American society, because competition represents a main characteristic in a capitalistic oriented culture; but the likelihood that they will display a much deeper understanding of their own culture/traditions, and the processes within, is much higher than the other way around. The omnipresent question, of course, is what can be done in order to assure a high probability of individual success and understanding in/of both worlds?

Conclusion

Navajo education has come a long way, from children being sent off to boarding schools, forbidden to speak their own language and to learn about their culture, to community schools, offering bilingual education, and teachings about their culture. In a sense, parental involvement and bilingual programs have just started, and both gradually seek more and more influence. However, those two factors cannot stand alone, if more Navajo students are to become successful in the future, in both their own culture and in mainstream American culture. The concept of bicultural education does not end with bilingual education; it must be carried much further. It must include a Navajo concept of thinking, concepts taken directly out of the Navajo philosophy, the very base of Navajo culture. I have argued earlier that a curriculum based on Navajo thinking combined with an effective bilingual program such as Rock Point will likely increase Navajos students' understanding of their own culture. It can display, however, a reasonable disadvantage in mainstream culture because of the concept of "cooperation" versus "competition." I argue, that there is a solution to this problem from within the culture itself

A curriculum geared toward bicultural education can specifically accommodate the notion of opposing life forces and the continuous quest to balance those forces (towards Hozhoogo Ina). If mainstream culture is viewed as the opposing principle that needs to be balanced, proper knowledge of the philosophy will provide devices to do so; meaning, a school system that can provide a curriculum based on Navajo thinking, a foundation (proper knowledge) for understanding one's own culture as well as the "other" culture.

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