
Pp. 213 ISBN 0807747173

Reviewed by Glenabah Martinez
University of New Mexico

January 5, 2009

*To Remain An Indian: Lessons in democracy from a century of Native American education* presents a synthesis of contemporary thought from two scholars of Indigenous education, Tsianina Lomawaima and Teresa McCarty, on the history of Indigenous education in the United States. Drawing on scholarship produced and published between 1996 and 2003, the authors skillfully and thoughtfully contextualize these works within a theoretical framework, the safety zone. The safety zone model challenges an often taken-for-granted explanation of the history of U.S. Indian policy that is depicted as a pendulum. Lomawaima and McCarty assert that a more appropriate way of reading the history of Indian education and U.S. policy is to view it as “an ongoing struggle over cultural differences and its perceived threat, or benefit, to a sense of shared American identity” (p. 6). Furthermore, they argue that “the federal...
government has not simply vacillated [italics added] between encouraging or suppressing Native languages and cultures but has in a coherent way…attempted to distinguish safe from dangerous Indigenous beliefs and practices” (p. 6). Drawing on data collected from archival sources, secondary sources, and prior research conducted by both authors, Lomawaima and McCarty achieve their stated goals.

K. Tsianina Lomawaima (Creek) is Professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Arizona. Her Ph.D. in Anthropology is from Stanford University in 1987. Her 1994 book, They Called it Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School received the 1993 North American Indian Prose Award.

The first two chapters set the sociopolitical and cultural context which frames the chronological and thematic analysis of Native education in the twentieth century. They introduce the safety zone theory in chapter one along with an overview of key terms and concepts. The discussion shifts to a different venue in chapter two by focusing on the strengths of Indigenous education. In this thoughtful discussion, the authors usurp the myths of “Indian learners” by interrogating the stereotypes that prevail in education. Chapters three, four, and five are centered on curriculum, instruction, and policy of Indian education between 1900 and 1954. The authors provide a thorough description of what Indigenous youth were learning at the schools they attended. In addition to a detailed account of textbooks, curriculum plans (Uniform Course of Study) and pedagogy, the authors provide the reader with a rich analysis vis-à-vis the safety zone theory. The reader is provided with numerous examples to support the theory.

The final three chapters focus on the movements of Indigenous People to challenge the safety zone. Drawing on prior research conducted by both authors, the reader receives an in-depth analysis of the challenges undertaken by bilingual/bicultural educators beginning in the 1960s. They posit the question, “what happened to challenge the entrenched English-only policies and practices in Indian schools?” (p. 115). This seemingly simple question sets the context for the final chapters of the book. The authors encourage the reader to critically examine how nearly five decades of exposure and resistance to miseducation administered in private, public, and government schools resulted in Native people “flexing the political skills acquired through the social and political battles waged since the turn of the century” (p. 115) during the 1960s. They examine four American Indian bilingual/bicultural initiatives based in Arizona to illustrate their points; and they provide a historical foundation for the reader to fully appreciate the next segment of
the book. A fluid transition occurs between chapters six and seven. In chapter seven, Lomawaima and McCarty report on the “drastic decline” of Native languages. They frame this important discussion with the following statement: “By the late 20th century, Native American bilingual/bicultural education programs had been in operation for more than three decades. Yet even as many of these programs were demonstrating effectiveness in improving student achievement and school-community relations, Native American languages were in drastic decline” (p. 135). In response to this observation, they proceed to examine the cases of language loss as a present-day manifestation of oppression and colonization.

At the end of this important discussion they acknowledge the potential power that Native youth possess to facilitate the revitalization and maintenance of their heritage languages. The final chapter is centered on contemporary Native education. Lomawaima and McCarty employ their “three-pronged approach (policy, practice, Native experiences)” (p. 151) encouraging the reader to critically examine both the “literal” and “metaphorical” aspects of high-stakes testing. The authors rearticulate the meaning of “high stakes” to emphasize the challenges of these tests to “cornerstones of tribal sovereignty and democracy” (p. 151). Drawing on their vast knowledge of the dialectical relationships between politics, economics, and education, Lomawaima and McCarty help the reader understand how race and intelligence testing operate in the interest of the state and the capitalist economic system of the United States. At the end of the book, the authors provide a coda which serves as a site to reflect upon the previous chapters, and to raise critical questions: “Can Native American cultural distinctiveness be maintained without the concomitant economic, political, and social marginalization of Indigenous communities? Can places of difference be maintained without denying educational, economic, political, and social rights and opportunities to their inhabitants?” (p. 169). They conclude this section with a reflection on the work of Luther Standing Bear and “take to heart” his vision that “America can be revived, rejuvenated, by recognizing a native school of thought. The Indian can save America” (p. 172).
There are two major strengths of this book. First, the reader is provided with a theoretical framework – the safety zone theory – which facilitates an analytical view of the history of American Indian education. History is frequently presented as a chronology of events that are not problematized or interrogated beyond their immediate effects, resulting at times in a disjointed understanding of history. The safety zone theory urges the reader to rethink the history of American Indian education from what one previously may have characterized as “simply vacillating through ‘swings of a pendulum’ between tolerance and intolerance” (p. xxii) to a history of federal Indian policy that is “a sociocultural (and therefore ideological) process in which federal authorities appropriate policy to serve particular interests and goals” (p. xxiii).

A second strength of this book lies in the voluminous selection of sources to support each chapter. Lomawaima and McCarty are meticulous in their quest to locate primary and secondary documents including photographs, curriculum, newspapers, and periodicals. In addition, the authors draw on rich qualitative data collected from studies conducted earlier in their careers. Abundant qualitative data, the product of long-term working and personal relationships with Indigenous Peoples in the Southwest, enrich this study considerably. Students who read this book for my classes comment positively on the sources in developing their knowledge of and skills in primary document analysis. In addition, students who are classroom teachers and administrators comment on the utility of Lomawaima and McCarty’s work in professional development at their schools in Indigenous communities throughout New Mexico and Arizona.

As stated earlier in this review, Lomawaima and McCarty, conclude the book with a reference to Luther Standing Bear. While I understand why his work is pivotal in framing their final thoughts, reference to an influential Indigenous voice from the Southwest who had similar experiences to Standing Bear might be more powerful. As I did a quick survey of possible candidates for this role, I asked myself: Would an Indigenous man or woman from the Southwest – specifically New Mexico and Arizona – ask the question, “Why not a school of Indian thought, built on the Indian pattern and conducted by Indian instructors?” (p. 170). Furthermore, would this individual contend that “[t]he Indian can save America”? (p. 172). In
answer to the first question, Indigenous People like those of my home community at Taos Pueblo have continued to educate our youth in our traditional cultural ways and beliefs. This form of education is not confined to youth, but is life long. The core knowledge and skills are “built on the Indian [Taos] pattern” and our teachers are our elders. The classrooms are our ceremonial sites within the walls of the village and in our mountains that surround our community. In response to the second part of the Standing Bear quote – “the Indian can save America” – what would be the motivation for saving the ideological space that America represents to a people like the Taos People who were violently attacked in 1847 and who suffered from assaults on our culture and beliefs throughout the U.S. period of colonial occupation? Again, I understand why Lomawaima and McCarty selected the passage, but I question whether this is relevant for those of us who are descendants of contemporaries of Standing Bear who ensured the preservation of our “schools of Indian thought” in the face of challenges throughout the twentieth century. This criticism is minor in light of what Lomawaima and McCarty offer in this book. Their analysis of the history of American Indian education offers Indigenous Peoples a theoretical framework for rethinking the past and for critically examining the present.

About the Reviewer

Glenabah Martinez (Taos/Diné), PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies at the University of New Mexico. She was a high school social studies teacher for over twelve years before her appointment to the LLSS faculty at UNM. Her research focuses on issues directly related to the schooling experiences of Indigenous youth and the politics of social studies knowledge. Her book, Native Pride: The politics of curriculum and instruction in an urban, public high school is scheduled for release by Hampton Press.

Editors
Gene V Glass
Gustavo Fischman
Melissa Cast-Brede