**Native American Bilingual Education: An Ethnography of Powerful Forces**

Written by Cheryl Crawley, PhD

Reviewed by Art Stellar, PhD

This book, as an ethnography, comes straight from the author’s perspective of her eight years working and observing the Crow Tribe in Montana. It also covers a thirty-year period when education in the United States was undergoing a critical time of trying to understand how to best approach teaching members of the Crow Tribe within the context of the dominant society, as well as address the matter of race in America. The political and social dilemmas at large make the prospects of educating American Indians even more complex.

The author, Cheryl Crawley, is a third generation Montanan with sensitivity to this sub-population. She has worked on and off the Crow Indian Reservation of Montana. From 1978 to 1986 she worked directly with the indigenous population during this study. She spent a year at the University of California at Berkeley doing graduate work for her doctorate. Afterwards she entered the field of school administration as director of student services for the Salem Oregon Public Schools. She later assumed the role of superintendent of schools for two other Oregon school districts.

At the time this study was completed, Crawley had served in school administration for forty years. She has also made a name for herself as a leadership coach, speaker, and facilitator of change. There is an autobiographical element herein, although the author keeps her ego out of the main story.

Crawley is unafraid of exposing the realities of life for the Crow Indians and for the white educators who worked with them. There were prejudices on both sides with political skirmishes from time to time. The history of the Crow Tribe was especially difficult for many young white teachers and administrators to comprehend and appreciate. Some were blind to the atrocities inflicted upon the native Americans while others wore cloaks of missionaries. Most entered with a sense of striving for and contributing to student success. In any case the turnover of staff was very high as conditions were bleak with minimum budgets and overwhelming poverty.

The Crow leaders have been dismayed with the steady loss of the Crow language, land holdings, and culture. They taught children to speak Crow in their family setting and community events, while also desiring children to learn English for employment and participate in legal endeavors, including voting. They recognize that the Tribe has lost power and land to the white people, partially because of lack of understanding of English. The Crow leadership has facilitated hiring their
own attorneys and encouraged young men to pursue legal and other professional degrees. There has been progress; however, it has not been easy. Crow students who attend college are often criticized by their peers who stay on the reservation and by those at the college who do not relate to Crow customs.

Policymakers in Washington, D.C. and elsewhere have not adequately attended to the societal issues within the Crow communities. Consequently, there have been numerous legal conflicts over water rights, fish and game, mineral rights, and sovereignty. There has also been cultural miscommunication. The pace of change has been extremely slow as the native American has not been a priority for non-native politicians.

The author cites the fear outsiders have of the reservation and the people who live there. She was often advised to be careful and not to venture onto the reservation without an escort, yet she found no concern for her own personal safety.

From an educational perspective the author delves into specifics of teaching and learning. Student attendance in school is a critical element everywhere; however, the Crow families believe that family needs come before school. She cites problems with communicating an “excused absence” and how to request such a labeling for an absence. This has become more of a concern as Montana has enacted new attendance laws.

The author suggests that although state and Federal policymakers aim efforts at children, focusing on parents would be more productive. Targeting elders can be even more essential with changing the behaviors of Crow children. Crow elders define educational success—a concept that is not appreciated by “outsiders.”

Mastery of the English language is key to development of students across the U.S. Studies reveal that 85% of Crow adults still speak Crow, which is more of a spoken language than English. There are significant technicalities with converting English to Crow and vice versa. This affects phonics, vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension. Math is even more of a barrier as there are no words in the Crow language for “add, subtract, multiply and divide” not to mention other higher order mathematical concepts.

The author is attuned to the challenges of going back and forth between the English and Crow languages, yet dual language is the preferred approach. While there has been funding available for learning English along with Crow, few programs have been very successful. Yet surveys of Crow families demonstrate that 82% want their children to be able speak fluent English.

However, “After a decade of bilingual education in reservation schools, only 50% of parents believed that bilingual education was a good approach … while Bilingual program staff sincerely believed they were providing these parents with the alternative they themselves, as well as the parents desire” (p. 160).

It gets worse: “Only 51% of parents believed their children liked school. And worst, only 15% of parents believed school staff understood and responded in a positive manner to the cultural and language differences of Crow students” (p. 160). The author describes the dichotomy of “Speak English” pushed by non-Indians and “Talk Indian” promoted by the Crow to convey to children that they belong to a tribe. The implications become central to trust between the two cultures. Anecdotes about the
difficulties of maintaining the Crow language clarify the weight of the burden upon Crow families. There are few dramatic historical occurrences involving the Crow Indians that are significant to the white population. While Custer’s Last Stand happened on Crow land, it was not a Crow fight. Thus, the future seems to point to a continuance of the deterioration of the Crow language and the low performance of Crow students in an English dominated society. The author’s hope lies in her belief that “talk Crow’ combined with “speak English” when necessary, will remain.

This reviewer regrets that this book was not yet written when he served as superintendent for the Oklahoma City Public Schools in Oklahoma with meaningful numbers of indigenous students. *Native American Bilingual Education* would have given our community a better perspective on this topic.

**Reviewer Biography**

Art Stellar has served as a superintendent for 25 years in diverse communities. He may be most known for improving educational excellence for all students and for reducing equity gaps. He has demonstrated that leadership is more important than high funding levels as he works with others to maximize available resources, while securing outside money. His new consulting company is StellarAdvantage.com. E-mail: artstellar@yahoo.com

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