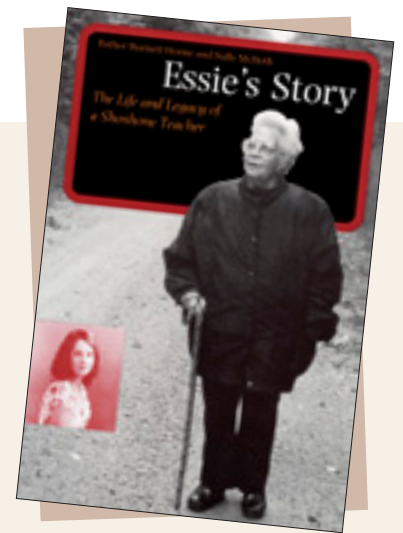


# “Essie’s Story”

## Insightful Words from an Old Teacher to Teachers Today

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It is said that, “teachers teach more by what they are than by what they say.” In the American educational system it can be argued that teachers do not have as strong an impact on students because of this focus on results and standards rather than growth. Esther Burnett Horne, a Shoshone teacher recounts in her autobiography *Essie’s Story* the role of teachers in making or breaking a child’s success. Faced with struggles of immersion and adaptation to American culture from her Native American roots, she sees such measures from many angles: being a student, a mother, a friend and a teacher. Not only is her story one of family ties and adaptation, but of being an understanding role model for future generations. She immersed her students from different backgrounds into the classroom without a concomitant loss of their own identity by incorporating activities, changing the traditional standards, and challenging students to be unique and responsible.



Horne, Esther Burnett and McBeth, Sally (Ed.) (1998) *Essie's Story*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press  
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With so much emphasis on standardized testing and tracking students into honors or “average” classrooms, Esther Burnett Horne’s philosophy on activities and community participation in the classroom is insightful. As a teenager, she attended Haskell Boarding School for American Indian children, and remarked on the activities there. Since the school had to supply all of its own resources, the children were in charge of “keeping the school running. We had dairy cattle, to supply the school with

milk; some pigs and cows for fresh meat, an apple orchard, gardens with tomatoes, corn watermelon, and other vegetables... I guess I think of our details as a source for broadening our horizons” (p. 35). Granted most schools are not self-sustaining like this anymore, and children don’t have adult roles such as food preparation or farming, but Burnett understood that it was good for the children to participate in extracurricular activities. She remarks, “The skills I learned outside of the classroom from my teachers

have been beneficial to me all throughout my life” (p. 36). Horne furthered this belief in her own teaching career. She took students outside of class into the forest where they would partake in tribal dancing where “the dances took place around a large fire. The lead dancer chanted and the rest of the dancers, male and female, answered” (p. 57). Not only was this a fun and interesting change of pace, but also it opened eyes of acceptance to something new and different. Horne remarked on the

activity, “we learned each others culture, and developed a healthy respect for each other’s vision” (p. 57). She admitted that if her superiors had known she would have been fired, but that “I taught my students to have a pride in themselves as individuals and a respect for their heritage” (p. 58). While her choices in curriculum may have been unorthodox and even scandalous at the time, Horne sends a strong message of acceptance for students’ backgrounds and integrating them into the classroom.

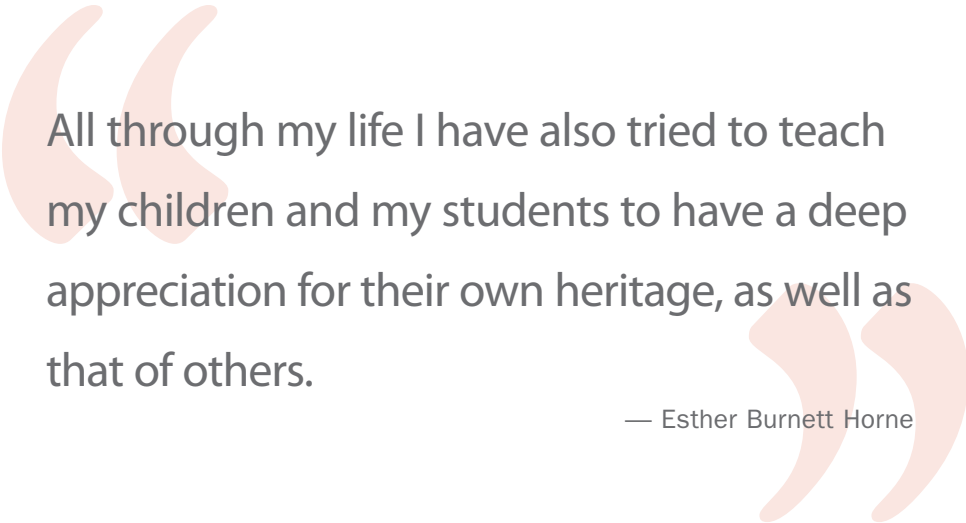
While Esther Burnett Horne’s belief that activities are great for learning is important, so was her philosophy on incorporating language and traditions. Starting when she was a child, Horne loved to read and write, and did so quite often. She remarked on loving many different contemporary and past authors and said, “My dad opened up many literary horizons. He wanted us to have a well rounded education, and to him this included an appreciation for our Indian and non-Indian heritages.” She continues, “All through my life I have also tried to teach my children and my students to have a deep appreciation for their own heritage, as well as that of others” (p. 21). Not only were books and written language important, but so too was oral communication. Horne remembers at boarding school that there was a “‘language’ common to Haskell, the usage of which made us feel like we were a bonded part of the group” (p. 32). This mixture of many tribes’ tongues that all students partook in made a bonding experience where the students would “discuss and learn about one another’s traditions” (p. 32). For teachers, I think this is incredibly important. Granted we have bilingual multicultural education classes, but for the most part, we only portray the dominant white culture and English language in teacher education courses. Horne’s belief that all languages and cultures should be in the classroom is very different from mainstream education. She believed that having only one language was undermining students’ capacities; they are fully able to intake more knowledge of culture, language, and appreciation. Another method of acquiring this was her peer tutoring system. “Those who were bilingual, came to the aid of those who knew no English at all, they translated the children’s

needs to me and encouraged them to be proficient in many languages” (p. 56). This is an admirable system because students do respond well to one another in peer groups, and Horne did not subjugate one language over another, but let them both have a special role in the classroom. This tie to the students’ cultural and linguistic heritages through communication made Horne and her students closer and sets a great standard for future teachers.

One of Horne’s greatest legacies as an educator was that she challenged students to be individuals, and also responsible. As a child Horne recalls that values were a big part of her life, “the way we were disciplined was through touch and firm but gentle words” (p. 25). Like her home life, Esther made a point of setting boundaries

pose them as singular forces: “The five values I focused on were bravery, generosity, respect for elders, individual freedom, and respect for the environment” (p. 130). She did not just have learning take place, but gave it application to the real world. Indeed this mixture of cultures and values was different from traditional education, but it promoted a sense of awareness and appreciation.

Esther Burnett Horne could very much be considered a role model teacher for her strides towards cooperative learning, and acceptance of others. She lived during a time when students were too often mainstreamed into “white culture” and asked to forget their native roots, and she managed to reject both notions, while remaining a respected teacher. She accomplished this



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— Esther Burnett Horne

and rules, but always using encouragement and guidance. She wanted her students not only to embrace their cultures, but to live in such a way that others would embrace them as well. “The responsibility to community is part of the Indian way,” so she wanted her students to be the best they could (p. 34). She had an integrative method of education: “rather than separating reading, writing, arithmetic, art and science into different disciplines, she had all the concepts integrated” (p. 76). This meant that students saw how each affected one another, and the implications of changing certain elements. Much like real life, Horne challenged her students to see the weight of their decisions rather than

through many ways, but her incorporation of cultural activities both in school and community, as well as use of many languages for added learning, and challenge to students made her a memorable role model. She practiced what she preached and made decisions that did not necessarily coincide with her superiors, but which were always in the best interest of her students. She not only spoke through her words, but in her actions. ★

#### Note:

All page numbers refer to Esther Burnett Horne and Sally McBeth. (1998). *Essie’s Story: The Life and Legacy of a Shoshone Teacher*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.