

THE BILINGUAL RESEARCH JOURNAL  
Winter 1995, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 169-178

STRATEGIES FOR ENABLING BILINGUAL  
PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT IN AMERICAN INDIAN  
SCHOOLS

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**Abstract**

Using comparative data from two Navajo community-school contexts, this article details the conditions within these and similar contexts that enable schools to authentically use and validate the local language. In particular, the article addresses concerns about the schools' role in reversing indigenous language loss and a shift toward English monolingualism. Six social engineering strategies are presented as a means to build dual-language programs, and more importantly, as a means to connect with parents and families so that American Indian children grow up with the personal, social and cultural benefits of full proficiency in the native language.

**Introduction**

My purpose in this article is to describe some of the complexities of bilingual program development in a public school district within the Navajo Nation and to point out consequent social engineering strategies that help dual-language programs grow. In

one sense, I am writing for a narrow audience: Navajo (and other American Indian) educators who are struggling to develop linguistically and culturally appropriate instructional programs in school environments that have historically been hostile to such efforts. In another sense, however, the audience for this discussion includes bilingual educators in *any* public school context where implicit and explicit opposition to dual-language instruction as a vehicle for shaping students' confident cultural identities is at issue.

In this particular Navajo setting, the language of the home is both English and Navajo, but the children overwhelmingly enter school as dominant speakers of English. In this sense, language shift from Navajo to English locally, as it is across the Navajo Nation, is in full swing. Until recently, the language of the home and the community was mainly Navajo; children entered school as dominant speakers of their ancestral language, and the district promoted and taught only English.

In recent years, however, this situation has changed dramatically. The language of the home and community is no longer Navajo but English. Fewer and fewer children come to school speaking Navajo. Despite the shift from Navajo to English, growing numbers of parents, teachers, administrators, and school board members have realized the resultant threat of Navajo language loss locally, as have others across the Navajo Nation as a whole, and asked, "Can't the schools teach English *and* Navajo? Won't instruction in Navajo help the children better understand themselves, and also help stabilize the Navajo language?"

In telling a story about answers to these questions, I do not wish to be dogmatic, nor do I wish to portray heroes and villains. The point that I want to emphasize is that multiply complex kinds of social engineering are needed inside and outside of schools to permit the acceptance of oral and written vernacular language and hence to provide foundations for developing successful dual-language programs, particularly in school contexts where bilingual education is a relatively new, untried, and thus potentially dangerous phenomenon.

**"We're Gonna Teach English-Dominant Children to Read and Write *in Navajo*?"**

The school district within the Navajo Nation that I refer to serves a large geographic area—nearly 3,000 square miles—and comprises four schools with some 2,900 students, nearly all of whom are Navajo. I worked there as an administrator of federal programs for two years from 1992-1994. In 1991, the district had won funding for a Title VII transitional bilingual program at the primary level; one year hence, it began meeting the state of Arizona's so-called "foreign language mandate" by offering oral Navajo on a limited basis in kindergarten and by adding one grade level in successive years. Navajo was offered in several third grade classrooms; it also was offered on an elective basis in the middle and high schools. Beyond these efforts, however, there had been no work to develop a maintenance Navajo-English program, and no thought whatsoever about a language revitalization program—until 1992.

Parallel to the evolution of thought about Navajo language instruction, district administrative personnel had been thinking about district restructuring. Since Fall 1992, district administrators had examined Outcomes Based Education as a vehicle for change at multiple levels: district, school, and classroom. Following preparatory analysis at occasional workshops, in 1993-1994, the district administration proceeded with outcomes planning in earnest. Inevitably, the two processes—language program planning and thinking about outcomes—wove together. It was difficult to say which process was driving which. The idea for *this* discussion is that the two processes were co-joined and mutually shaped by each other's categories and logic.

All of which is background for overhearing an exchange that took place between principals and program administrators. Along with other district personnel, I presented a plan for the development of Navajo immersion bilingual instruction starting in kindergarten, and adding one grade per year until the program served children in

grades K-5. The purpose of the program would be to help English-dominant Navajos learn to speak, read, and write their parents' and grandparents' language. On an optional basis, parents who wanted their English-dominant children to learn Navajo—there were many, as extensive parent survey data showed—would elect to enroll them in one of two sheltered immersion classes where they would be immersed in oral Navajo and learn to read and write in Navajo. English literacy instruction would be held off until a foundation had developed in Navajo language skills, well into the second grade.

I held my breath.

"We're going to teach English-dominant children to read and write *in Navajo*? Isn't that what we've been doing for a hundred years—teaching the kids literacy in a language that they don't know—the sink or swim model—only now *in reverse*?" said one principal.

Another said, "The teachers who will teach in this program aren't ready for it. They are having enough difficulty with the logic from Navajo to English in the transitional program. This immersion design will be too much."

A third added, "Parents won't buy it. They may think it's cute in kindergarten or first grade, but after that, no way will they stay with it. Three-four years from now, no one will be in the program!"

From these exchanges, I was left not only to ponder the next tactical move in developing Navajo bilingual programming, but also more strategically and fundamentally, I was reminded of what I have known all along; more critical than the development of the program itself is the nurturing of social, cultural, and political conditions that will support sociolinguistic and school change.

### **Lessons Learned**

I need to explain where I am coming from. I have taught within and administered school programs for seventeen years in

Navajo settings. Formative experiences for me took place at Rock Point Community School, arguably one of the most effective maintenance bilingual programs on the Navajo Reservation over the past quarter century (Holm & Holm, 1990, and this volume; of. Rosier & Holm, 1980). Which is why it is important to look at and learn from the Rock Point experience. Above all, we can learn that the implementation of the program—started in 1968—was not nearly so crucial to the program's success as was the engineering of social conditions that allowed for the program's embrace by members of the local community. These social engineering efforts were at least six-fold.

*First, wresting power from outside authorities to develop local standards that underpin program design and effectiveness was essential, including the means to implement a comprehensive program of maintenance bilingual instruction, hire all staff on a year-to-year basis, and set standards for hiring local, community-based Navajos (often uncredentialed and non-certified) who would not only staff and administer the bilingual program but also remain working at the school.* What the Rock Point board, administration, teachers, and community did was figure what they wanted their graduates to be able to do—that is, think, speak, read, and write with equal facility in English and in Navajo—and design program outcomes at each grade level accordingly. In effect, the program was a model of Outcomes Based Education one generation before the idea became fashionable, with specific objectives and locally developed criterion-referenced tests that drove mastery-type instruction in both languages at each grade level. But to do this, the board had to wrestle decision-making powers from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which it was able to do as a function of the Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975—always problematically so, with many double-binds, but with enough political autonomy such that the program was initiated in the late 1960s and indeed continues today.

*A second condition concerned the equalization of salaries and prestige among teacher-aides and teachers.* When the bilingual

program was initiated, the distinction between "certified" and "classified" staff was abolished. The hierarchy between credentialed, Anglo, English-speaking teachers (and their instructional content and language of instruction) on the one hand, and non-credentialed, Navajo, and Navajo-speaking teachers (and their instructional content and language of instruction) on the other, was thus leveled. In time, the category of "teacher-aide" was erased from Rock Point's organizational lexicon.

*A third condition was that administrative salaries were lowered, again, to mitigate against class hierarchy that inevitably tilts power, status, and prestige away from Navajo toward English.* When I was hired at the school as one of two elementary principals in the mid-1980s, I made less money than many veteran teachers. My salary was approximately two-thirds what principals were earning in comparable nearby settings. This leveling had several effects. It helped cut down on administrative carpet-bagging. It also spread more money around to maintain very low student-teacher ratios; that ratio during my tenure was approximately nine to one. At most Navajo districts, as is true in most schools these days, the student-teacher ratio is two to four times this number. Most importantly, the leveling tended to reduce social hierarchy, as did the elimination of "teacher aides," both within the organization and in its dealings with the community. This tended to eliminate an important source of resistance to Navajo language programming, in that any edifice of power and prestige, given the macro-sociolinguistics of English and Navajo, inevitably creates situations where the two languages must compete. And in these situations, Navajo, because it has not been the language of hierarchy, jobs, bureaucracy, and financial gain, has tended to lose battles of power and prestige.

*A fourth condition concerned framing and hiring local Navajos—to reduce debilitatingly high teacher turnover rates and to make cultural compatibility a structural feature of classroom life.* When the bilingual effort began at Rock Point, there were no training programs for teaching in Navajo, nor was there a pool of

trained individuals to draw from. Local people and talent were all that could be relied upon. On-site college classes were offered, and non-credentialed Staff were required to make continual progress toward certification. By the late 1980s, approximately 85 percent of all instructional staff were Navajos; more than 60 individuals had gained teaching certificates while working at Rock Point; and increasingly, new teachers came from the ranks of recent bilingual-biliterate graduates of the program itself. Most significantly, the training all along was Rock Point-centered. It did not represent the importation of theories, orientations, and skills foreign to the purposes of the program, the curriculum and materials in use, or the program participants; rather, it tended to map and build onto these starting places and possibilities.

*Fifth, parallel programs were developed that brought so-called "uneducated" parents, grandparents, and other community members into the school to show them that the bilingual program was theirs and that local language and knowledge indeed could be and was being taught effectively in the classroom.* Instruction in Navajo clanship began; grandparents were brought in as culture instructors; an annual Navajo song-and-dance festival was initiated; Navajo arts and crafts classes were offered; adult education classes were developed; and parents learned to read and write Navajo. All of these efforts scaffolded the development and the community's acceptance of the Navajo language program.

*Finally, a host of new genres and functions for oral and written Navajo were developed.* In time, these became surrounded and supported by ideologies of self-determination, self-awareness, and a kind of empowerment, that I have chronicled extensively, that made logical the development of still new purposes for oral and written Navajo—lists, letters, notes, diaries, songbooks, and ceremonial journals that are unconnected to the school (McLaughlin, 1989 and 1992). All of this has been noteworthy in light of previous descriptions of the non-acceptance of written Navajo outside of school and church domains (Spolsky & Irvine, 1982).

All of these thoughts have woven across my understanding of what it will take in schools to develop a meaningful maintenance, and revitalization, Navajo language program. I realize that the task is large. While there may be considerable support for such programs, there also will be considerable resistance, particularly in contemporary reservation communities that have been shaped by the development of a wage economy and sizable middle class—with all of the opportunities, material wealth, shifting attitudes about Navajo language and culture, and trappings that this implies. In such circumstances, more significant than creating a new language program is socially engineering conditions that will allow for the legitimation of oral and written Navajo not only at school but also in the home. These conditions include the following:

*First, clarifying purposes for teaching the oral and written vernacular—not for cognitive or sociolinguistic reasons (that is, teaching the child concepts in his or her first and strongest language, or reversing native language shift), but for cultural identity purposes (that is, we can help kids develop positive cultural identities through native language and literacy).*

*Second, a long-term commitment to developing and hiring local individuals is essential.* Bringing quality community-centered training to native teachers and teacher-aides concerned with teaching native language and literacy is very important.

*Third, there must be a long-term commitment to undoing the status-and-prestige hierarchy of oral and written English (and all of the culture, organizational-within-schools and otherwise, that goes with it). Plus, there must be a long-term commitment to dialogue with community about developing parallel instructional and extra-curriculum school programs that support Navajo language in the schools, including family-centered efforts.*

At a minimum, this is the ground-work that successful bilingual programming in reservation communities entails.



### **School Bilingual Programs for Reversing Language Shift**

This brings me to Joshua Fishman's admonition that we cannot save" the Navajo language by teaching it more, or even more effectively, in schools. Reversing Navajo language shift must happen in Navajo homes as a function of the transmission of Navajo language, and beliefs in support of its use, from grandparents to parents to children (Fishman, 1991). I realize this both professionally and at gut level. For those of us concerned with the shift, with what Dell Hymes (1980: 152) has called, working to create more space within the hive," this means that we must constantly attend to how our programs effect the transmission of language and culture *within the family*.

At the same time, those of us in schools cannot stand by idly watching the profoundly negative effects of language shift on our students. We can and must offer Navajo language choices for parents who are interested in Navajo for their children. To do this, what we must do is figure out locally how we can utilize school resources to make meaningful, lasting connections to the communities that we serve, and to utilize oral and written Navajo to facilitate the development of local knowledge, language, and resources in this process. This is no easy task. It demands nothing less than acute understandings of local religion, history, politics, sociology, and anthropology so that the right social engineering decisions might be made in the right ways.

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