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STRATEGIES FOR ENABLING BILINGUAL  
PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT IN AMERICAN INDIAN  
SCHOOLS

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**Abstract**

Using comparative data fr a5lege





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

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-yet Poitau sj Ted NaoGding hj,tirD 0.011vm 14t . Fkhff on a 1968-was not*

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.*



### **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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