

**“He Said It All in Navajo!”:
Indigenous Language Immersion
in Early Childhood Classrooms**

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This paper describes the historical and social foundations of the Navajo Headstart Immersion program. The researchers have worked as teachers, teacher educators, and parents in these programs. They reflect on the need for new partnerships among tribes, tribal colleges and universities to prepare teachers and to develop curriculum materials for Indigenous language immersion programs.

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One day a parent came to the center and said, “Thank you for teaching my child Navajo. Yesterday my son wanted to feed the dogs some food that he didn’t eat. He was actually calling to the dogs and telling them to come over and eat. He said it all in Navajo!” The mother said that she was so amazed and almost started to cry. She was caught off guard and could not believe that he was making sentences. When she asked her son what it was that he said to the dogs, he replied with a smile, ‘I called the dogs to eat.’ As a teacher I was proud to learn that the children were learning the Navajo language. I knew that the full immersion program was effective.

-Caroline Wagner (teacher)

Introduction

This paper describes the historical and social foundations of the Navajo Headstart Immersion program and the success of the program from 1995-2000. The authors have worked as teachers, teacher educators, and parents in these programs. They reflect on the need for new partnerships among tribes, tribal colleges, and

universities to prepare teachers and to develop curriculum materials for Indigenous language immersion programs.

The history of formal education for the Indigenous peoples of the Americas as well as the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific—New Zealand, Australia, and Hawaii—parallels the history of the formal education of the Navajo people. In New Zealand, the Native Schools Act of 1887 made English part of all government schools (Ovando, 1996). In Hawaii, the Hawaiian language was banned in public and private schools between 1886 and 1986 (Kamana & Wilson, 1997). In Canada, the Indian Education Act of 1876 began a policy of forced assimilation and separation from their families for Canadian children who were speakers of aboriginal languages (Burnaby, 1996). In the United States, in 1868, the Indian Peace commission ordered, “Schools should be established, which children should be required to attend; their barbarous dialect should be blotted out and the English language substituted” (Indian Peace Commission, 1868). In each setting, efforts to revitalize the Indigenous language come from an understanding of the history of formal education in colonial times as well as an understanding of efforts by teachers, parents, and community members to gain autonomy in the education of their children. This history has not been included in traditional teacher preparation programs. Teachers in early childhood settings need information about successful program models, teaching strategies, and materials. They need to discuss the funds of knowledge in their communities that motivate parents to transmit their language and culture to their children, and they need to establish settings in the community where children are immersed in their home language.

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights guarantees parents the “right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children” (United Nations, 1992). The rights of Indigenous peoples are further guaranteed by the 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic Religious and Linguistic Minorities which guarantees that “states shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and ethnic identity of minorities within their respective territories and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity” (United Nations, 1992).

In New Zealand, in the 1980s, the effort to reverse language shift began in the early childhood setting with the institution of the *kohanga reo* (literally means “language nests”). Today 14% of the Maori population speak the Maori language well or very well (King, 2008). In 1983 Hawaiian educators founded the Punana Leo preschools which provided full-day 11-month schools with a model of full immersion in the Hawaiian language (Kamana & Wilson, 1996). In the Canadian community of Cold Lake, Alberta, projects to reverse language shift include an immersion day care and the Canadian Head Start program (Blair, Rice, Wood, & Janvier, 2000).

We recognize that these teachers work within the borders of state and federal language policies that have defined their students’ learning opportunities. These borders have existed for the Navajo people since the introduction of formal education with the signing of the treaty of 1868. For teachers of Navajo language and culture today, these borders take the form of current legislation to impose standards-based

curriculum on schools and to limit the language of instruction for English Learners.

History of Navajo Schooling

In 1819 the U.S. Congress established a “civilization fund” to introduce the “habits and arts of civilization” among the Indians (Prucha, 1975, p. 33) This policy led to the foundation of the manual labor boarding school in 1834 at the Choctaw Academy in Kentucky, where half the day was spent in academic instruction and half the day was spent in vocational instruction, as well as the first reservation boarding school at Fort Simcoe, Washington Territory. By 1848, 16 manual labor schools were in operation and seven were under construction. The Carlisle Indian Industrial School was founded in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, by Captain Richard Henry Pratt who ordered teachers to speak only in English. Pratt’s goal of assimilation did not end with the loss of the students’ native language. He ordered students to cut their hair, dressed them in military-style uniforms, and ordered them to select a new name from a list written on the chalkboard. Students marched in military companies from the dormitory to the classroom and marched to work and to meals. On Saturday evenings Pratt lectured the students at English-speaking meetings.

This assimilationist model of the industrial boarding school would serve as a model for schools on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. In 1863 Navajo men, women, and children had been forced to march over 400 miles from their homeland to a reservation at Ft. Sumner in the Bosque Redondo on the Pecos River in southeastern New Mexico. General Carleton ordered the construction of classrooms for 800 Navajo children on the premise, claiming, “The education of these children is the fundamental idea on which we must rest all hopes of making the Navajo a civilized and a Christian people” (Carleton as cited in Woerner, 1941, p. 15). In 1868 the Navajos signed a treaty with the federal government which allowed them to return from Ft. Sumner to parts of their former territory in New Mexico and Arizona. The treaty of 1868 described the purpose of education:

In order to insure the civilization of the Indians entering into this treaty, the necessity of education is admitted, especially of such of them as may be settled on said agricultural parts of this reservation, and they therefore pledge themselves to compel their children, male and female, between the ages of six and sixteen years to attend school. (US Congress, 1868, cited in Terrell, 1970, p. 222)

In 1869, President Ulysses S. Grant, in a shift from a policy of war with the Indians to a policy of peace, appointed a board of Indian Commissioners to supervise the appointment of Indian agents, teachers, and farmers (Reyhner & Eder 2004). The board, which answered directly to the war department, divided Indian agencies among 13 different religious groups, The Navajo tribe was assigned to the Presbyterian board of missions.

In the 1930s, changing attitudes towards the role of the Navajo language in the classroom led to the publication of the first Navajo language readers. The 1928 Meriam report recommended the adoption of reading materials that "...have some relation to Indian interests, not merely Indian legends...but actual stories of modern Indian experiences" (Meriam, 1928, p. 372). John Collier was appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1933. His policy reform efforts led to the use of native language literacy for reading instruction in the classroom. Collier appointed Willard Beatty, president of the Progressive Education Association, to serve as director of Indian education. Beatty established programs in bilingual education, adult basic education, Indian teacher training and in-service education (US Congress 1969). Beatty wrote, "It is desired that the Indians be bilingual, fluent and literate in the English language and fluent in their vital, beautiful and effective native languages" (*Indians at Work*, 1935, p. 35-36). From 1933-1945, bilingual books, textbooks, dictionaries, and films were developed, including a series of Navajo primers and bilingual folk tales including *Who Wants to be a Prairie Dog*, and the *Little Herder Series*. A monthly news magazine *Adahooniligii (Events)* was printed with a partial English translation. The magazine was printed on a single sheet of newsprint and posted in trading posts and chapter houses.

The history of Navajo education reflects changes in federal policy toward the Navajo language. Title VII of the ESEA Act of 1965 brought the first funding for bilingual education for economically disadvantaged Indian students in public schools. In 1966 funds were provided for students in federal schools. This legislation was important in the development of Navajo literacy as it provided financial resources to implement the production and dissemination of Navajo language materials in contract schools.

Rough Rock Demonstration School which opened on July 27, 1966 was the first school to be governed by an all-Indian locally elected board. The school was regarded "not just as a place for educating Indian children, but as the focus for development of the local community" (US Congress, 1969, p. 20). There was an emphasis on community control of the school. In the classroom, students were exposed to a bilingual-bicultural curriculum. Director Robert Roessel (1977) wrote, "We want to instill in our youngsters a sense of pride in being Indian. We want to show them that they can take the best of each way of life and combine them into something visible" (1977, p. 91). In 1983 Rough Rock Demonstration School adopted a new bilingual-bicultural curriculum based on the NAMDC inquiry-based social studies curriculum which followed a spiraling sequence of culturally relevant topics beginning with the Navajo concept of "ke'e" (kinship) (McCarty, 1991). The Rough Rock Demonstration School thus provided a model for contract schools that were locally controlled and that became centers for the development and dissemination of Navajo language curriculum materials.

Government policy has evolved to allow native peoples to read and write in their language. In *Indian Nations at Risk* (1992) Linda Skinner voices the demand for native language instruction while acknowledging the new direction of the Federal Government:

On October 30, 1990, President Bush signed Public Law 101-477. Title I of that bill is the Native American Language Act. This act preserves, protects and promotes the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice and develop Native

American languages. Among other things, it recognizes the rights of natives to use their languages as a medium of instruction. (p. 55)

Schools are institutions which reflect the knowledge and assumptions held by educational authorities about the prior knowledge of students from the majority language group (McGroarty, 1986). Most education is based on systematic research on the development and experiences of these majority language speakers (Heath, 1986). For education to be appropriate to the experiences of Navajo students, we must focus our attention on significant background and learning factors particular to the development of these students (McGroarty, 1986). Teachers must actively seek to understand the backgrounds of these students in order to plan effective instruction for them. They must recognize the rich knowledge students bring to school with them (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). The contextual knowledge of language minority students, rather than being impoverished, deficit or different, is rich and multicultural (Pease-Alvarez & Vasquez, 1994).

The Native American Language Act of 1990 recognizes that “there is convincing evidence that student achievement and performance, community and school pride, and educational opportunity is clearly and directly tied to respect for, and support of, the first language of the child or student” (U.S. Congress, 1990 PL 101-477 Sec.102(6)) The Esther Martinez bill, which was enacted by Congress in December 2006, is an amendment of the Native American Language Act of 1990, which authorizes competitive grants to establish language nests and language immersion programs for children ages birth-7 and their parents. The passage of this bill, following 14 years of deliberation in the Congress, serves as an invitation to discuss the history and the current situation of Indigenous languages in early childhood programs and to reflect on systemic change in schools to support this model (U.S. Congress, 2006).

The Navajo education policy states, “The Navajo language is an essential element of the life, culture and identity of the Navajo people” (Navajo Tribe, 1984, 10 N.N.C. § 111)The Navajo Nation places great value on a Navajo specific education that supports the self-identity of its teachers and students (Navajo Tribe, 1996, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). A 1991 survey of 4,073 Navajo Head Start students found that 53.3% spoke only English, 17.7% spoke only Navajo, and 27.9% spoke both Navajo and English (Platero, 2001). Teacher educator Bernard Spolsky (2001) writes of the influence of the school in disrupting intergenerational language transmission:

Seemingly protected by its isolated geographical position and by the formal recognition of its autonomy as a Nation, the Navajo people were denied any real control of the one institution, schooling, which can play a central role in a campaign to reverse language shift. With this lack of autonomy came a language shift which disrupted intergenerational language transmission. (p. 157)

These statistics indicate a need to include instruction in Navajo language in all schools serving Navajo students, an alarm echoed in the literature on Indigenous language loss. (Appel & Muysken 1987; Bauman 1980; Krauss, 1996; McCarty, 1998, 2005; Nettle & Romaine, 2000).

Early Childhood Opportunities for American Indian Children

Support for Navajo language programs in the schools is further documented in a survey of 242 schools on the Navajo Reservation to which 1,222 Navajo classroom aides and 2,474 aides of all types responded. The Diné Division of Education found that Navajo language and education is a legitimate part of the educational program (Navajo Tribe, 2003c). Research in Navajo communities demonstrates that place- and community-based curriculum and instruction supports students' academic success (Rosier & Holm, 1980; McLaughlin, 1992; Goodluck, Lockard, & Yazzie, 2000; Zehr, 2007; Pavel, Reyhner, Avison, Obester, & Sayer, 2003; Wilson, 2003).

Yazzie-Minz (2005) reviewed formal early childhood educational opportunities for American Indian and Alaska Native children. She questioned the relevance of these formal preschool programs for parents and children. Diaz Soto and Swadener (2002) call for educators to rethink their reliance on a strictly scientific worldview; Rogers and Swadener (1999) ask, "Whose narrative are heard here, and who benefits from these practices?" (p. 439). This question is important if we are to effect systemic change to implement Navajo immersion in the Headstart curriculum (DeJong, 1999; Cahape & Demmeret, 2003; Slate, 1993).

Nissani (1993) found that, for preschoolers who were speakers of other languages, "to promote the healthy self-esteem of each and every young child, early childhood programs must be thoughtfully designed to serve both parents and children--all the more so for those who speak a language other than English at home" (p. 2). Diaz-Soto and Swadener (2002) agree:

It is clear that it will be crucial for the field to continue to critically analyze how privilege and power have influenced the direction of the field toward the scientifically driven epistemologies and valorized the rationalistic Western lens. Who stands to benefit from the over reliance on Western ways of seeing the world? Why has it been so difficult for the field to examine its own presuppositions? (p. 55)

We believe that the study of history deconstructs this rationalistic Western lens and engages teachers in a process of transforming their classrooms and schools. Eder (2007) calls for research which considers the practices we use in education in this effort to examine Western assumptions.

With this cautionary note and with a belief that teachers are agents of change in their institutions only when they understand these relations of power, we begin a discussion of the history of Navajo Headstart Immersion from 1995-2000. This discussion began in a junior level writing course at Northern Arizona University: "BME 331W: Structured English Immersion in Early Childhood Settings." In class we discussed methods for teaching young English Learners. Two of the students, Eilene Joe and Caroline Wagoner, were Navajo Headstart teachers; another student, Judy DeHose, was a school board member who was interested in preparing bilingual teachers for a new immersion program in her community on the White Mountain Apache

Reservation. The Navajo Headstart Immersion program was supported by a grant from the Administration for Native Americans from 1995 to 2000. This discussion led to a review of current efforts to teach Navajo in the Headstart program and to reverse language shift in Indigenous communities.

Culture and Language

Caroline Wagner worked as a Navajo Headstart teacher in Rough Rock in the Chinle Agency in 1995. She reflects:

The Navajo Nation Department of Head Start has grown from serving 199 children in 1965. Dr. Robert Roessel was a part of getting Head Start started here on the Navajo Reservation. At the time Dr. Roessel proposed that teachers stay at the dorms at ASU through the summers to go through training. Dr. Roessel always stressed Navajo language and culture. He always asked, "How would you feel if you lost your language?"

Former Navajo Nation President Mr. Albert Hale issued an executive order in July 1995 establishing the Navajo language as the primary means of instruction in all Headstart classrooms. This order decreed, "Navajo language shall be the medium of instruction for Navajo children, the Nation's future at all Head Start facilities...the Department of Head Start, Division of Education, shall herewith implement, beginning with the Fall Semester 1995, the purpose and intent of this order in the curriculum, teacher education, facilities, extracurricular activities and all other relevant facets of the Navajo Head Start program" (Navajo Tribe, 1995).

Later that year the Headstart Navajo language curriculum was developed and field tested. During the years 1995-1996, this special project was coordinated by Mrs. Afton Sells from the Office of Diné Culture, with Chinle as the pilot site. Two hundred and fifty students were enrolled in the pilot project. This curriculum integrated the wisdom of traditional Navajo teaching with the day-to-day planning and activities in the current Headstart program. The children learned stories and songs. They learned about plants and animals by the seasons. They used concrete objects and their five senses to explore the world around them. Parents and elders understood the significance of early childhood, and the elders believed all the knowledge and experience gained in the early years would stay with the child throughout their lives. The curriculum that was developed incorporated the wisdom of traditional teaching and learning for young children with the current Head Start program and learning environment.

Eilene Joe interviewed Dr. Wayne S. Holm in December 2006. Dr. Holm was part of the Navajo Nation Language Project funded by the Administration for Native Americans in partnership with the Navajo Nation Division of Diné Education, which developed the curriculum for the Navajo Nation Headstart program. Holm described the curriculum, which included Situational Navajo. He described how Situational Navajo is supported by theories of second language acquisition and discussed how second language is more than just being exposed to the language; it is the ability to

communicate in situations in which the child receives feedback (Holm & Silentman, 1997; Holm, Silentman, & Wallace, 2003).

Joe also interviewed Afton Sells in December, 2006, at Diné College in Tsaile, Arizona. Afton Sells was the Education Specialist for the Headstart Immersion Program. She supervised four full immersion classrooms in the Chinle Agency. Sells reported that in the Immersion program children were exposed to the Navajo language from the time the child got on the bus to the time the child got off the bus. The Navajo language was used in all communication with children and teachers in the classroom. Children were immersed in the Navajo language in every interest area and learning situation. Sells reported to Eilene Joe that when children are taught the Navajo language at an early age they have more confidence in themselves.

Caroline Wagner discussed the beginning of the immersion program in Rough Rock.

I worked with Head Start for a number of years. Our site was chosen to operate a full immersion program. That was an experience for all of us. The instruction was all in the Navajo language. The students would remind each other to speak in the Diné language. *Diné keji*. It was incredible to hear them say "*diné keji*". In the beginning it was a little difficult to constantly use Navajo while teaching throughout the day. Sometimes we would catch ourselves speaking English. The children that attended school during the years the full immersion program was being used learned a lot of Navajo. They would try to make sentences and could understand when someone spoke to them in Navajo.

Wagner introduced a thematic unit on geography or *Diné Tah* (meaning "among the people") with a lesson on the colors associated with the four sacred mountains that mark the boundaries of *Diné Tah* (Arthur, Bingham, & Bingham, 1982). Wagner reflects:

Students at Rough Rock learned the four sacred mountains, their colors, the directions and what the mountains represented I had to do a lot of hands-on activities in order for them to understand the mountains and their colors. For example, we would go on a nature walk and collect different colored rocks. We would search for white, turquoise, yellow and black. The children would try to find rocks that were the same color as the four sacred mountains. If they couldn't find one by the time we got back to the center, the children would use paint to color the rocks that they found. After that the students would glue it onto a cardboard. They would use dirt to make models of the four sacred mountains. The children enjoyed putting their homes in the middle. With this activity the children learned that they lived within the four sacred mountains.

In Headstart the directors and teachers strive to achieve the goals of the program. The mission statement for Navajo Nation Headstart is "Life is a journey not a destination." It is a journey that is not traveled alone. The development of the child is influenced by the world around him, Mother Earth, the air, water, and light as well as the family, the community and every individual around him. Even though this journey may lead the child beyond the boundaries of the four sacred mountains, the child will continue to be protected by the foundation provided by these elements and the child will work in beauty. Just as one will cross the path

of the child in the future we will strive to prepare the Navajo child, the family and the community for the challenges of the future and stability from the past.

The mission of the Navajo Department of Headstart is to strive to be a positive and integrating influence in this process. The curriculum was developed with this mission statement in mind. The Navajo basket was used to symbolically represent the curriculum, with the seasons as a framework for the learning activities of young children. The basket incorporates the four directions and the blessings and teaching of the 12 Holy People as they relate to the four seasons. The basket also carries the symbol of the four seasons and the four original words of the Navajo Language and the four stages of life and the human cycle.

The curriculum consisted of Situational Navajo and the Diné Curriculum, a curriculum designed by Navajo Nation Headstart. Several years after this Diné Curriculum was implemented, the Department of Health and Human Services wanted all Head Start programs to have a research-based curriculum. The Ade'e'honiszin Curriculum was created. The Ade'e'honiszin curriculum is a curriculum made up of the Diné Curriculum and the Creative Curriculum (Navajo Tribe, n.d.). Although the Creative curriculum recognizes the value of the home language of the child, Dodge (2002) argues,

Bilingual children make the transition to decoding words well. Bilingual children are often very creative and good a problem solving. Compared to children who speak one language, those who are bilingual can communicate with more people, read more and benefit more from travel. Such children will have an additional skill when they enter the workforce. (p. 39)

While acknowledging the reality of bilingual education, Eilene Joe critiques the shift of the contemporary Navajo Nation Head Start toward English-dominant literacy:

Today in some Headstart classrooms English is the language of instruction while in other classrooms the Navajo language is used for enrichment. Since 2000 when No Child Left Behind and Early Reading First were implemented, there has been a shift to the use of more English for literacy. This is where the Navajo Nation Head Start made the mistake in teaching more English.

As teachers reflect on this history and understand the need to support the Immersion model in their classroom, policy makers must continue to support curricular reform which includes the Navajo language and culture.

Conclusion

A discussion of the success of the Navajo Headstart Immersion Project from 1995-2000 must include an understanding of the failure of current programs to support full academic success for American Indian students. In 2006, 30% of the 184 Bureau of Indian Education schools made Adequate Yearly Progress as defined by No Child Left

Behind. In Arizona 55% of the 141 public schools on Reservations made Adequate Yearly Progress (Zehr, 2007).

As Judy DeHose, a school board member from Navajo county says:

The most difficult task for the endangered Native American language would be the development of curriculum in the native language. It is even more difficult because of the “English Only” laws that have been passed by many states. Bilingual programs are no longer funded. It takes money to train teachers who are fluent in the native language but are also certified in teaching all subject areas in the native language. It takes money to develop and print materials for a true Immersion program. I know that some tribes are years ahead in developing materials that are relevant to their culture and language but as the funding sources dried up for bilingual programs, they have come to a standstill. (A personal conversation with DeHose, 2007)

The Navajo Headstart Immersion Program has been successful because of the professionalism of the teachers, the strength of the curriculum which was based on current theory, and the vision of a future which included the Navajo language and culture in the community. Yazzie-Mintz (2005) calls for “partnerships among ...tribes, tribal colleges, and universities,” concluding that “Strong partnerships create sustained opportunities to create longitudinal studies of early education and provide the means to include research-based recommendations in local, regional, and national policy” (p. 34). These partnerships included Diné College, Northland Pioneer College, Central Arizona College, Northern Arizona University, and Arizona State University where teachers completed both AA degrees and bachelor’s degrees in Early Childhood Education. What will strengthen the Navajo Headstart Immersion program is to structure activities in the centers so that children acquire Navajo through “doing Headstart” in Navajo. We must work with parents to empower children to acquire Navajo in settings beyond the Headstart center.

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