Native American Language Immersion Programs: Can There Be Bilingual Education When the Language Is Going (or Gone) as a Child Language?

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Here, in a paper originally presented at the annual meetings of the National Indian Education Association at Anchorage in 1989, Marie Arviso and Wayne Holm describe an elementary school program designed to teach Navajo-as-a-Second-Language to English-speaking Navajos. Reasons for the program concern less a willingness to reintroduce Navajo or to preserve it, than to help Navajo children do better in school and come ultimately to value who and what they are. The hope is that these Navajo students, unlike many of their peers, come to value Navajo-ness. If they do, in increasing the number of Navajos who reach adulthood as Navajo speakers, they might retain the option of having their children grow up to be Navajo-speaking as well.

Navajo bilingual education programs of the last two decades have tended to be located in more rural communities where many of the students still have come to school speaking (good) Navajo. Bilingual education programs in schools serving the emerging towns of the Reservation were originally intended to serve just those more rural, Navajo-dominant, students coming into more English-speaking town schools. But in recent years the numbers of such Navajo-speaking students coming into these schools has been dwindling. Can programs of bilingual education still be offered and justified in such schools? Thinking this question is common to a number of American and Canadian Indian schools and communities, we will discuss the program we are developing for relatively limited speakers-of-Navajo at Fort Defiance.

Tsehootsooi has been the name of the community now known in English as Fort Defiance. The Americans claimed the area, along with most of the American Southwest, after the Mexican War. Fort Defiance was established in Navajo country by the Army in 1851; it was, as the name suggests, intended to "defy" the Navajos.

The first school was established at the old fort in 1869 or 1870, a year or more before the first public school opened in Arizona. This was the beginning of Navajo education.

For many years, Fort Defiance was an Agency town. There was for many years a large federal boarding school there. A public "accommodation" school was set up for the children of federal employees sometime in the 30's or 40's. In the 50's, public school districts were established on the Navajo Reservation. The first, or one of the first, of the new public schools on the Reservation was built at Fort Defiance. The federal school at Fort has long since been closed. And, some thirty-five years later, the district is still trying to catch up with the growing student population. We now have over 900 students K-5 at Fort Defiance.

Fort Defiance is still an Agency town. But the Bureau of Indian Affairs is no longer the only business in town. With the Tribal headquarters at Window Rock seven miles away, there is a spillover of Tribal (and Bureau) offices and housing into Fort Defiance. There is a Public Health hospital. There are now some state offices. And there are the public schools. There is a relatively good-sized semi-conductor assembly operation. And a small but growing number of service operations: gas stations, fast-food places, and the like.

Public school districts were laid out in the early 50's with little regard for topographic or Navajo political boundaries. (State and county boundaries, however, were fairly closely observed.) As a result, the Window Rock School District serves parts of a number of Navajo communities. The Fort Defiance Elementary School serves parts of five Navajo communities: all of the Fort Defiance community and parts of the Red Lake, Sawmill, Kinlichee, and St Michaels communities. It actually draws students from only four of these: Fort Defiance, Red Lake, Sawmill, and St Michaels.
Many of the parents and grandparents of these four communities tend to be somewhat ambivalent about the value of the Navajo language. They may regret the loss of the language but do not see it as necessary or desirable for their children.

Many of the people now living in these communities (either from the communities originally or having moved into them for employment purposes) are working for one or another governmental agency. Many tend to feel that it is their formal education and/or their English language abilities that have enabled them to obtain the job they now have—in an area characterized by considerable un- and under-employment. There is as a result a tendency to value Anglo education and the English language over more traditional Navajo learning and the Navajo language. This we perceive to be the more common attitude in the area. But, as we shall see, not everyone in the area necessarily agrees.

Fort Defiance School has had good bilingual programs in the past. There were at that time students coming in from the outlying communities with limited English but with relatively well-developed child-Nava. The school developed some good teachers and had a good program. But by the mid-80's there were fewer and fewer Navajo-speaking students needing such services. The time had come either to quit offering bilingual education or to change radically the kinds of bilingual education being offered.

In SY '87, we attempted to test the Navajo and English language abilities of all children K-2. We found roughly that only a third of the incoming kindergartners had any knowledge of Navajo; less than a tenth could be considered to be fluent speakers of five-year-old Navajo. (More sobering: although most of the students were monolingual or dominant in English, their English did not seem to be adequate for school purposes. In Jim Cummins' terminology, they controlled "conversational" English but not "academic" English.

"Academic" and "Conversational" English

Here it may be worthwhile to explain these terms. Jim Cummins is a Canadian, one of the foremost students of bilingual education in the world. In attempting to understand why many originally non-English students learn to talk English within several years, but don't seem to do as well in school for five-to-seven years, he has made use of the concepts of "conversational" English and "academic" English. In explaining these concepts locally, we have sometimes changed these to "playground" and "classroom" English.

Cummins (and his frequent co-author Merrill Swain) have made use of these concepts in analyzing more conventional Native American bilingual education situations. They have not, to our knowledge, made explicit use of them in analyzing situations or programs like our own. We think these concepts have considerable relevance here.

Using Cummins' terms in ways that he might not agree with, we would say that many of our students do control conversational (or playground) English. Many of these children are town kids. They use conversational English fluently and effectively to satisfy most of their needs. Talking to others (usually other children who have shared experiences) they can satisfy almost all their communication needs (through conversational English).

But, despite the fact that many of these students speak English as their stronger or only language, many of these students do not do well in school: 75% to 85% of the students at any given elementary grade test below state and national averages. We would say that although they control conversational English, many do not have adequate control of "academic English".

Conversational English might be characterized as talk about the immediately present here-and-now, or at least about shared experiences. Because my listener has had many of the same experiences, or the same kind of experiences, I do not have to make the background of what I have to say explicit. Set in the here-and-now of personal interaction, a significant part of the message is carried by the context of the situation and is supplemented by less explicit or less verbal communication: deictics, pro-forms, intonation, gestures, etc.

School, however, is not much about the immediately present or the here-and-now. It involves abstractions; it is relatively impersonal. It is literacy-based. It involves a lot of talk (and print) about things you cannot touch; it may involve talk about other peoples and other places and other times. In academic English, the language of school, much of the here-and-nowness of interpersonal communication is absent. There is less context. Higher proportions of the messages are carried by language alone.

Students whose home language experience includes English or is English-only may still have not had much experience at home with the kinds of English that would allow them to understand, acquire, and use academic or classroom English easily. Thus, while these students may well be dominant or even monolingual in English, they may not control, or have easy access to, the academic English necessary for success in school.

A Typology of Language Abilities

There is also what could be called conversational and academic Navajo as well. (And, while we talk here about Navajo and English, we could be talking about situations involving any Native American language and
TABLE 1: Typology of Navajo Students’ Linguistic Competencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bi-lingual</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+Navajo +English: There could be, and are, a small number of students who come to school with control or the potential for control of both academic Navajo and academic English. Because of their ability in English, these students have few problems with school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+Navajo -English: There could be some students who control academic Navajo but only conversational English. We have very few, if any, such students coming in to Fort Defiance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Navajo +English: There could be, and are, some students who control academic English but only conversational Navajo. Because of their ability in English, these students will have few problems in school. Their teachers may not even know that such children know any Navajo. Our data so far suggests that unless there is strong Navajo-language support in the home, many of these students actually lose Navajo ability over time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Navajo -English: There could be, and are, some students who do not control either academic Navajo or English; they control only conversational Navajo and English. Many of these students do not do well in school. Noting their difficulties with school, their teachers may be more aware that they talk Navajo and tend to attribute their problems to their use of Navajo. Note that these students are not &quot;a-lingual&quot; or &quot;semi-lingual&quot;. They may be quite talkative and outgoing. They can communicate their needs and wishes effectively in one or both languages. They simply don't have control of language adequate for the game called school.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mono-lingual</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+Navajo: There could be students who control only academic Navajo (and speak practically no English). It is doubtful whether or not we’ve had any such students at FDES in recent years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+English: There could be, and are, students who control only &quot;academic&quot; English. These students, who tend to come from more middle-class (Anglo and Navajo) homes, tend to do well in school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Navajo: There could be, and are, a few students who control only what could be called conversational Navajo. Often coming from relatively economically poor homes, many of these students do not do well in school. Teachers tend to attribute their lack of success not to their parents’ socio-economic status (as they would if they were E-only speakers) but to &quot;interference&quot; from Navajo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-English: And there could be, and are, some students whose only language is English but whose English would be called conversational English. Tending to come from economically poorer homes, many of these students do not do well in school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

English.) In terms of language abilities, we might say that we have as many as eight kinds of students in our school, as described in Table 1 above.

Several points might be made about this typology.

First, these labels are somewhat impressionistic. We do test student’s language abilities in both Navajo and English. We can and do quantify these test results. But we can’t really say just what constitutes academic or conversational English. We can say this student appears to be strong in Navajo but weak in English. But we can’t really say that this particular student controls academic Navajo but conversational English. We can place most students with some rough certainty. Students with the same classification do seem to have some of the same experiences with school. The terms are useful if they are not taken too literally. We don’t use them to label individual students but to analyze the language abilities of the student body as a whole.

Second, it should be obvious that such a classification does not see bilingualism as a disadvantage or English monolingualism as an advantage. It is the particular abilities of the bi-lingual or mono-lingual student that make academic success more or less likely.

The typology should again make us aware that we cannot talk about either bi-lingual or mono-lingual students as if they were all the same. Even for Navajo and English, there are a number of different kinds of bi-lingual students and a number of different kinds of mono-lingual students.

And it should again make us aware that the loss (or non-acquisition) of the native language does not automatically ensure the acquisition of an English adequate for school. That the acquisition of English does not, in and of itself, assure success in school.
Thirdly, "dominance" per se is not what's important. We've talked about dominance for so long that this may be hard for many school people to accept. Think of it this way. If on a scale of 10, a student is scored 3 in English and a 2 in Navajo, he or she would be said to be dominant in English. But this student is likely to have a hard time in school. On the other hand, a student who was a 9 in Navajo and an 8 in English would be said to be dominant in Navajo. But he or she's unlikely to have much difficulty in school. Dominance per se is not what's important. It's academic ability in one or more languages that is important.

Fourthly, as has been suggested by some of what we have said, it may well be that the socio-economic/educational circumstances have more to do with our students' relative success in school than does language per se. Or, put another way, that their language abilities tend to be determined by socio-economic/educational circumstances (instead of the other way around). Seen this way, the Navajo language is not a or the problem for most Fort Defiance students. For many of our students it is English, an English which is inadequate for school purposes, which is the problem.

Setting Up the Program

Having completed testing the Navajo and English language abilities of the incoming kindergartners, we realized that the conventional programs using Navajo as a bridge to English and to participation in school were no longer appropriate. If we were to offer a program of bilingual education at Fort Defiance, it would have to be rather different from those programs offered in the past. The program that has emerged is what we have called "Navajo Immersion", hereafter "NI". It differs from more conventional Navajo-English bilingual programs in a number of ways.

NI was to be a program of choice. In far too many school districts on the Navajo Reservation, bilingual education has come to be perceived as one form of Special Education. Children who have then been placed in bilingual education not because they talked Navajo well, or because their parents wanted them to talk Navajo well, but because school people felt the students didn't talk English well. "Bilingual Education", whatever it was, came to be perceived as some sort of treatment for the disease of inadequate English. Aware of the fact that the children in many Bilingual Education programs did not do well in school, many parents (not too illogically) came to see the treatment as the cause. Many came to feel that Bilingual Education was an educational fate to be avoided if at all possible.

We wanted NI classes to be voluntary. We wanted bilingual classes to be perceived not as treatment classes but as enrichment classes. Classes for parents who wanted their child to be able to be able to use both languages successfully in school. We wanted parents to fight to get their child in, not out of, NI classes.

We said we would take only those students whose parents enrolled them in the program. Students could be withdrawn at any time. Students would have to re-enrolled each following school year. This has no doubt decreased the number of students in the program. It has made the numbers of students each year somewhat predictable. But it has ensured that the students in the program are there because their parents want them to be there.

In recent years, there has been a growing body of research that strongly suggests that a language (first or second) is best learned in a situation where that language is used as the means of communication, and where the language expected is accessible to the student; i.e., where the language the student needs to learn is available to him or her outside the school and where students have real reasons for using it. Older, more formal, methods of second language teaching may still be useful or necessary where these conditions do not prevail. But where these conditions can be met, there has been a shift away from teaching the language as a subject to using the language as a means of communicating content.

If students are to learn to go to school effectively in Navajo, we realized that Navajo must become the language of communication within the classroom. We couldn't just teach students a few words of Navajo. We couldn't just teach students about the Navajo language nor teach Navajo as a subject (among many other classroom subjects). All (or almost all) communication with the classroom instructors must be through Navajo. It had to be made the language of communication in these classrooms.

If a student is to succeed at school through what is for most students the weaker language, then that instruction must be intense. It should concentrate on enabling the child to do those things in the new language which will enable him or her to succeed in school. One of us had had the experience of working as a Fulbright fellow in one of the best of the Maori bilingual schools in New Zealand. That experience had convinced us that unless we (teachers, parents, students) are willing to make an almost total commitment to the native language, the undertaking is all but hopeless. Students may learn a few words or a few phrases; but they will not learn to communicate successfully in the native language in any but a very limited number of circumstances. Anything less than total commitment to the native language in the overpoweringly English environment in which we now live seems doomed to failure.
Starting a Program

By the time we had tested the students and arrived at these conclusions, the school-year was already well underway. We presented a proposal to the administration; if we were to offer a program of bilingual education at Fort Defiance, it would have to be some sort of immersion program. We were given a go-ahead: if we could interest enough parents, we could start such a program.

We felt that if we were to have any chances of success, we would have to start with those students who had at least some Navajo. We found approximately 54 students who had shown on tests some (often rather slight) knowledge of Navajo. We eliminated some students whom we feared might have other non-language-related learning problems.

That left 48 children who might take part in such a program. We felt that if as many as half of those students' parents were interested, we might start one Navajo Immersion Kindergarten that school year. We began contacting parents in their homes. We were surprised by the reception we received; by the time we were through, 46 of the 48 parents said they wanted their child in such a program. We feel we made an honest presentation of the program; we don't feel we high-pressure anyone. Some parents asked us why we hadn't done something like this earlier. Others expressed unhappiness that the program would be offered only to kindergartners that school year.

And so, in mid-November 1986, we moved those students whose parents had signed them up into two Navajo Immersion Kindergarten classes. We later set up a third classroom. One kindergarten teacher had been using a certain amount of Navajo in the classroom over the years. A number of parents asked to have their child placed in this classroom where some Navajo would be used but in which Navajo would not become the language of classroom communication. We came to conclude by the end of the year that, despite the teacher's best efforts, this just hadn't worked very well. These students didn't test as highly in Navajo as did the students in the full immersion classes. And, somewhat more surprising, they did no better in English than those students in the full immersion classes who had had only 40 minutes a day of English. This has reinforced our belief that unless we go all-out, immersion programs are unlikely to succeed.

Perhaps we hadn't realized just how little Navajo many of these children actually had. Many had only a passive knowledge of Navajo; told something in Navajo in a test situation, they could point to an appropriate picture. But they had little, or no, ability to talk Navajo on their own. And we had accepted a few students who started without even a passive knowledge of Navajo because their parents wanted them to learn Navajo. (We continue to do so but try to limit the number of such students in a classroom.)

There is in (second) language-learning theory a concept of latency: learners often seem to have to hear a given word or phrase or sentence any number of times in meaningful communication before they are willing to try to use it themselves (for real communication). Undue efforts to force students to do so don't really seem to speed things up; they can actually slow things down. We have come to believe that such latency is real.

We set up the classes all in Navajo. We didn't try to teach Navajo; we tried to teach (and communicate) in Navajo. We tried to teach most of those things that otherwise would have been taught in English, such as reading readiness, and math readiness, in Navajo.

We set up conventions for students to use in getting into Navajo. A student who had something to say for which he didn't have the Navajo yet would say, "Shíkáá nîlleyéed," "Help me (please)." Having gotten assent from an instructor, the student would then say what she or he had to say in English. The instructor would then rephrase this in simple Navajo. The student would then be lead to repeat this, sometimes one word at a time. All this was time-consuming. But students were communicating in Navajo.

If we're honest, those first few weeks and months were some of the most anxious of our professional lives. Our concern as teachers is to communicate. It's extremely difficult, as teachers, to keep on talking to students in their weaker language knowing that you are communicating only partially or not at all. The temptation becomes very strong to cut through and just say it in English. Sometimes the teachers had to. But all were relatively experienced bilingual teachers and they persevered. And, sometime, after Christmas those of us who weren't classroom teachers every day noticed that most of the students were now beginning to open communication with the instructors in Navajo. While their Navajo was limited, and a bit artificial, it was Navajo and it was being used for real communication!

(In New Zealand, students enter school in the Infants room the day after their fifth birthday. While this can make the delivery of academic instruction rather difficult, it has in Maori immersion classes the unintended advantage of ensuring that new non-Maori-speaking students come into an already-Maori-speaking classroom one at a time. Despite starting with even less Maori than many of our students have Navajo, the Maori Infants began using Maori more quickly than our kindergartners do. Because they are socialized into Maori not just by the instructors but by the other students. Given the way we do school here, with all students starting school together with little or no Navajo, we have tended to find that it may be mid-1st grade before many students start using significant amounts of Navajo with one another.)
The Program Today (SY 91)

We are now in our fifth year of the Navajo Immersion program. Those students who began as kindergartners in somewhat less than ideal circumstances are now 4th graders.

Because of differences in the way we have made parents aware of the program in different school years, we have had considerable variation in the number of kindergarten students in the program each year. Currently (SY 91), we have: two (of seven) kindergarten rooms; two (of seven) very small 1st grade rooms; two (of seven) 2nd grade rooms; two (of seven) 3rd grade rooms; and one (of seven) large 4th grade room. As can be seen, roughly a quarter of the students in these grades are in the Navajo Immersion program.

The Organization of Instruction

In the kindergarten and the 1st grade classrooms, there is a teacher and an assistant. Both act as instructors; we attempt to down-play the caste difference between teachers and assistants. If we want to maximize communication in and through Navajo, we have to make use of every adult we can. We strive to have two (sometimes three) centers of language-mediated instruction on-going at almost all times. These instructors use only Navajo for both instruction and classroom management.

Those instructors who teach in English come into the classroom from the outside to do so. Students receive small group instruction through English for two 20-minute periods a day. When those instructors go, they take the English language with them. We feel that this is extremely important. If the classroom instructors were to shift from Navajo to English with the students, the students would be much more inclined to use English with them; they would use and learn considerably less Navajo. Some classroom instructors have even trained the office staff to use Navajo with them on the PA system!

An English instructor is in the room for an hour. During that time, she meets with three groups for about 20 minutes each. The third-class groups rotate between the three instructors: one classroom instructor teaches Math-in-English; the other we call "Concepts". So, from a students' point of view, each child receives 40 minutes a day of instruction in English (out of a five-hour instructional day).

At the 2nd grade, we place two classrooms side-by-side. There is a teacher and an assistant in each room. One room is an all-Navajo classroom; the other is an all-English classroom. The students in the two rooms exchange places at the middle of the school day. In effect, then, they spend half their time in Navajo and half in English. But the uses of the two languages are kept separate.

At the 3rd grade, we have much the same arrangement, except that there are no assistants at the 3rd grade level.

This is the first year we have had a 4th grade. We intend for 4th and 5th grade students to have an hour a day in half-class groups in a Navajo Social Studies-based Navajo language arts (talking and writing).

The Curriculum

We hope to be able to follow the emerging curriculum of the District to the extent that we can. But, as we are a new program, we have had to simplify the current curriculum somewhat. We tend to emphasize four (or five) basic activities.

One is what we call "talking time". The theory behind this is that to learn to use a language, students must use it for real communication. By real communication, we mean transmitting information which is meaningful to the speaker and (to some extent) novel to the listener. (There is no reason for a listener to "attend" to something she or he already knows.)

One of the best ways for students to develop language, we feel, is for students to talk about personal experiences. These are meaningful to the speaker. But they are, to some extent, novel to the listeners: in most cases, the listeners weren't there and they didn't see what happened. If the speaker doesn't communicate effectively, the listeners will not be able to "see" much of what the speaker is trying to "show".

At the outset, we are simply concerned to have students try to put something they have experienced into words in Navajo. In time, we encourage the listeners to ask intelligent questions of the speaker. We hope, over time, to lead students toward true discussion.

By the 2nd grade, we want to begin to emphasize the characteristics of effective communication. Did the speaker talk about a single experience (instead of giving us a whole list of happenings)? Did the speaker tell us enough to enable us (as listeners) to "see" what happened? In other words, we are beginning to try to get students to shape narratives as they would if they were writing them.

The content of Talking Time, however, is not limited to home experiences. It may also include information about what's going to happen that day in school. It may, at the end of the day, include summaries of what students learned that day, what they did, or what is coming up the next day.

In the 3rd and 4th grades, it comes to include some Navajo, national, and international news.
We are strongly committed to process-writing. In both languages. Students begin writing in Navajo in the Kindergarten. They don't add writing-in-English formally until the 2nd grade.

We begin process-writing in the kindergarten. We encourage what many call "invented spelling": students use whatever knowledge they have of letters and sounds to try to write what they want to write (often to accompany a picture of the same event).

By mid- or late first grade we attempt to set up a simple writing process going from a conference through two or more drafts and resulting in a little book of sorts. In the 2nd grade, the process becomes lengthier with greater effort to involve other students in revision and correction activities. At that level students begin writing in both Navajo and English (although at first their writing-in-English is heavily dependent on Navajo spellings).

We attempt to get students to do a number of different kinds of writing: personal narratives, make-believe stories, letters, play-scripts, and even a micro-research project. While creativity is not unwelcome, we are trying to emphasize the abilities to organize one's own material to communicate effectively.

In the 3rd grade and 4th grades, we are attempting to involve students in cooperative editing of one another's stories. Students type their final draft on Macintoshes.

In addition to all the reading involved in the writing process, we also set aside time for reading as such.

Navajo is characterized by fairly long rather complex verbs. Navajo verbs are often more like sentences in English. There is only one one-syllable verb in the language; five- and six-syllable verbs are not uncommon in child speech. Fortunately, the language is also characterized by relatively simple syllable structure: all syllables are either CV or CVC. Unlike English which can have as many as four-consonant clusters, Navajo has no consonant clusters. And, fortunately, Navajo has had a good practical orthography for fifty years: the relationship of letters to sounds is highly consistent. Given these circumstances, it would be nonsense not to use some sort of phonics or word-attack approach to reading, and writing, Navajo.

On the one hand, we are saying in the process-writing to "spell fearlessly": write what you hear. On the other hand, in Navajo reading-readiness and reading we are saying there is a "right way" to write any given syllable. What we hope is that these two (apparently contradictory) approaches to, in time, come together. They seem to do so but we are finding that they don't for all students unless we pay a fair amount of attention to it.

In Navajo, we use the Navajo language materials that were published by NAMDC (now, unfortunately, being allowed to go out of print). In English, we are using the so-called "Miami" materials as being the materials that seem to maximize the amount of transfer from reading-in-Navajo. We have found, however, that while the phonemic aspects of Navajo orthography transfer rather readily to English orthography, we do need to spend more time on teaching those aspects of the more morphophonemic English orthography than we had thought necessary at the outset. We hope to have most or all 3rd graders into the reading materials used by the District before or by the end of the school year.

Math is taught in both languages.

In Math-in-Navajo, we make use of locally-written adaptations of the so-called "Stern" materials making use of Unifix blocks. Students are expected to think, and talk, their way through math. They are expected to manipulate materials, verbalize what they have done, and only then write down what they have done. We also emphasize, in Math-in-Navajo, so-called word stories. These require very close attention to both language and thought. In the 3rd and 4th grades, we also hope to make considerable use of Willink's schematics in working through word-stories.

In Math-in-English, we make use of the District-adopted math books. Using techniques adapted from those of Reuben Feuerstein, we attempt to get students to "talk through" what they are doing, going from generalizations (directions) to specifics (problems) and back to generalizations (summaries). In both reading and math workbooks, we devote considerable effort to getting students to make explicit the strategies for a given activity.

In both, we are much more interested in students learning to think about and talk through the appropriate processes rather than on just getting the answer. We're more interested in mastery of concepts than of computation per se.

While we do not teach conventional Social Studies and Science as subjects, we attempt to incorporate them as topics of the writing process. We were finally able, this last summer, to rough out a scope-and-sequence for a language-intensive, research-oriented, contemporary Navajo social studies component. But much remains to be done to implement this.

Parental Support

One of the more pleasant surprises in this program has been the degree of parental support and involvement.

As noted earlier, no student is in the program without students' parents having signed them up for that school year. Given the prevailing skepticism about the uses of Navajo in the area, this alone assurs a considerable amount of support for those students who are in the program.
As we have seen the difference between the success of those students who get Navajo-language support at home and those who do not, we have tried to encourage parents to see that someone in the home is talking to the student in Navajo at home. Not all students are getting the same degree of support. But many are. And a number of parents are making a real effort to see that their child does get such assistance.

Following a British model, we have asked parents to hear their student’s homework. Students take home a folder of their work; their parents initial their child’s work to attest that their child has at least read it to them. Not all students are getting the same degree of attention. But most are getting some. In some cases, parents hearing the student’s homework are not themselves Navajo-speakers; the students must translate for their parents.

During the course of the school year, we have three or four potluck parent-student-teacher meetings. Most of these are done by grade level. We all bring food. We put on pickup demonstrations of what we are doing with whichever students are there that night. We talk about what we are doing in class and what we are doing at home with the students; something of a mutual support association. Not all parents come. But a surprisingly high proportion do, and this on a Reservation not noted for high turnout for school meetings.

Evaluation

The NI program is now in its fifth year. We realized at the outset that we could not easily evaluate this program on a year to year basis. So we stated our objective to be that, by the end of the third grade, the NI students would do as well on the state-mandated achievement tests as comparable students who had received monolingual students. We find this may have been overly-optimistic. About a third of last year’s 3rd graders were reading at the end-of-3rd-grade level at the end of school. (While Rock Point students’ averages exceeded the averages of comparable Bureau school students from the 2nd grade on, they began to exceed the averages of nearby public schools about the 5th grade.)

We are in the process of collecting data with which to make such comparisons. But we may have encountered a problem in doing so. We don’t have enough comparable students to make up a control group of adequate size. Most not all of the Navajo-language speakers are in the NI program. It may turn out that there aren’t enough students with comparable Navajo-entry levels in the monolingual classrooms. If this should turn out to be the case, we may have to go to a somewhat different evaluation design.

In one sense, the program is being evaluated by parents annually. Students do not automatically continue in the NI program. To allow their child to continue, parents must sign up their child to participate in the NI program for the following year. There is a fair degree of job mobility in the school district; parents move in and out of district all the time. Some parents do opt to remove their children from the NI program. But the proportion of students who have stayed with the program has been gratifying. As has the number of parents who have enrolled younger siblings or relatives in the program.

But the ultimate evaluation of this program is still some years off.

Given the mix of language abilities in this group, it would be unrealistic to claim that all or even most of these students will somehow do better academically (in English) than those students who did not receive such instruction. We have said that they will, as a group, do at least as well (in English) as comparable students. And... they will have acquired Navajo language abilities those students will not have.

But our real concern is social or psychological. There is on and near the Reservation an all-too-pervasive de-valueation of Navajo language and culture, and of those who adhere to them. By adolescence, talking Navajo, thinking Navajo, acting Navajo, tends to be associated by many with relative poverty. A dead end. The way not to go. Even students from families who do not accept or perpetuate such attitudes tend to acquire something of such attitudes from other students. Middle-class town kids come to look down on lower-class town kids; town kids come to look down on more rural kids. It just isn’t cool to be seen as a “John”.

And yet, as they move towards young adulthood, these students must reconcile some of these attitudes towards Navajo-ness with the rueful realization that they are one of those people it doesn’t seem desirable to be.

It is our hope that this need not happen to the students in the NI program. That those students who have succeeded in school through Navajo will have associations of Navajo-ness and success, and a degree of parental support, that will allow them to come to accept, and positively value, being Navajo. Ultimately, that’s what such a program must be all about.

Problems

We would be deceiving ourselves if we have suggested that we had very carefully planned this program and then executed it just as we had planned. We’re suspicious of such reports and you probably are too.

We would be less than candid if we didn’t admit we have had, and are having, our share of problems. Some of these are generic to American or Southwestern schools; others may be peculiar to programs such as ours.
We have had some problems with relatively high student mobility. A number of students leave the district and/or the program each year. We have had some difficulty in identifying and separating language-learning and academic-learning problems. We have had some difficulty in determining bases for promotion/retention; we have probably promoted some students we probably shouldn't have.

We have been extremely fortunate in having at the school a number of experienced and capable Navajo language teachers and assistants. While there are some real differences between the Navajo-language instruction in the earlier kind of bilingual programs and that in the newer immersion programs, these people have adapted extremely well. But we would be hard put to come up with enough people to greatly enlarge the program. We have had much more difficulty in locating and retaining Anglo English-language teachers. It's a difficult role: teaching intensively in English in what is clearly a Navajo program. Not all Anglo teachers with ESL backgrounds seem able or willing to adapt to such a role.

And we have had problems funding all positions, particularly the walk-in EL positions. We have begun each school year with at least several positions unfilled; we currently have two NL positions unfilled. We have tried to plug the gaps as best we could; this has made it difficult to spend as much time on curriculum and materials development, or on training, as we should.

Navajo is fortunate that we have the materials that we do. But interest in Navajo bilingual instruction is now at an ebb. Only a few schools on the whole Reservation are seriously teaching initial-reading-in-Navajo. The NAMC materials are being allowed to go out of print. Given our emphasis on process-writing, we are going to have to rely increasingly on student-made materials to supplement the dwindling supply of published materials.

And, although we have added only one grade a year, and adopted or adapted materials used in other Navajo programs, we have not been able to keep up with the development of the curriculum and local materials we need.

We have been fortunate in obtaining the degree of parental support we have. But we have not had that sort of support from all parents. Not all students' parents are as involved in reviewing their students' homework as they might be. And, although we have had some parents who have come in to help out, we have not done as much as we could to encourage this.

There is in our area, as there must be in many emerging Reservation towns, a considerable amount of social pathology. There may be somewhat less of this among the families of the children in the NI program. But there are a number of NI students who are affected as well. We realize that eventually we are going to have to better integrate instruction and social services if we are to enable more students to achieve at levels commensurate with their abilities.

And, if we are honest about it, there isn't a great deal of guidance in the literature on what sorts of instructional activity are most likely to develop "academic language" abilities (in English and in Navajo). It is one thing to say what the problem is. It is another to say this is what we should do to deal with it. We think the things we are doing--activities which require a considerable amount of student thought and verbalization, which start from the child's own experiences, which require students to shift from generalizations to specifics and back to generalizations, which require considerable parental support, etc.--are making and will make a difference. But we know we still have a great deal to learn.

Conclusion

If, after four school years, we had to summarize what we have learned, we might say that we now think it is possible to conduct successful programs of bilingual instruction even in Native American communities where the language is declining as a child-language. But that for such programs to succeed, both parents and instructors must be very strongly committed to that undertaking. We do not undertake such programs to "preserve the language"; that's too abstract. Ultimately, it's not a question of what these children can do for the language; it's a question of what the language can do for these children. We undertake such programs to help these particular children do better in this particular school. In the hopes that these students, unlike many others, will come to positively value Navajo-ness. If they do so, this may increase the number of Navajos who reach adulthood as Navajo speakers. And who retain the option of having their children grow up to be Navajo-speaking as well.