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CHANGE FROM THE INSIDE OUT:
A STORY OF TRANSFORMATION
IN A NAVAJO COMMUNITY SCHOOL

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Abstract

This article combines the perspectives of bilingual teachers, teacher assistants, school administrators and an outside researcher on the 10-year development of a K-3 Navajo bilingual/bicultural program at Rough Rock Elementary School. Growing out of an original collaboration with the Kamehameha Early Education Program, Rough Rock expanded KEEP's notion of cultural compatibility to include instructional content rooted in the local language and culture. Here we examine transformations in curriculum and pedagogy emerging from the Rough Rock program, and the social and political process by which those instructional changes occurred. Lasting instructional reforms, we argue, involve more than changes in curriculum and pedagogy, but must also reconstitute the relations of indigenous educators to the larger school power structure. Bilingual teachers must "own" the program and their work in it; change must occur from the "inside out." We conclude with a consideration of the implications of the Rough Rock program for Navajo and other indigenous schools.

The story of Rough Rock Community School is a story of innovation. As the first American Indian school to be governed by a locally elected Navajo school board, Rough Rock in the 1960s emerged as a leader in Indian bilingual/bicultural education. In recent years, the school's bilingual/bicultural education efforts have centered on the K-3 Rough Rock English-Navajo Language Arts Program or RRENLAP, which grew out of Rough Rock's earlier partnership with the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP; see Jordan, and Vogt & Au, this volume). The great strength of RRENLAP--and what sets it apart from many other educational reforms--is that it has been shaped and molded by Navajo bilingual teachers themselves. In contrast to programs driven by top-down administrative or external mandates, RRENLAP involves community educators teaching according to community norms, and utilizing local cultural and linguistic knowledge.

Our purpose here is to examine these developments and their wider applications to indigenous schooling. First, we consider transformations in curriculum and pedagogy: that is, changes in what is taught and how teaching and learning take place in RRENLAP classrooms. In this regard, RRENLAP staff members have sought not only to make classroom organization and interaction "compatible" with the ways in which teaching and learning occur in the community, but also to make the content of instruction locally relevant, drawing upon themes and knowledge valued in this Navajo community, and validating students' "Navajoness."

Our second concern here is the *process* by which these curricular and pedagogical changes have occurred, and in particular, bilingual teachers' generative role in initiating and carrying out those changes. For teachers to validate students' knowledge and experience, teachers themselves must feel validated and supported in taking the risks necessary for fundamental change. This carries a special significance in American Indian and other minority settings, where formal education historically has been controlled by

outsiders whose aims were to eliminate indigenous languages and cultures, and to replace them with English and dominant society values. In places like Rough Rock, bilingual teachers have experienced first-hand the oppression and systematic negation of indigenous identity which occurred in federal Indian boarding schools. To the extent that such experiences become internalized, and when teacher-administrator power relations remain hierarchical and unchanged, indigenous teachers' voices--and their language and cultural knowledge--continue to be suppressed.

At Rough Rock, change has involved more than curriculum or pedagogy *per se*. At the elementary school, significant instructional changes were made possible through a fundamentally political process of democratization in the relations between elementary school administrators and bilingual teachers. This opened up new possibilities for creating instructional environments that invite students and teachers to use their own lives as the basis for new learning. We argue that to be meaningful and lasting, curricular and pedagogical reform must reconstitute the relations of indigenous educators to the larger school power structure. Bilingual teachers must "own" the program and their work in and for it. In short, change must occur not from the outside in, but from the inside out.

Such changes have evolved at Rough Rock over the past 10 years. In that time, each of us has played different but complementary roles in the elementary school program. Sally Begay is a RRENLAP bilingual teacher. Galena Sells Dick also is a bilingual teacher and coordinator of the bilingual program. Juanita Estell is a bilingual instructional assistant. Begay, Dick, and Estell grew up in Rough Rock and shared the experience of having attended federal and mission schools. In the words of Dick (Dick & McCarty, in press), she, Begay, and other RRENLAP teachers "grew up with" the Rough Rock School, beginning their teaching careers there as instructional assistants and going on to earn their teaching degrees. Dan W. Estell has lived at Rough Rock since 1978, is married into the community, and has been

principal of the elementary school since Rough Rock's early collaboration with KEEP. Teresa McCarty has worked at and with Rough Rock for the past 14 years, first as a curriculum developer and currently as a university-based consultant to RRENLAP. Afton Sells, now a specialist in the Office of Diné Culture and Language in the tribal headquarters of Window Rock, was the third grade bilingual teacher with whom KEEP began its work at Rough Rock, and RRENLAP's first coordinator.

Our work together over many years reveals multiple facets of the process of change within RRENLAP classrooms and the elementary school. Here, we attempt to weave our perspectives into a single story, recognizing that it is still only partial, and that it is unfinished. Nonetheless, as we look back over the past 10 years, we are struck by the lessons this story holds, and its implications for other Navajo and American Indian schools. We begin, then, with some background on Rough Rock and its learners.

Social and Linguistic Context

Located in the center of the Navajo Nation in northeastern Arizona, Rough Rock is among the reservation's more geographically isolated communities. Most of the 1,300 community residents live in extended family households dispersed throughout the 400 square-mile Rough Rock School District, or in government housing on or near the school campus. Paved roads only recently have penetrated this area, and it is still several hours' drive to the nearest towns on the reservation border. The nearest cities of size, Albuquerque and Phoenix, are a five- to six-hour drive from Rough Rock. Chinle, about 35 miles from the Rough Rock School, is the nearest reservation town with facilities such as a hospital, shopping center and gas station.

In this setting the K-12 Rough Rock Community School is the community's focal point and primary employer. Establishing the school as the community's center was, in fact, the goal of Rough Rock's founders when the school was established in 1966 as part

of the federal government's War on Poverty program (for details on the founding of the school, see Johnson, 1968; Roessel, 1977, and McCarty, 1989). Despite the school's essential social and economic role, per capita incomes at Rough Rock remain well below national poverty levels, averaging \$2,500 per year. The traditional economic activities of sheep herding and subsistence farming thus continue to be important at Rough Rock, as do indigenous religious practices, arts and crafts, and the Navajo matrilineal kinship system.

Children growing up at Rough Rock see, in their daily lives, the presence and value of Navajo and English. Navajo is the language of local and tribal government, and it remains vital to family and community life. But English, the majority *written* language, also is the language of much "official" local and regional business. While a shift toward English among younger speakers is undeniable (cf. Holm & Holm, this volume), for a significant number of Rough Rock students, English is still a language heard and spoken primarily at school.

This sociolinguistic situation reflects the range of diversity in students' family and home backgrounds. About a third of Rough Rock's 230 elementary students come from traditional households located some distance from the school compound, many of which may lack running water or electricity. These families make their living by herding sheep, raising cattle, making and marketing traditional arts and crafts, and in some cases, by wage labor associated with construction, mining or other employment. In these matrilineal extended family households, Navajo is the primary language. The children may not have traveled far beyond the reservation, though battery and generator power gives them access to Navajo and English radio, and to English television.

A second prominent group of Rough Rock elementary students lives on or near the school campus, in housing with modern amenities. Many of these students' parents are employed by the school's support services; others work as teachers, teacher assistants, or in administrative positions at the school. Their

children are exposed to the traditional Navajo way of life through kin relations with extended family members living off the school compound, but the children do not experience this lifeway on a daily basis. Children from these families have varying proficiencies in Navajo and English.

A third group of students come to Rough Rock from outside the local area, and reside in the school dormitories. These students' home backgrounds vary, but in general are similar to the two groups above. Some parents of dormitory students enroll their children in Rough Rock School specifically for the purpose of learning Navajo.

Compatibility and Relevance: The Content and Organization of RRENAP Instruction

The Rough Rock School Board has consistently sought to provide an education that values and utilizes the community's bilingualism and biculturalism. Implementing that goal has been difficult, however, due to the inconsistent federal funding upon which the school depends, and, until the relatively recent certification of a core of Navajo teachers, to high turnover among non-Navajo teachers imported from outside the community. When KEEP came to Rough Rock in 1983, no formal bilingual program was in place; four elementary principals had come and gone in the space of a few years, and what curricular direction existed came from teachers themselves. To stabilize the curriculum, the school board had instituted a commercial phonics program. Though embraced by Rough Rock teachers as "at least something stable that we could rely on" (Dick, et al., 1994, p. 33), the program did little to promote students' comprehension of English, and it left little time for instruction in Navajo.

KEEP seemed to address the very things perceived as lacking at Rough Rock at the time: English listening and reading comprehension, oral language development, cooperative learning groups, and instruction keyed to the local culture. But KEEP

provided something else: needed curricular direction, sustained involvement and follow-up, and direct work with teachers in their classrooms. KEEP stepped into an unoccupied niche at the school, providing a foundation of support for bilingual teachers to move forward.

Instructional practice in KEEP classrooms was based on the premise that students are more successful if they are able to learn within a context that is socially, linguistically, and cognitively compatible with their natal culture (see Jordan, and Vogt & Au, this volume). In this respect, the KEEP-Rough Rock program was fortunate in that, by 1983, all K-3 instructional staff were Navajo community members. The types of compatibilities KEEP strategies sought to create could, in large part, be transferred through a natural teaching process.

For details on KEEP strategies and the initial KEEP-Rough Rock collaboration, we refer readers to Jordan, and to Vogt & Au (this volume; see also McCarty, 1993; Vogt, et al. 1993). Here we want to point out that as that collaboration evolved into RREN LAP, the Rough Rock teaching staff expanded on the KEEP premise of compatibility by tailoring instructional content as well as classroom organizational structures to the local culture. Today, RREN LAP is implemented in all K-3 classrooms and serves approximately 130 students. The classrooms are organized around learning centers and small-group instruction that includes both Navajo and English. Curricular content centers on teacher- and student-developed thematic units that are meaningful to the students and relevant to important events and activities within Navajo culture. These units integrate conventional content area knowledge and develop children's literacy and biliteracy through the use of authentic children's literature, creative writing and publishing.

For example, a recent thematic unit in Sally Begay's third grade class centered on Navajo creation stories. As part of their studies, students read Ethelou Yazzie's (1971) *Navajo History* and Marilyn V. Maberry's (1991) *Right After Sundown: Teaching Stories of the Navajos*. The importance of insects and insect people in Navajo

creation stories provided an ideal connecting point to science and entomology. Hence, students were involved in scientific inquiry, literature study, journal writing, creative writing and publishing--all revolving around a locally generated theme. Oral and written language development were natural parts of this interdisciplinary enterprise. The text in Figure 1, "The First World" by Morris Denetdeel, illustrates what children can do under such instructional conditions.

Monitoring Students' Strengths and Progress

Criterion-referenced assessment is a key feature of RREN LAP instruction. Assessments are based on objectives for children's language and literacy development, identified on individual student profile sheets. The objectives originated with KEEP, but have been significantly modified to include comprehension, syntax, verbal expression, and an entire component for Navajo. Stories used to assess oral and written comprehension were developed in Navajo. The content of other stories, provided by KEEP, was changed to reflect the local culture. For example, one story describes an older relative instructing children in making kneel-down bread, a traditional bread made of fresh ground corn wrapped in corn husks and baked in a bread oven. Other stories used for assessment have been translated into Navajo from the original KEEP versions in English.

The assessment process consists of three parts: (1) preassessment, done with all new students during the first three weeks of the school year; (2) teacher-requested assessment, in which students are evaluated on all strands of the profile sheet except for Navajo and/or English listening and reading; and (3) quarter assessment, done every nine weeks for Navajo and English listening and reading.

Figure 1.
"The First World" by Morris Denetdeel

Morris
February 3, 1994

The First World

The first world was a drak island the Holy people lived on the island. On the island there lived four beings there names were Water Monster, Blue Heron, Frog, and White Mountain Thunder. The insect people lived there for sevenl days.

The island floated around in darkness and around there were four cardinal directions. The insect people lived there for another sevenl days. A day after sevenl days the insect people started to fight. Then they started quarreling among themselves. The four beings Water Monster, Blue Heron, Frog, and White Mountain Thunder. The four beings turned against the insect people. The four beings told them to go elsewhere.

These locally developed assessments, in addition to teacher and student evaluations of children's writing, now constitute a viable alternative to the standardized tests upon which the school had relied prior to RREN LAP. And on criterion-referenced measures, students' end-of-the-year scores consistently show substantial improvements in oral English and reading. In 1992-93, the most recent year for which program evaluation data are available, 38 percent of all K-3 students mastered criterion-referenced objectives for English listening comprehension, and 71 percent mastered objectives for English reading (where "mastery" means an end-of-year score of 70 percent or higher on locally-developed assessments). All students improved their English listening comprehension scores over the 1992-93 school year; overall, the K-3 group improved their mean listening scores by 15 percentage

points. In English reading, the K-3 group in 1992-93 gained an average of 13 percentage points from fall to spring. These findings, though encouraging, are preliminary. Further, they tell us little of the *quality* of students' learning or of their reading and writing in Navajo and English. This has caused us to look more closely at standardized tests and to investigate additional evaluation alternatives, as the section below describes.

From Staff Development to Teacher Research

None of the instructional changes outlined above occurred in a vacuum or as a linear, "straight-line" process (see Vogt & Au, this volume). They evolved over time, initially in the context of KEEP's direct and ongoing work in Rough Rock classrooms, and later through workshops, institutes, and coursework requested by and in some cases led by RRENLAP teachers themselves.

Before the creation of RRENLAP, school-sponsored staff development consisted largely of "one-shot" inservices and conferences, which provided little or no follow-up. With the inception of RRENLAP came a concerted effort to assure program continuity. A primary consideration was the identification of a cadre of local bilingual teachers who seemed most likely to stay with the school. These teachers, with the support and co-involvement of program administrators Dick and Estell, then had sustained opportunities for studying and trying out the methods used in KEEP classrooms. Teachers and the elementary principal observed KEEP in Hawaii, and KEEP teacher-researcher Lynn Vogt worked directly with teachers and program administrators in K-3 classrooms. Afton Sells, then the third grade teacher with whom KEEP carried out its initial research, also provided inservices and demonstrations in other K-3 classrooms.

As RRENLAP evolved, staff development did likewise. Witnessing improvements in students' English language development, teachers grew in their confidence to modify KEEP to better meet students' needs. Staff development moved away from

focus on KEEP-specific strategies ("cloning KEEP;" see Dick, et al., 1994), to immersion in research, theory and practice in American Indian bilingual education. At teachers' request, whole language, cooperative learning, thematic units and literature-based reading became the core staff development activities. All K-3 teachers attended the American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI) at the University of Arizona, where they worked together with McCarty; there and in on-site follow-up workshops, these pedagogies were reinforced.

In the process of our work in classrooms and these staff development activities, we began to question the limited means available to evaluate what we observed students actually doing. While RRENLAP's criterion-referenced assessment system provided good indicators of students' language proficiencies and growth, it could not capture the richness or texture of that growth, represented in texts such as Morris Denetdeel's (Figure 1). Standardized tests were far worse, projecting only images of "limits," "underachievement," and "deficiencies." The vast difference between children's scores on these tests and their performance on RRENLAP's criterion-referenced measures--as well as our first-hand observations--demonstrated that the problem resided in the linguistic and experiential biases of standardized tests, not in children's real abilities.

In the spring of 1992, eight RRENLAP teachers, the elementary principal, Dick and McCarty formed a study group to investigate alternatives to standardized assessment. Similar to teacher study groups elsewhere (see, e.g., Gonzalez, et al., 1995; Short, et al., 1992; Lipka & Ilutsk, this volume), the RRENLAP group was voluntary, organized by teachers for their own purposes, and intended to connect a body of scholarly literature to our classroom-based research on Navajo students' literacy and biliteracy. The group met weekly for a few hours and monthly for a full day over the course of one semester. Initially, our concerns were with reading and discussing several texts, including Sarah Hudelson's (1989) *Write On*, and Robert Tierney et al.'s (1991)

Portfolio Assessment in the Reading-Writing Classroom. Between meeting times we kept reflective logs and dialogue journals, and consciously observed and collect samples of students' writing in Navajo and English.

At our first full meeting, several teachers said they did not "know anything" about student assessment, and were "waiting to be told what to do" with the writing samples they had collected. (For further details on the structure of the study group and its internal dynamics, see McCarty, 1993, and Lipka & McCarty, 1994.) By the end of that meeting, the group began to take a critical stance to this subordinate role: "We tend to accept what somebody else develops" (i.e., standardized tests), one teacher stated. Galena Dick pointed out, "This study group is not just a place where we have to listen to one person and have them give us all the answers... We know our kids better than anybody else... Teachers intuitively know there is more going on than what is represented on standardized tests" (of. Dick, et al., 1994, p. 41; Lipka & McCarty, 1994, pp. 271-272).

The study group became the forum in which we not only examined children's literacy-in-process, but also in which bilingual teachers validated for themselves their intuitive and professional knowledge of that process. By literally laying students' Navajo and English writing on the table, teachers publicly and collectively affirmed the value of their bilingualism and cultural knowledge in understanding what Rough Rock students *can* do. This rich, qualitative understanding stood in stark contrast to simple numbers on tests. Often this process recalled painful memories of teachers' own English literacy experiences in federal boarding schools, where they had been denied the opportunities they now were trying to afford their students.

As we have described it elsewhere (see e.g., Lipka & McCarty, 1994, p. 272), the study group afforded much more than a chance to explore alternative assessment. The study group created a "zone of safety"—an environment for positive change—in which conventional practices could be questioned, opposition expressed,

and new approaches explored and tried. This was not a "comfort zone;" indeed, there was great personal and shared discomfort as teachers revisited their education histories and challenged many pedagogical assumptions internalized in the course of their schooling. The study group instead created a space and a place in which RRENLAP teachers and the group as a whole could examine past educational practices, compare those to the innovations being used within RRENLAP, and consider our interdependent roles as change agents. Perhaps more than any other single experience since RRENLAP's establishment as distinct from KEEP, the study group strengthened bilingual teachers' ownership over the process and outcomes of instruction, reinforced group solidarity, and provided the opportunity for teachers to acknowledge the power of their own pedagogy.

Conditions Underlying Positive Change

The occasion for this article was the opportunity to reflect, with our colleagues from KEEP, on a decade of program development and change, and on the singular encounter between two schools that sparked that process of change. While the encounter itself was fortuitous and unlikely to be repeated, the ensuing processes, especially as they developed locally through RRENLAP, contain lessons we believe are transferrable to other American Indian schools. In this section, we consider those lessons and the conditions that promote positive and lasting pedagogical transformations.

First, none of the changes described here is possible without the presence of a stable core of local bilingual teachers. At Rough Rock, such a situation did not materialize until the early 1980s, following years of work by then teacher assistants to obtain their teaching degrees. All K-3 teachers have their roots in the Rough Rock community. The Rough Rock School Board explicitly supported local educators' work, both in the board's written policy and in the allocation of its financial resources (see also Holm &

Holm, this volume). The profound impact of this single development cannot be underestimated: It is these teachers' presence as community members, their longevity in their current positions, and their commitment to bilingual/bicultural education that has muted the effects of an intrinsically volatile school financial structure, and opened new possibilities for instruction that reflects local interests.

Related to this, it is important to point out that RREN LAP's organization reflects the reciprocity and mutual aid characteristic of the local community. Most RREN LAP staff members are related by blood and marriage ties. While we might envision difficulties arising from this situation, we also recognize that it is quite common in small communities. Within RREN LAP, this personal network has nurtured pedagogical change that makes use of individuals' language and culture strengths, while also providing an additional basis for collective action.

Second, program administrators have played critical roles. In the case of those administrators closest to the program, we note the importance of their longevity in their positions and commitment to bilingual/bicultural education. Equally important has been these administrators' facilitation of a school culture that values bilingual teachers' voices. At Rough Rock, the elementary principal and bilingual program coordinator have participated as equals in staff development and other aspects of the program's implementation. Providing release time and physical facilities, these administrators ensured that teachers could engage in sustained reflection, dialogue, and critique of conventional pedagogies (see also Vogt & Au, this volume). Through their actions as well as their words, these administrators demonstrated the value placed on bilingual teachers' work. This encouraged teachers to take new instructional risks. The overall effects were to enhance teachers' professional confidence and ownership over the program, and to fundamentally democratize relations between administrative and teaching staff.

Third, the support and expertise of outside collaborators contributed significantly to the program. While the conditions

above emphasize the cultivation of resources *within* the school and community, Rough Rock clearly has benefited from expertise inserted from the "outside in." Collaborations with outsiders have been long-term; they explicitly have rejected "one-shot" workshops, focusing instead on direct work in classrooms and a *mutual* process of learning and professional growth. In recent years, RRENLAP's collaborative relationships have grown, as bilingual teachers have reported on their work at national and international conferences. The increasing dialogue with other indigenous educators resulting from such dissemination efforts expanded RRENLAP's base of support, and strengthened our resolve to provide a bilingual/bicultural educational alternative.

Finally, RRENLAP has been able to maintain funding at levels that permit development of the three conditions outlined above. Given the dual facts of the federal trust responsibility for Indian education and the absence of a property tax base in reservation communities, the issue of sustained federal funding is critical. It is noteworthy that recent federal grants supporting RRENLAP have been conceptualized and written by RRENLAP teachers and administrators themselves.

In summary, several generalizable conditions stand out as instrumental in facilitating "change from the inside out" as we have described it here. A school culture must be fostered that values and rewards local knowledge, and that nurtures the development of local expertise. Coupled with this, there must be consistency and longevity of local program personnel and staff development opportunities, along with a firm commitment to program goals. School power relations must be democratized such that bilingual teachers control their own pedagogy. The latter carries a heightened significance in American Indian and other minority communities, as it entails a basic reversal of historic role relations. It is this dimension of change, we believe, that constitutes the essence of "change from the inside out," for it is only when teachers feel and are validated in their work that they can create the same conditions for their students.

Concluding Thoughts

We began by noting that the story of Rough Rock is one of innovation. Within RRENLAP, curricular and pedagogical innovations have grown out of the work of a core of Navajo teachers who speak, read and write their own language. This has promoted program stability, while simultaneously building a foundation for continued program development and enhancing the school success of Rough Rock elementary students. As it has been elaborated from the initial work with KEEP, RRENLAP now possesses an organizational structure within which local educators can examine and continue to modify the school's educational approach.

Innovation and change do not occur without struggle or disappointment. At Rough Rock, a great deal of work remains to be done, not the least of which is expanding the program beyond grade three. This will require, at the very least, more bilingual teachers and Navajo print materials. Both are goals of a newly funded developmental bilingual education grant. At another level, expanding the bilingual/bicultural program throughout grades K-12 will require establishing, on a district-wide basis, conditions similar to those developed within RRENLAP. The restructuring of relationships entailed by this presents an enormous challenge, but one that will become increasingly more feasible to address as more local educators assume teaching and administrative positions within the school.

We find hope that such goals will indeed become a reality in the strong tribal support for Navajo teacher education begun under the leadership of President Peterson Zah. As the statement below suggests, that support is both philosophical and logistical:

It is a priority of the Navajo Nation President and a dream of the Navajo Division of Dine' (Navajo) Education to some day take control of their own education. It is the mission of the Division of Education to assure that all

Navajo people have the opportunity to be educated, and to be able to carry on the work of building the Navajo Nation. Navajo young people need to be proud that they are Navajo and hold respect for the heritage, land, and people to which they belong. They need to be able to build strength from their culture, language, and history, and have faith in their own potential. They must be committed to perpetuating their Navajo heritage which they have received from previous generations and to mastering the knowledge, technologies, skills, and abilities which are necessary to succeed in the American and world societies. The Division of Education is committed to work with local school boards and school board organizations... Communities... educators... and students... to improve the quality and relevance of education for all Navajos (Sells, 1994, p. 1).

This vision for education calls for increasing Navajoness in Navajo education by, among other things, producing a cadre of Navajo teachers prepared and committed to teach in and through Navajo. In tandem with Navajo Community College and numerous local school districts, including Rough Rock, the Navajo Division of Education has vigorously pursued this goal (Pfeiffer, 1993). The many contributions to this volume are evidence that such goals are widely shared in indigenous communities.

We believe RRENLAP provides one model for realizing these goals. That model is rooted in a simple yet critical understanding: Those best equipped to mediate between an educational system of exogenous origin and the local language and culture, are local educators themselves.

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