

THE BILINGUAL RESEARCH JOURNAL  
Winter 1995, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 141-167

## NAVAJO LANGUAGE EDUCATION: RETROSPECT AND PROSPECTS

Agnes Holm and Wayne Holm  
Navajo Nation

### **Abstract**

Holm and Holm have been involved as practitioners and action-researchers in Navajo language education for over 30 years. Here they describe the growth and development of bilingual education on the Navajo Reservation, and resultant outcomes for Navajo students, educators and communities. From the groundbreaking efforts in bilingual education at Rock Point, to recent work in Navajo immersion programs, this article shows not only how learning is mediated by language and culture in the Navajo context, but also the critical conditions needed to sustain genuine two-language education. The article relates these developments to a sociohistorical analysis of Navajo and the status of Navajo today, and finally, considers prospects for the survival of Navajo, in particular as a child-language.

### **Retrospect**

We begin by looking back over the ways Navajo language has or has not been used in schools. We have not attempted to present a detailed sequential history of Navajo education (for further discussion see Thompson, 1975; Roessel, 1979; and Emerson, 1983); rather, we have chosen instead to identify what seem to be four basic approaches to language education. We might think of these as stages, but in the real world one stage has not necessarily replaced another in all locations. It therefore makes more sense to conceptualize these as approaches to language education.

All reservation schools have not used the same approach at the same time. There have always been some schools that seem to be "ahead of" or "behind" the times. There are some schools using each of these four approaches now.

Further, even within a given school, some programs or levels may utilize different approaches--and some teachers or groups seem to be "ahead of" or "behind" the rest of the school. There may well be proponents of several different approaches working within a single school. Still, this framework of four approaches, or four stages, may help us understand something of today's diverse language programs impacting Navajo students.

**Approach #1: No Navajo.** The first on-reservation school was established over 120 years ago. That school was conducted in English only. Since then, most Navajo schools have been conducted in English only. Originally, it was not so much that school people were opposed to conducting school in Navajo as it was that the idea of doing so was all but *unthinkable*. Over time, a few mission schools made use of some Navajo to teach religion. In the late 1930s, some Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) educators came to advocate the use of Navajo in schools. Several sets of books were written in Navajo, but few if any schools ever used these. World War II brought these experiments to an end. Today, most classrooms and most schools serving Navajo students still conduct school (almost) entirely in English. Where Navajo is used, its use tends to be limited in both scope and intent.

**Approach #2: Navajo as a Means.** In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Navajo came to be used in the off-reservation Five Year Program (a federal program for students in the five-year age span of 12-17). In students' first years in the program, Navajo-speaking assistants translated for Anglo teachers. In the students' later years, however, instruction occurred in English only. Thus, Navajo was used as a *means*: a means of enabling students to comprehend instruction in English. These programs were, at the time, an innovative and imaginative approach to schooling for teenage students with no previous school experience. The programs ceased

to be appropriate with the advent of near-universal schooling for Navajos.

In the late 1960s, some on-reservation Navajo schools were able to obtain federal Title VII Bilingual Education Act funds. All programs at that time were transitional in nature; Navajo was used as a language of instruction in some areas while students received intensive English-as-a-second-language instruction. Within a few years, the use of Navajo was discontinued and students went on to English-only instruction. Here, too, Navajo was used only as a means to essentially English language ends.

In a sense, transitional programs were inappropriate-upon-arrival on the reservation. At least some Navajo schools realized the fallacy of "exiting" students at the end of two or three years and found ways to conduct what have since come to be called maintenance or developmental programs with or without Title VII funds (see McLaughlin, this volume). In recent years transitional programs have been somewhat discredited. But some Navajo schools still have such programs. During a visit to Australia, we heard an Australian educator explain these programs to a group of aboriginal teacher-trainees; "The Yanks use Navajo as a bridge to English, but once the kiddies have crossed over that bridge, they burn it!"

**Approach #3: Navajo as Supplemental.** In the late 1960s and early 1970s, some public and Bureau high schools added Navajo as a foreign language elective. Some schools have offered such courses for some time now. The courses have usually tried to simultaneously serve both Navajo and non-Navajo speakers. The expectations for both groups have typically been quite modest. Such programs have since been offered in some middle or junior high schools, and at some elementary schools. With the implementation in Arizona of a foreign language mandate, most (not all) Navajo-majority public elementary schools in Arizona have begun to teach some Navajo as a "foreign" language. Most of these schools were teaching Navajo in at least two grades during the most recent school year.

These elementary programs are new; most aim at best to give students some limited conversational ability in Navajo. In a few schools students may also be taught to sound out some simple written Navajo. In most schools these are essentially *add-on classes*: one more subject in an already overloaded curriculum.

**Approach #4: Navajo as Integral.** In the late 1960s the Rough Rock Demonstration School began using English and Navajo as languages of instruction (see Begay, Dick, Estell, Estell, McCarty, & Sells, this volume). A number of other community-controlled schools followed suit. In recent years, several public schools have begun to do so (McLaughlin, this volume).

In these schools, Navajo was used in its own right, *not* just as the means to essentially English-language ends. Students were expected to continue to develop their Navajo language abilities *throughout* their school careers. Students were taught to read and write first in Navajo. They continued to read and write in Navajo after they learned to read and write in English. Nor was Navajo merely an add-on subject. The use of Navajo allowed students to study their own community and culture. But conventionally Anglo content--math, social studies, science--also were taught in Navajo. Students learned both content and skills through Navajo and in so doing, they continued to develop in Navajo. Navajo came to be used in ways it had not been used before: with computers, in school-based research, in drama and in creative writing. Navajo was used to express both thoughts and feelings.

These programs continue to be successful (see, e.g., Begay, et al., this volume). But despite some favorable data, and consonant with contemporary language learning research and theory, these programs have not been widely emulated. It seems to have been assumed that such programs are only possible in more rural communities. The relative success to date of at least two longer-term, more urban Navajo immersion programs should call this assumption into question.

## Two Programs

In this section, we briefly present two contemporary programs: the two-language program at Rock Point Community School, and the Navajo immersion program at Fort Defiance Elementary School, both in northern Arizona. We choose to describe them as "two-language," rather than "bilingual," programs for a specific reason. In the context of Navajo education, the word "bilingual" has come to mean all sorts of things except two languages: In many schools, "bilingual" students are those who do not speak English (well); in many schools "bilingual" teachers are those who teach Navajo.

Rock Point Community School. Rock Point began as a BIA community day school in the mid-1930s. We came to the school in 1960. A number of papers have been written about the Rock Point program; those who are interested may consult those sources. (The role of the school board in the development of the Rock Point program is discussed in Holm & Holm, 1990; comparative data on student achievement appears in Rosier & Holm, 1980; and a rich ethnography of school- and community-based Navajo literacy is found in McLaughlin, 1992). Here we will provide some background for the lessons drawn.

Rock Point is a reservation-interior community on the middle reaches of Chinle Wash. In 1960, the three-teacher K-3 community boarding school was the lowest scoring school in the lowest scoring BIA agency on standardized achievement tests.

We began a modest ESL program at the school in 1960. The school board was able to get the school enlarged to a K-S, seven-teacher school. With the arrival of Elizabeth Willink in 1963-64, the school began a much more ambitious ESL program. The school undertook some small-scale explorations of Navajo literacy in 1964 and 1966. Initially skeptical of the school's intensive ESL program, the Bureau subsequently made the school a demonstration-training center in ESL. The school was expanded again in 1967-68. With its first discretionary (Title I) funds in

1968, the school began a beginner-level initial Navajo literacy program. In 1971, the school obtained Title VII funds to implement a serious Navajo-English bilingual program.

In 1971, after 18 frustrating months, the community-elected school board was able to contract for the operation of the then K-6 school. Contracting enables an Indian tribe or community to operate a school in its own way. The board proposes the program and the ways in which that program may be evaluated; the Bureau of Indian Affairs provides the same amount of money they would have had they operated the school. The originally administrative procedures became law with the passage of P.L. 93-638, The Indian Education Assistance and Self-Determination Act, in 1975. Although offered employment contracts, only two of the Bureau teachers chose to remain. The board hired a whole new staff.

Doing away with the roles of teacher aides, the school placed two or more teachers in each of the primary classrooms: a Navajo Language Teacher (NLT), and an English Language Teacher (ELT). The teachers worked as a team; one, both, or neither might have degrees. In what was then called a coordinate bilingual program, instruction went on simultaneously at both ends of the classroom with students alternating between the NLT, the ELT, and independent work.

The Bureau continued to be concerned about the school's unconventional staffing and curriculum. The board stated in the contract that students would do better on a standardized tests of the Bureau's choice than the other agency schools. This did, in fact, occur. The school board agreed to have all non-degreed teachers take coursework toward a degree each semester and summer. We brought university courses on-site, and taught university courses as adjunct professors. Local educators went on campus to a regional university during the summers. Over time, about 50 individuals obtained their degrees on-site; many did their student teaching on-site in Navajo.

The school started with a radically simplified curriculum: ESL, reading, math, and Navajo social studies. The emphasis was on

language and thought; students were expected to show they knew what they were doing. Students began reading and writing in Navajo. They added reading and writing in English in the second grade, and thereafter they read and wrote in both languages. Math was taught in both languages with heavy reliance on base-ten manipulatives. Social studies was community-specific Navajo social studies. In time, the school added a hands-on science-in-Navajo component. The school constructed their own set of curriculum-specific, criterion-referenced tests. All students were expected to master these objectives and when necessary, were coached until they were able to do so.

There were three teachers, two NLTs and an ELT, in the kindergarten. In the first and second grades, there were two teachers—an NLT and an ELT. There was a single classroom teacher, an ELT, in grades three through six. Students in the latter classes went out to specialty NLTs for Navajo literacy and either Navajo social studies or science in Navajo, and to programmed reading in English.

Concerned about what was happening to their sixth grade graduates, the board established first a junior high and then a high school. The first high school graduates graduated in 1982. The school has continued to grow and evolve. For a dozen years now, the secondary school's Applied Literacy Program (ALP) has published a quarterly Navajo/English newspaper containing original research and writing from all students. They have operated a community low-power television station showing original videos by students in the ALP program. Now, 16 years after having initiated a secondary program (in an old dormitory), the school has finally obtained funds with which to build a secondary school.

We have written elsewhere about the academic performance of these students (Holm & Holm, 1990; Rosier & Holm, 1980). It would be incorrect to claim that the students met or exceeded national averages on standardized achievement grades. Some grade levels did so on some tests. But the students did do better than comparable students in nearby schools at all grade levels, and the

margin of differences tended to be larger at each succeeding grade. Just as important—though harder to gauge—was that students had considerably more self-confidence and pride. We believe that people now take considerable pride in being from Rock Point. The program is demanding, and the school may not be as "entertaining" as some; some secondary community students opt to go to other nearby schools. It remains to be seen what will happen when the school finally has adequate secondary facilities. A fairly large proportion of graduates go on to college. Almost all of the staff is now Navajo; most are from or married into the community. Many of the younger teachers are graduates of the community school program.

**The Navajo Immersion Program at Fort Defiance Elementary School.** Fort Defiance was the site of a pre-Civil War army fort, the original Navajo Agency, and what may have been the first school in Arizona about 125 years ago. In the 1970s, the school had a good bilingual program.

In 1981, we visited New Zealand through Fulbright awards. There we had an opportunity to work in the Maori immersion program at Ruatoki, and to see some of the other bilingual schools there. We concluded that this might be the way Navajo education would have to go by the year 2000 if Navajo language education did not catch on.

In 1986, Wayne Holm went to work for Fort Defiance Elementary School, and was asked to conduct a survey of students' language abilities. We found that only a third of incoming kindergartners had even passive knowledge of Navajo. Less than a tenth of the five-year-olds were reasonably competent speakers of Navajo. And, something we became increasingly aware of over time, a relatively high proportion of the English monolinguals had to be considered "limited English proficient." "Limited English proficiency" is usually defined as having difficulties with English due to "interference" from some other home language. The point we wish to make here is that many more urban Navajo students may have limited English despite the fact that English is their



weaker or only language. We are *not* saying these students are "a-lingual" or "semi-lingual;" we *are* saying that many of these students do not do well on tests of English language ability, and that many of them do not do well (at least initially) on English-mediated measures of academic achievement. In effect, the year 2000 had already arrived. We concluded that if there were to be a two-language program, it would have to be a Navajo immersion program. And, because "bilingual education" had come to be viewed so negatively, the program would have to be voluntary.

With strong administrative support, we set out to contact the 48 kindergartners who had tested as having at least passive knowledge of Navajo. To our utter surprise, 46 of those parents agreed to enroll their children in the immersion program. In mid-November, we started the first two (later three) kindergarten immersion classrooms. For details on this program, see Arviso & Holm (1990).

These were *not* limited English speakers. Later analyses (Holm, 1992) showed that the Navajo immersion (NI) students had known about as much English and Navajo upon entry to school as had the monolingual English (ME) students. The students differed not so much in their language abilities as in their parents' aspirations for them. The NI students' parents believed it important for their children to acquire and develop in Navajo. The goal of this program was not (as it was at Rock Point), higher academic achievement; it was the acquisition of, and development in Navajo. We claimed that students could do this and do as well in English as the ME students by the third, and later the fifth grade.

What followed were the most anxious weeks of our lives. Only after the December holiday break did the children begin to use Navajo in other than set situations. In subsequent years, we added a grade each year. Participation remained voluntary: Students enrolled (or re-enrolled) each year.

The curriculum was kept simple: developmental Navajo, reading (first in Navajo and then in English), writing (first in Navajo and

then in English), and mathematics (in both languages). The other subject areas were included as content for speaking or writing activities. The program placed heavy emphasis on language and thinking. Process writing and cooperative learning approaches were extensively used.

The kindergarten and first grades took place almost entirely in Navajo. Both the teacher and the aide taught in Navajo; Wayne Holm and others came in to provide students 40 minutes a day of small-group instruction in English, while the other two groups continued in Navajo. In the second and third grades, students went a half-day in Navajo and half-day in English. Where possible, we attempted to pair a Navajo and an English-language classroom side-by-side. In theory, fourth and fifth graders had an hour of group work in Navajo; in practice, this seldom occurred.

By the time students were in the third grade, there was a change in the school's administration. The new administration was considerably more skeptical about the program, and attempted to "cap" it at the end of the fourth grade. Parents fought back and the administration allowed the program to continue into the fifth grade.

In the course of this controversy, student evaluations indicated that the third and fourth grade NI students did as well on tests of English language ability as the ME students. NI students did considerably better on tests of Navajo language ability; all but a handful of the original Navajo speakers in the ME program tested *lower* in Navajo as fourth graders than they had as kindergartners! The NI students did considerably better on local assessments of writing-in-English. They did better on math in the computer lab. On standardized tests, they still were slightly behind (but catching up) in English reading; slightly ahead on some and slightly behind in other so-called language subtests; and way ahead in math.

It appeared that these students were well on their way to accomplishing what had been claimed: that they would acquire or develop in Navajo "without cost"--that is, they would be doing as well as ME students in English by the fifth grade.

For a few years, the NI program was continued in an attenuated fashion in the sixth and then the seventh grade of the middle school. It has now been discontinued in the middle school, which has been conducting a television-based Navajo program for several years now. The program continues in the elementary school on a somewhat attenuated basis. The kindergarten and first grade classrooms appear exemplary. Unfortunately, the fourth and fifth grade program has never again been fully implemented.

### **Lessons To Be Learned**

Here we set out four interrelated lessons to be learned from the two programs described above.

**Lesson 1: The Need for Selection/Intensity/Commitment.** The Rock Point program involved a careful selection of activities, as did the Fort Defiance program. Realizing that they could not do everything, the programs attempted to do those few things they thought most important, and to do those things well. As the programs and the staff developed, other things were added.

What the programs chose to do were integrated with one another. For example, the morphological complexity of Navajo verbs requires a phonic approach. Therefore, reading-in-English, when it is taught, is taught as if it were a logical extension of reading-in-Navajo. English reading materials are selected on the basis of how well they lend themselves to such an approach. In both Navajo and English phonics, students are encouraged to see and use the generalizations they find. To take another example, math is taught with manipulatives, but students are given verbal or written frameworks for "talking through" what they are doing in math. In the Fort Defiance program, carefully controlled Navajo phonics is presented in Navajo reading to complement the invented spelling approach in Navajo writing.

An often unstated corollary is that these programs quit or downplay things they *do not* think are as important. This is contrary to conventional wisdom. States and regional accrediting

associations tend to act as though good school programs involve trying to do a little of everything (on their checklists). The programs described here saw such an approach as a recipe for mediocrity, and insisted upon being selective.

Those things that these programs chose to do were done very intensely and very thoroughly. If something was considered important, it was important for every student. The programs set out, in formal or informal ways, to ensure that every student did in fact learn to do those things. Many programs say similar things in their program philosophies; these programs did this in very concrete and specific ways. This meant they did fewer things, and that they took time to allow every student to show that s/he could do what was expected. And, where necessary, classes stayed with that activity until most or all students could do it. In time, students came to expect they would succeed. This might take longer for some, but all would succeed at that task.

This, too, is contrary to conventional wisdom. So much intensity is discouraged; it is often felt to put too much pressure on the students (and/or the teachers). It's boring. Too little material is covered. Wisely or otherwise, expectations are lowered; students come to understand that "some have it and some do not"--and that if you don't "have it," there is not much you can do about it.

Both programs were characterized by high degrees of program consistency and staff commitment. In particular, the Rock Point program was strongly affected by the increased overlap between staff and community. Being community people, most school staff knew that their newly earned degrees had not come easily and that they had to prove their competence. They had high expectations for their children and those of their relatives. They put pressure on other staff members to help their children meet those expectations; others in turn put similar pressures on them. Thus there was a potentially virtuous cycle of higher expectations.

Being a federal contract school, Rock Point could also choose whether to renew the personal contracts of staff members who could not or would not accept the program. In time, the

elementary staff became an all-Navajo staff, not through ideology but because people who were from or married into the community were more likely to stay long enough to develop professionally. Not only the students but the staff had succeeded; they were committed to the program.

The situation was somewhat different at Fort Defiance. Few staff members came from the Fort Defiance community itself. But by being willing to meet parents as equals in after-school potlucks and in the classroom, teachers achieved a degree of community with parents. And parents came to communicate their high expectations for the teachers, the children, and one another.

The employment situation was somewhat different at Fort Defiance. The program was fortunate to inherit four or five reservation Navajo-language bilingual teachers who readily adapted to immersion teaching. In earlier bilingual programs, apart from the creation of new technical terms, Navajo language teachers did not have to pay a great deal of attention to their Navajo. The students they taught tended to be those students who already had the most adult-like Navajo. Teachers could focus on content. In Navajo immersion programs, however, teachers are teaching skills and content in the children's weaker language, and teachers must pay a great deal of attention to the Navajo they use. They must attend to both language and content; they must learn to teach in what might be called "sheltered Navajo." Not all former teachers in bilingual programs have made that transition successfully. Although two more Navajo-language bilingual teachers joined that group, the program suffered from its inability to attract, select, or retain equally competent and committed English-language teachers.

Here too the programs differed somewhat from the conventional wisdom which stresses allowing all teachers to be creative and try a variety of different approaches. We argue that the needs of these students, and the lack of time and resources, preclude everyone doing their own thing; they are all too likely to cancel each other out. School programs are more likely to succeed where the people

in those programs are where they want to be and believe in what they are doing.

In sum, we would argue that part of the reason for the success of these programs was their insistence on doing those things believed to be most important; integrating those things into a coherent program; doing those things intensely and well; and doing those things with commitment. We concede that this might not be the case if the things selected are not the most important things we could or should be doing--or if the ways chosen to do them are not among the best ways to do them. But that is not an excuse for not trying. We have found that, once started, the process tends to be self-correcting: As people find different things to do or better ways to do them, the program begins to grow, almost organically.

**Lesson #2: The Need for Whole School Programs.** The Rock Point program involved the entire school. At the outset, the Fort Defiance program involved only a portion of the students. (In time, it was conjoined with a minimal Navajo-as-a-foreign-language program to involve more, though not all students.)

While early ESL programs may have involved all the students, they often did not involve all the staff, and they seldom involved parents. Later ESL programs have typically involved only some of the students. Similarly, while supplemental programs may involve all or only part of the student body, they usually involve only part of the staff and few of the parents.

Earlier programs assumed that while Navajo might be tolerated, lack of English was the problem. More recent programs seem to assume that there are real limits on what the school could or should do in Navajo. But we are learning that, reservation-wide, the Navajo language is in serious trouble (see discussion below, and Crawford, this volume). Many students who speak mainly or only English also are limited in their English language abilities.

We have come to realize that attitudinal problems are at least as important as purely language problems. In most schools and communities, Navajo does not have the "status" that English does. The more rural and/or economically poor students in ESL programs

tend to be just those who have relatively lower status in the school and community. Thus begins the vicious cycle whereby the use of Navajo in school comes to acquire low status, as Navajo is equated with rurality, poverty, and lack of "cool." Staff, student and parents come to perceive Navajo language education as "special," "remedial," and intended for students who are "behind." Some conclude that such programs actually *cause* these students to be "behind." The cycle of low status speakers and a low status language is perpetuated.

Supplemental programs would seem to have the potential to break this cycle. They seldom do, however, because the expectations for them are usually quite low. Students are seldom taught enough Navajo to communicate effectively, much less to "do academics" in Navajo. Thus we conclude that only programs involving *all* students have some hope of enabling students to do well in both Navajo and English, thereby counteracting these attitudinal problems.

In effect, two-language Navajo and English education became *the* education program of Rock Point. Some students may have received more help with English, and others with Navajo, but all students went to school in both languages. All staff members were involved in the program--not just the academic portions of the program but the total school program, including residential halls before they were phased out), transportation, food services, and even administration. Every effort was made to make Navajo a co-equal language of the school. Staff were encouraged to emphasize language and thinking activities. Parents were kept informed of the school's emphasis on language and thinking; parents conferred with teachers as equals.

The Navajo immersion program was part of a larger, essentially monolingual English program at Fort Defiance. While the immersion program staff strove to be internally consistent in their stress on language and thinking, the staff could not control the entire school. Since the NI program was voluntary, parental understanding and support was high; parents successfully fought the

administration's effort to cap the program at the fourth grade. But English-only was the emphasis of most specialty classes, the hallways, playgrounds and dining room. There were problems with administrators, staff members and students who "looked down" on the use of Navajo in the school.

Herein lies a fundamental problem. Given the high degree of language loss, only an intense immersion-type program has any hope of enabling students to acquire Navajo. (This is what Ruiz, this issue, would call an "endoglossic" school language policy.) But only some parents will support such a program; many are still concerned that such a program will cause their children to "fall behind." A partial program may be the best that can be expected in such a situation.

But with a partial program, many staff members and some students and parents still see what they expect to see. Despite evidence to the contrary, they still see "substandard" education. The addition of a state-mandated Navajo-as-a-second-language activity in the primary grades is a hopeful sign. In time, all students will receive at least some Navajo instruction. It may well be that in communities where the language is far gone, such a two-level program is the best we can hope for at this time. We can only hope that this leads, in time, to demands for more and better Navajo language instruction.

**Lesson #3: The Need for Total Programs.** Both the Rock Point and the Fort Defiance programs were total programs. They were all-day, all-year programs.

As suggested by the preceding historical discussion and analysis, most earlier ESL programs were only partial programs. Navajo was used in some ESL programs but only until students had acquired a minimum of English. The rest of the program was the conventional school program, albeit with reduced expectations. More recently, Navajo language and/or Navajo culture classes have sometimes been added on to otherwise conventional programs--with the Navajo culture class all too often taught in English. In contrast, the programs at both Rock Point and Fort Defiance were total programs.



At Rock Point, the program attempted to do a few things well: oral language development, reading and writing, and math in both languages; Navajo social studies; and science in Navajo.

Although still a part of the total Fort Defiance program, the immersion program there also was a total program. It, too, attempted to do a few things well: oral language development, reading and writing, and math in both languages. It differed from the Rock Point program because of the differences in its students' language abilities, and the fact that it had to fit into the overall (essentially monolingual English) school program at Fort Defiance. It devoted more time to Navajo language development than English, and more time to reading and writing in both languages.

ESL programs have tended to assume that, at best, Navajo was not a problem; at worst, they assumed Navajo was a hindrance. *English* was the problem that had to be addressed. Supplemental-type programs assume that while a little Navajo might boost students' self-esteem, there is little more that the school can or should do in Navajo. In both programs, there are usually very modest expectations for what students could or should do in Navajo.

In contrast, both the Rock Point and Fort Defiance Navajo programs concentrated very heavily on language and thinking. Students were expected to talk and participate actively and verbally in their own education. For example, at Rock Point, students were not only expected to understand what they read but to explain, in writing and/or orally, why and how they understood what they did. Relating math manipulatives and written symbols, students were expected to "talk through" how they arrived at their answers. Science, too, tended to be hands-on. Four-student teams were expected to perform experiments and then to talk through and write up what had happened and why. The program was integrated, then, in its emphasis on language and thought development.

There was much the same emphasis in the Navajo immersion program at Fort Defiance. There was more emphasis on writing in both languages. There was more cooperative work: having students

"talk things through" in pairs. In reading more emphasis was placed on learning to summarize and decide how a piece was organized and what was important.

In short, another reason for the success of both programs is that they are whole-school programs, taking up the whole day, every day.

**Lesson #4: The Need for High Expectations.** Both programs are characterized by high expectations of students and staff in both languages. There are individual Navajo students who are doing well in school and who expect to continue to do well. And there are, no doubt, individual teachers and some schools that have high expectations for their students and who successfully communicate those expectations to students. But still it has to be said: Overall, Navajo education is characterized by relatively low expectations. And too many students rise only to the level of those expectations. Thus the vicious cycle of expectation-lowering continues.

The program at Rock Point was characterized by high expectations. At the elementary level, the school wrote and continually revised a set of criterion-referenced objectives in key content areas, in both Navajo and English. Teachers taught toward these objectives, and called for tests when they thought their group was ready. The NL or EL evaluator then tested those students, usually individually. If all passed, the teacher went on to the next block of material. If most didn't pass, the teacher retaught and then retested. If only a few didn't pass, an itinerant teacher worked with those students until they were able to pass the test. Thus in many ways it was communicated to students, through actions not just words, that they were expected to succeed and that they would be helped until they did succeed. While evaluation at the secondary level was less extensive, the same attitude prevailed there.

Then, too, Rock Point consciously taught elementary students "how to go to school." Students were taught how to say they did not understand, to ask questions, and to ask for help. Any or all students might be called upon to "perform their competence."

When called upon, a student was expected to respond. Here too the school communicated its expectations that students would successfully participate in their own education. Over the course of several school generations, these expectations became part of the subculture of the school.

While less formalized, many of the same expectations prevailed in the Navajo immersion program at Fort Defiance. All students were expected to show that they knew what they were doing and why. Considerable use was made of cooperative learning, which had the effect of students pre-performing their competence. There also were mini-programs in which students showed their parents what they had been doing in class.

These schools had not only high academic expectations, but also high social expectations. Traditionally, Navajos have expected children to act in responsible, adult-like ways. Toward these ends and in a number of ways, Rock Point brought community adults into the school. One Navajo observer characterized student behavior there as being quite natural, "like breathing." The students knew when to concentrate and when to relax. Thus, they accomplished a great deal in a relatively relaxed atmosphere.

The same sort of thing was observable in the Navajo immersion program at Fort Defiance. There, however, the contrast between the more Navajo adult-like behavior in the immersion classes, and the more Anglo child-like behavior in some monolingual English classes, was marked. Unfortunately, under such circumstances it became harder to maintain adult-like behavior in higher grades, where students began to pay more attention to monolingual peers than to teachers.

Another reason for the success of good Navajo language programs, then, is the higher expectations students have of themselves. Acting like responsible Navajo adults, they do more and better in school.

### **Navajo Language' Education and the Status of the Navajo Language Today**

The previous sections have detailed two strong Navajo language programs, and the conditions which led to their relative success. Perhaps now more than any time in history, the significance of such programs is heightened. For as we approach the mid 1990s, Navajo is seriously endangered as a child-language. In this section, we bring together some information on the status of the Navajo language among young children today.

In 1969 and 1970, Bernard Spolsky of the Ford-funded Navajo Reading Study at the University of New Mexico, conducted surveys of Navajo six-year-olds in BIA and public schools. Teachers and aides were asked to evaluate students on a five-point scale, from monolingual Navajo to English dominant. Spolsky found that 95 percent of the six-year-olds were reported to be speakers of Navajo. Most (73 percent) were believed to speak Navajo as well as or better than English, but to be unable to do first grade work in English. Less than 5 percent were considered to be monolingual in English (Spolsky, 1970; 1971).

In 1991, over two decades after the Navajo Reading Study reports, Navajo linguist Paul Platero visited a significant number of Navajo Headstart centers (Platero, 1992). At each center, he asked the staff to evaluate each student on a three-point scale: Navajo-speaking, bilingual, and English speaking. Most of these students were four-year-olds, but there were some three- and five-year-olds. Over half the 682 preschoolers were considered by staff members to be English monolinguals. Less than half of these children were said to be speakers of Navajo (Platero, 1992).

In 1992, Wayne Holm reported earlier data from the Window Rock Oral Language Test (a test of oral Navajo) for kindergartners from Fort Defiance (W. Holm, 1992). Only about a third (38 percent) were rated as having even passive knowledge of Navajo. Less than a tenth (4 percent) were rated as being reasonably competent five-year-old speakers of Navajo. More disturbing, 62 percent of these students were rated relatively low on the IDEA test

of oral English as well. Many were rated as weak in both languages, and as weak in English, their only language. To our alarm, the retesting of students five years later showed that a few of the originally Navajo-speaking kindergartners who went into monolingual English instruction tested *lower* in Navajo as fourth graders than they had as kindergartners.

In 1993, Wayne Holm conducted a survey of all 110 Navajo area schools with Navajo majorities and kindergartens (W. Holm, 1993). Teacher aide pairs were asked to jointly rate all Navajo students' school entry abilities in both languages on a six-point scale, with zero being "not even passive knowledge," 1 being passive knowledge, 2 being limited five-year-old speaking ability, 3 being average speaking ability, 4 being above average speaking ability, and 5 being exceptional almost adult-like speaking ability. Considerable effort was made to ensure reliability. Instructional pairs without a Navajo speaker were excluded. Suspicious ratings (e.g., all zeros or fives), were questioned and if not revised, excluded.

Data were obtained for over 3,300 students. Most (87 percent) were considered to have at least passive knowledge of the language, rating 1 or higher. Only about half (52 percent) were considered to be Navajo speakers, rating 2 or higher. Less than a third (31 percent) were considered fluent five-year-old speakers of the language, rating 3 or higher. Very few (18 or less than one percent) were considered to have entered school without at least some passive knowledge of English.

In 1994, Wayne Holm analyzed data from a special tabulation of the 1990 census (Holm, 1994). This showed a steady drop in the proportion of five-year-old Navajo speakers from the early 1970s to today. This suggests there may well have been a one generation delay in the impact of schools. In the mid-1950s, the expansion of Bureau schools and the extensive construction of public schools saw 90 percent or more of Navajo students in school for the first time. Most seem to have retained Navajo, but an increasing proportion of their children and grandchildren have not.

While the rating scales and exact proportions of Navajo speakers differ from study to study, the trend is clear. Only about half of the students now entering school are speakers of Navajo. What none of the studies shows is that students who do come to school speaking Navajo tend to be perceived by many educators and fellow students as being "disadvantaged." Moreover, many students who do speak Navajo do not necessarily speak it well. And many students who enter school speaking some Navajo seem to lose considerable ability over time.

A recent study by Navajo language teacher Evangeline Parsons Yazzie (Yazzie, 1994) suggests some of the intergenerational mechanisms underlying the shift toward English. Yazzie presents 10 ethnographic profiles of children who, despite growing up in homes in which parents and relatives speak Navajo, acquired little or no Navajo. Even in the remote and traditional community in which Yazzie conducted her work, young children "sense" the relatively lower utility and prestige of Navajo *even before* they enter school. Despite hearing considerable Navajo in the nuclear and extended family, many children choose to respond (if they do) with single Navajo words or phrases, non-verbally, or in English. Most seem extremely reluctant to actually use Navajo outside the family (Yazzie, 1994).

**Summary of the Status of Navajo.** Until some time in the early 1970s, we could probably say that while the proportion of Navajo speakers was decreasing, the actual number of Navajo speakers was still increasing. With a high birth rate, the increasing number of English-only speakers was offset by the even larger numbers of new Navajo and Navajo/English speakers. But after that time, both the numbers and the proportions of English-only speakers began to accelerate. And with the relative decline in the numbers of monolingual Navajo speakers--now increasingly older people in a very young population--there has been less felt need for one 5 children to speak both Navajo and English. English is felt to be "enough."

Perhaps even more important than the numbers, the relative prestige of Navajo has declined. The evidence is all around us. There was a time when children spoke Navajo because it seemed that "everyone" around them spoke Navajo. In time children came to hear English at home from older siblings or cousins and the media; those children chose whether to speak Navajo and if so, to whom. An increasing number of parents have ceased to speak Navajo to their younger children; these children hear Navajo, if at all, only from older relatives. It now seems that in many homes, children feel that almost everyone around them speaks English, and speaking English is the "natural" thing to do.

Many parents regret what is happening, and more older people are openly sad about what they see happening. But Navajo is a relatively non-coercive society. Few parents are willing to resort to unnatural, un-Navajo ways to ensure that Navajo continues to be used "naturally" even within their nuclear family. Many adults seem resigned to the loss of Navajo--or they place unrealistic hopes on the heretofore inadequate efforts of the school.

### **Prospects**

Given the situation outlined in the preceding section, what are the chances for Navajo to continue as a language spoken by children as well as teenagers and adults? And what is the role of schools and of language education programs? The answers to these questions, we believe, rest on our ability to solve a number of difficult and interrelated problems.

First, we must communicate to young bilingual parents the advantages of their children being able to speak both English and Navajo. Parents must be convinced that it is to their child's advantage to (also) speak Navajo. If parents are to take the time and effort to impart the language, they must also be reasonably sure that schools will not penalize their child for them having used and encouraged Navajo at home.

Second, young bilingual parents must be willing to consciously make Navajo a language or the language of the home. It is one thing to believe this is desirable; it is another thing to act upon this belief. Given the pervasiveness of English in the media and among children's peers, this may mean doing "unnatural" things within the family for the child to use Navajo naturally again.

Third, schools must be willing to structure the school experience in a way that entering school with Navajo is perceived as an advantage, not a disadvantage, and that demonstrates the school values and rewards continued development of both oral and written Navajo abilities. Toward these ends, schools need to develop a whole set of activities that encourage and require students to use Navajo in relatively prestigious ways, and that enable students to study and discuss their communities in Navajo. The programs at Rock Point and Fort Defiance both offer examples of how this might be done.

Fourth, families, relatives, and individuals in organizations beyond the school must make the effort to create Navajo-speaking activities with enough status for Navajo children and youth to want to take part. With a lot of work, we may make Navajo a "school language." To go beyond that, young people have to come to feel that it is "cool" to speak Navajo.

Together, these four circumstances may, in effect, create a virtuous circle: The increased status of Navajo would make it more likely that parents would choose to make Navajo a home language; more likely for children to choose to speak Navajo, at least in some settings; and more likely for children and young adults to obtain some comfort and satisfaction through Navajo.

On the other hand, there are many things working against the Navajo language. The situation is becoming increasingly difficult, but all is not yet lost. We still have a dwindling window of opportunity in which to turn things around. There does appear to be a recent increased interest in and concern for the language. It remains to be seen whether this interest and concern can be translated into viable activities and programs. This will not "just



happen"--and it will not happen until many people are willing to work long and hard and smart to make these things happen.

Fishman (1991) has told us repeatedly that schools alone cannot "save" a language. Certainly Crawford's analysis (this volume) seems to bear this out. Some have interpreted Fishman to say that schools cannot do anything. We do not believe this is what he is saying. We think he is telling us: Don't depend on the schools to do this for you. At best, Navajo might become a heritage language, used in school but nowhere else. At worst, Navajo classes might become just another nuisance in which students do not acquire even minimal communicative competence in Navajo.

We believe that schools *can* do a great deal if they will only take Navajo seriously and go beyond the classroom to set up activities that cause students to inquire in Navajo in their homes and communities. Certainly schools alone cannot "save" a language. But conversely, we know of no successful efforts to reverse language shift in the 20th century that have ignored the school. Living as dispersed as we do in the Navajo Nation, there are few other social groupings upon which we can depend. Fishman (1994) reminds us, however, that we must concentrate not only on activities in school, but also activities, before, after, and out of school.

Some of us believe it meaningful to "be Navajo through Navajo;" that is, we affirm Fishman's "being X through X," rather than "being X through Y;" of being Navajo through the use of the Navajo language, instead of trying to be Navajo through the use of English (Fishman, 1991). We must continue to do what we can for those parents, schools and communities who do not accept the loss of that opportunity to be inevitable. And we must continue to hope that others will do the same.

*J'óó hot'ééla. T'áá 'akódí.*

## References

- Arviso, M. & Holm, W. (1990). Native American language immersion programs: Can there be bilingual education when the language is going (or gone) as a child language?" *Journal of Navajo Education*, 8 (1), 39-47.
- Emerson, G. (1983). Navajo education. In A. Ortiz, (Ed.) & W. Sturtevant (Series Ed.) *Handbook of North American Indians, Vol. X Southwest* (pp. 659-671). Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.
- Fishman, J. (1991). *Reversing language shift Clevedon*, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Fishman, J. (1994, November). Keynote Address at the Conference on "Stabilizing Indigenous Languages. Flagstaff: Northern Arizona University.
- Holm, W. (1992). Preliminary analysis of comparative data for the Navajo immersion program. Ms. on file, Ft. Defiance Elementary School, Ft. Defiance, AZ.
- Holm, W. (1993). A very preliminary analysis of Navajo kindergartners' language abilities. Ms. on file, Navajo Division of Education, Window Rock, AZ.
- Holm, W. (1994). Current status (of the Navajo language). In *Navajo Nation Language Project*, on file, Navajo Division of Education, Window Rock, AZ, C1-22.
- Holm, A. & Holm, W. (1990). Rock Point, A Navajo way to go to school: A Valediction. *Annals, AASSP*, 508, 170-184.
- McLaughlin, D. (1992). *When literacy empowers: Navajo language in print*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Platero, P. (1992). Navajo Headstart language study. Ms. on file, Navajo Division of Education, Window Rock, AZ.
- Roessel, R.A., Jr. (1979). *Navajo education, 1948-1978*. Rough Rock, AZ: Navajo Curriculum Center Press.

- Rosier, P. & Holm, W. 1980. *The Rock Point experience: A longitudinal study of a Navajo school program (saad naaki bee na'nitin)*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Spolsky, B. (1970). Navajo language maintenance: Six-year-olds in 1969. *Navajo Reading Study Progress Report No. 5*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, College of Education.
- Spolsky, B. (1971). Navajo language maintenance II: Six-year-olds in 1970. *Navajo Reading Study Progress Report No. 13*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, College of Education.
- Thompson, H. (1975). *The Navajos' long walk for education*. Tsaile: Navajo Community College Press.
- Yazzie, E. P. (1994, November). Draft of unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Flagstaff: Northern Arizona University.