Navajo Bilingual and Bicultural Education

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1. Introduction

"If a tribal language is still an important part of the governmental, social, religious, or ceremonial life of a tribe, or is an important component of intergenerational dialogue within Indian families, the schools should make a commitment to assist in the continuity of that language through bilingual education."
Blanchard, (page 196)

It is not controversial to say that language is the medium for large numbers of cultural transactions. What is a popular fallacy, however, is the notion that between distinct languages it is possible to translate all concepts adequately such that it is irrelevant which language is used as the medium for cultural transmission. Apart from a selfish desire on the part of linguists to preserve endangered languages for later study, I would like to illustrate why the Navajo language is a cultural commodity that the Navajo themselves cannot afford to lose.

The Navajo, until this century, did not have a writing system. This meant that cultural lore and history was passed from generation to generation orally. Wilson Aronilth, a professor at Diné College, related to me that at the time of first contact with Westerners, the Navajo had over five hundred distinct ceremonials. Since that time, the number has dwindled to fewer than forty, representing a serious collective cultural loss. Now ceremonials are being transcribed in Navajo for the sake of future generations, but a sufficient number of native Navajo speakers and literates is
necessary if the full cultural content is to be accessible to the general population at all.1

If Navajo culture is in some measure encoded in the Navajo language, and we determine that Navajo culture is in itself worth preserving, then efforts to maintain the Navajo language are also essential. If the Navajo language is failing to be transmitted from one generation to the next in the homes, then schools must step up to the challenge of preserving this cultural element.2

In the United States today, there is a widespread emphasis on a melting pot ideology that prefers assimilation to multiculturalism. It is within the melting pot model that Navajos (and other minority linguistic groups) are expected to abandon their native language in favor of English, to better fit into the American mainstream. Huff felt that “this lack of respect, along with a disregard for the students’ languages and cultures in many schools enrolling Indian students both on and off reservations are contributing to the disappearance of tribal languages and identity” and to the low academic performance of Native students (page 26).

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1 The Navajo language, although comparatively healthy in numbers of speakers when placed alongside other Native American languages, is in danger of extinction as it is passed on to fewer and fewer members of succeeding generations. According to data derived from the 1990 USA Census Bureau, there are at present close to 150,000 Navajo speakers in a population of nearly 220,000 ethnic Navajos. Of these, approximately 7,600 are monolingual Navajo speakers (SIL ethnologue).

2 Although this paper focuses primarily on the educational realities of the Navajo people, many of the themes presented here are also applicable to the majority of Native American tribes and, by extension, to other disadvantaged minority groups in the United States. The universality of these themes should be kept in mind.
The negative attitudes towards multilingual communities can be attributed to both blind nationalism and xenophobia. This prevailing political climate is endangering the legal gains made in bilingual education in the 1960s and 1970s. Intending to equalize educational opportunities, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was approved and funded by Congress in 1965. The Bilingual Education Act (Title VII)\(^3\) was added in 1968. While it does not mandate bilingual education, it does provide “funds for districts to establish programs that used primary language instruction to assist limited English proficient children. In subsequent amendments to the act, funds were allocated for teacher training, research, information dissemination, and program support.” (Lessow-Hurley, page 7) The 1970s and early 1980s found mandated dual language instruction in nine states\(^4\), and all fifty states permitted bilingual education.

Historically, and presently, there has been much debate over whether or not languages other than English have a place in the United States, despite gains made towards preserving individual minority cultures. Public figures such as Theodore Roosevelt declared “We have room for but one language here, and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house” (King).

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\(^3\) These specific acts were aimed at the advancement of the education of all groups in the United States, not just Native Americans.
\(^4\) I was unable to determine if Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah (those states with Navajo reservation lands) were among those that mandated dual language instruction.
It is my intention to argue in favor of a polyglot society, in which cultural groups such as the Navajo are allowed and encouraged to operate within and without multiple linguistic codes. Particularly in the case of the Navajo, who are not immigrants to the United States but had the ways of an immigrant government imposed upon them, every effort should be made to allow them agency in their own educational, cultural, and linguistic affairs.
2. Native American Education in the United States

2.1 An historical survey

Navajos, and Native Americans in general, have long suffered at the hands of the United States government's discriminatory and irresponsible education policies. The history has been marked by efforts on the part of the US government to assimilate Native Americans into the dominant culture by whatever means necessary. Successful assimilation of the Native Americans involved conversion to Christianity, replacement of indigenous languages with English, and adoption of specific lifestyles sanctioned by European-American settlers. The historical attitude of the US government towards Native American schooling is succinctly put forth in this statement made by one commissioner of Indian affairs: "Our Indian Schools should be building better Americans, not better Indians" (Huff, page 55).

The education of Native Americans was characterized by legislation that both overtly and covertly expressed its assimilationist goals. Among the most famous of these were the decisions to send Native children to boarding schools, to reconfigure reservation borders to allow settlement by European Americans, the exploitation of natural resources by businesses, and diminishing their capabilities as sovereign nations and place them under direct US government control - most notably under the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). One striking example of the prevailing US sentiment is found in a statement by Senator Dawes of Massachusetts, referring to the Cherokees:
"To bring him out of savagery into citizenship we must make the Indian more intelligently selfish before we can make him unselfishly intelligent. We need to awaken in him wants. In his dull savagery he must be touched by the wings of the divine angel of discontent. Then he begins to look forward, to reach out. The desire for property of his own may become an intense educating force. The wish for a home of his owns awakens him to new effort. Discontent with the teepee and the starving rations of the Indian camp in winter is needed to get the Indian out of the blanket and into trousers - and trousers with a pocket in them, and with a pocket that aches to be filled with dollars" (Huff, page xxiii).

Children were the primary targets of the assimilationist effort, because they were rightly seen as the conveyors of Native American culture to future generations. It was felt that if the children were seduced by Western ways, eventually so too would the rest of the tribe. By removing Native children from their tribes and families and placing them in boarding schools, the US government could effectively cut them off from the cultural transmission process. This had disastrous effects on tribal society, as illustrated by this reaction of several chiefs who had sent their children for a Western education:

"...Several of our young people were formerly brought up at the colleges of the Northern Provinces. They were instructed in all of your sciences, but when they came back to us they were bad runners; ignorant of every means of living in the woods; unable to bare [sic] either cold or hunger; knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, or kill an enemy; spoke our language imperfectly; were therefore neither fit for hunters, warriors, or counselors; they were totally good for nothing. We are however, not the less obligated by your kind offer, though we must decline it; and to show our grateful sense of it, if the gentlemen of Virginia will send us a dozen of their sons, we will take care of their education, instruct them in all we know and make men of them" (Huff, page 2).

From this time period began a long history of removing Native Americans from their tribes and placing them in distant boarding schools. 109 off-reservation boarding schools were created between 1879 and the early 1900s. In general, the conditions of these boarding schools were deplorable,
and often Native students spent more of their time performing tasks towards the upkeep of the school than towards furthering their own educations (Huff, page 9). Many children fled the schools and returned home, only to be made to return again. Boarding schools were then moved further and further from reservations in order to discourage runaways. Some Navajo students were sent as far away as Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Efforts to separate Native American children from their tribes and families were shockingly aggressive. Huff notes that “in 1892, Congress authorized the BIA to withhold rations from any Indian family unwilling to have their child sent away to school. Education, Congress agreed, should inculcate Indian assimilation into mainstream society” (pages 3-4). For Native American students, it was generally agreed, “parental involvement was considered inconsistent with success” (Blanchard, page 192).

In addition to the BIA schools, mission schools operated by various religious sects stepped in and assumed responsibility for Native American education. These schools were subsidized by the federal government and, according to Huff, “the US Constitution distancing church from state was conveniently set aside” during this time period (page xiii). This likely represents a seemingly covert attempt on the part of the U.S. government to displace Native American religions in favor of Christianity.

The Meriam Report, issued in 1928, was the first step towards changing the tide in Native American education. The researchers spent seven months extensively documenting conditions they found on the reservations, actions
(and inactions) on the part of the BIA, and abuses in the school system. Dr. W. Carson Ryan was instrumental in creating the Meriam Report, and leveled charges that in BIA schools, "learning played a secondary role throughout the system" (Huff, page 9). It exposed many of the harsh realities of boarding school life, and fostered sympathetic governmental reforms in succeeding decades.

In 1972, Congress passed the Indian Education Act, which provided for increased tribal participation in the school systems. Following this legislation was the Indian Self-Determination Act in 1975, granting the authority to tribes and tribal organizations to operate their own schools and programs, ones that were formerly run by the BIA. Subsequent amendments to the acts have given tribes even greater autonomy (Huff, page 19).

Although most accounts of governmental discrimination against Native Americans deal with events from an earlier time period, the reality is that discriminatory actions take place even today. Primary language instruction, for example, fell under attack in the 1980s and President Reagan was quoted as saying: "It is absolutely wrong and against American concepts to have a bilingual education program that is now openly admittedly
dedicated to preserving their native tongue."\(^5\) Presently, in the 1990s, many districts are cutting back their bilingual education programs, and in the case of the Navajo, the government is not consistently coming through with the funds needed to maintain bilingual schools. This is despite legislation like US Code Title 25 (see Appendix 1) in which the government pledges support for such programs.

2.4 Stereotypes of Native Americans in the United States

Native American children have a difficult task in evaluating and reconciling two very distinct cultural influences in creating their own self-concept; namely, that of their tribe and that of their country. Unfortunately, in addition to this walk on the bicultural tightrope is the burden of popular negative stereotyping of Native Americans\(^6\). As Huff puts it, "if you ask average Americans what they know about Indians, they will rattle off the words corn, Thanksgiving day and Christopher Columbus, followed by alcoholism, tomahawk, and scalping" (page 51).

Some Native American students have had to endure appalling stereotypes of their culture in classrooms. In Washington State, just three miles from the Lummi Indian reservation, "students were given social studies sheets entitled 'Mountain Men and Their Women.' Underneath the title was the caption:

\(^5\) It should be noted that President Reagan was referring to all language minority groups in the United States, not specifically Native Americans or Navajos.

\(^6\) There likely exist plenty of negative stereotypes about Anglo America floating around on reservations, but as an outsider in Native culture, I do not feel confident of either my ability to - or the appropriateness of any attempt on my part to - address this issue here.
The trappers of the Far West, as rugged and primitive as they were, could not resist the security and affection of a good woman. Finding white women too frail and in short supply, they courted, loved and often married native women they encountered in the West. While trapping in the Rockies they met Indian squaws. While in the Southwest villages, and on Southern California ranches they found attractive Mexican women.

The trappers usually met the squaws at the annual early summer rendezvous. After completing the trading during the first few days, trappers loosened up for a rip-roaring time sustained by gallons of lethal alcohol and sadistic games. The Indian squaw provided ‘solace of the flesh’ when needed. Her availability and different moral code (prostitution was void of moral taint) were reasons for her popularity. If the relationship grew into a love-match, the trapper began looking for other qualities. Hopefully, she could cook, sew and work for him to make his life more comfortable. Domestic chores never really appealed to any mountain man, and, besides, the squaw was hardened to harsh labor because of her usual low status in the tribe.” (Huff, pages xiv-xx)

Typically, Native American culture is presented as an historical artifact, with little or no attention given to Natives in modern times. Referring to this fact, Huff writes that “the hidden and mixed messages Indian children receive tear away at the fiber of their self-esteem” (page xx).

It is a lot to ask of Native children that they overlook these stereotypes and bastardizations of their home culture, and envision themselves in positions of prestige in greater American society.

2.3 Academic achievement of Native American students

Currently, the mean drop out rate for Native Americans in high school is estimated at 50 percent, compared with 17.8 percent for Whites, 39.4 percent for African Americans, and Chicanos at 49.7 percent (Huff, pages xi-xii). The drop out rate for Native American students entering public colleges and universities has been estimated to be between 75 and 90 percent, “whereas the persistence rate (completion of a degree program) is extremely high in tribal colleges. There is a very good reason for this. Most graduates of tribal colleges
are able to find work or continue with their education: A more recent survey of six tribal colleges found that one third of the graduates continued their education and that only 12 to 17 percent were unemployed. The survey noted that this contrasts with reservation unemployment rates that can soar to 85 percent” (Boyer, page 178).
3. Cognitive Theories of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education

According to Frederick Erickson,

"anthropologists and sociologists with linguistic training found the school failure rate among low-SES and minority populations in developed societies especially odd, in light of what was coming to be known about the cognitive demands of first language acquisition by children. It was apparent that virtually every child who is not severely impaired physically or neurologically comes to school at age 5 having mastered the basic structure of the language spoken at home, its grammar and sound system. Linguists had contended that less prestigious regional, social class, and racial dialects were no less cognitively complex than the standard language spoken at school" (page 120).

With these observations in mind, what can be said about the causes for school failure among Navajo students?

3.1 Cognitive look at second language acquisition

Primary to examining current ESL models it is necessary to gain an understanding of the process of second language acquisition from a cognitive framework. Second language acquisition has been defined by Eugene García as the "process of language development whereby a child acquires first one language and then is exposed to and required (emphasis mine) to learn a second language" (page 116). Many studies have been conducted examining the cognitive effects of bilingualism in various learning environments.

Relevant to the process of language acquisition is Cummins' threshold hypothesis. Cummins (pages 59-60) holds that there "may be threshold levels of linguistic proficiency that bilingual children must attain in order to avoid..."
cognitive disadvantages and to allow the potentially beneficial aspects of becoming bilingual to influence cognitive growth.” There are two thresholds in second language acquisition: the first is necessary to avoid any negative cognitive effects, while the second is necessary to lead to long-term cognitive benefits. Getting Navajo students to the second threshold should be one of the school systems’ primary objectives.

Blanchard describes a problem with many ESL programs as use of the child’s home language as a “crutch” until he achieves English competency, without ever having developed a “formal understanding of the linguistic or grammatical structure of the home language” (page 196). This deficit has clear ramifications for future educational success. Halloway and Cooper argue that complete knowledge of a language is necessary for analytical reasoning, and feel that many Navajo students today “are more ailingual than bilingual” (page 214).

The threshold hypothesis points to the distinction between additive versus subtractive bilingualism. In examples of additive bilingualism, the second language learner’s first language (L1) is valued and maintained, whereas with subtractive bilingualism the language learner gradually loses proficiency in his first language due to replacement by the second (L2). The majority of studies looking at the cognitive advantages of bilingualism have used subjects that have benefited from additive bilingualism (Cummins, pages 58-59).

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8 ESL refers to English as a Second Language educational programs for language minority
Furthermore, despite previously popular notions that bilingualism confounds a child’s linguistic abilities, it has been shown that “learning two languages simultaneously did not prevent children from understanding more abstract language rules such as those for correct word order, or syntax” (García, page 118). Lessow-Hurley argues that “for language minority children, primary language instruction is a tool for conceptual development that will enrich their ability to function in both first and second languages” (page 65).

3.2 Various educational models for language minority students

The majority of ESL programs in the United States today are transitional programs designed to develop students’ English proficiency and move them into mainstream classrooms as quickly as possible (the expectation is that it will generally take three years). However, it takes an average of five to seven years for children to develop the language skills “required for academic achievement in a context-reduced environment” (Lessow-Hurley, pages 54 and 64). Within these programs, the student’s primary language is used for instructional support in transitional programs only until which point he can function in English. Transitional programs produce clear examples of subtractive bilingualism in their students, who often remain behind grade level academically due to the remedial English teaching methods (Lessow-Hurley, pages 12-13).
The fact that there are comparatively few certified Navajo language or bilingual instructors on the reservation at present time is an additional confound, in that bilingual classrooms are quickly saturated. Perhaps due to this shortage of a Navajo-speaking teaching pool, there is a high number of English immersion programs for Navajo students on the reservation (Cook describes this as *submersion teaching*, page 141).

This second form of dealing with language minority students, English immersion programs, operates on the belief that students will better acquire proficiency in English if it is the only language they encounter in schools. Although immersion programs have proven successful in cases of additive (or elite⁹) bilingualism, in communities where second language acquisition is not a luxury, this success rate diminishes. Lessow-Hurley states that a “recently completed longitudinal study of English immersion indicated that it is less successful for minority language students than bilingual education with native language support” (page 16).

A third model of instructing the second language learner is language maintenance programs, in which students are taught primarily in their native language. Perez and Torres-Guzman argue that this “support for home language and culture builds self-esteem and enhances achievement,” an example of additive bilingualism. The ideology behind these programs

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⁹ Elite bilingualism refers to bilingualism that is the result of *choice* on the part of the second language learner or his parents. Elite second languages have prestige in a given society (perhaps like French in the United States) or are spoken by members of a ruling class. Because English is the language of the American mainstream, and because Navajo language skills are by and large not esteemed, the act of achieving proficiency or fluency in either language (Navajo or English) is generally not an example of elite bilingualism in the United States.
holds that second language acquisition can be facilitated if the student has a strong base in his L1. "Given that literacy is a process of constructing meaning from text, it makes sense that readers will manipulate the context and cueing systems of a language they speak fluently better than those of a language they do not know well" (page 45).

Furthermore, "concepts and skills learned in a student's first language transfer to the second language," an idea supported by a sizable body of research in the field of cognitive science (Lessow-Hurley, page 16). This fact diminishes the validity of arguments that children must be moved into English-only classrooms faster so as not to fall behind academically.

A model of Navajo education must be established given that "the most important influence on L2 learning being the relationship between the social group of the L2 learners and the social group of the speakers of the target language." (Cook, page 169) In the case of the Navajo, this is particularly significant given the hybrid population of native Navajo and native English speakers. The worlds that the Navajo language and the English language inhabit on the reservation are widely disparate, almost to the point that I'd suggest a system of diglossia. The Navajo language is most frequently used in social circumstances, religious and ceremonial events, and in the home. The English language is used in the areas of education, business, and government.

The question of the goals of second language instruction must be considered. Cook argues that "the model for language teaching should be the fluent L2 use, not the native speaker," a distinction in language ability that
might be imperceptible in most circumstances. Lessow-Hurley distinguishes between two types of language proficiency that educators should be made aware of in evaluating students. These two classes of language proficiency are: Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), namely those skills required for face-to-face communication, where interactions are context-embedded; and Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), the level needed for achievement in the context-reduced academic environment.

3.3 Cultural aspects of learning process

Researchers have long attempted to pinpoint the causes for the disparities in academic success between varying ethnic groups in America. Professor of Anthropology John Ogbu (1994) has made a career for himself attempting to differentiate notions of caste, race and class and how they are influential in the workings of American society. Although these ideas were based upon the academic performance of Black students, I believe the themes are applicable to Navajos as well.

“One factor is the basic assimilationist offer that schools make to Blacks: You can be valued and rewarded in school (and society), the schools say to these students, but you must first master the culture and ways of the American mainstream, and since that mainstream (as it is represented) is essentially White, this means you must give up many particulars of being Black—styles of speech and appearance, value priorities, preferences—at least in mainstream setting. This is asking a lot.

The equation of the school curriculum, the standard classroom behaviors and instructional language, the standard English, with white American culture and language results in conscious or unconscious opposition or ambivalence toward learning and using instrumental behaviors to make good grades and obtain the school credentials that the students say they need and want. This phenomenon, which has to do with identity choice, is a dilemma that cuts across class lines. It may partly explain the low school performance of some middle-class black students.”
The cultural congruence present in tribal schools could account for their higher success rates, in that Navajo students are not asked to abandon Navajo behaviors in order to achieve academically.

Tied into this is the reality that most reservation schools, out of necessity, utilize instructional materials that are not reflective of Navajo culture. One clear example of this are the Dick and Jane readers. Navajo students have a difficult time appreciating why Dick would be walking on his hands so as not to sully a freshly mopped floor, when many Navajo families still reside in hogans which have dirt floors.

Along this vein, an explanation put forth by Erickson is that "subtle subcultural differences between the community and the school led to interactional difficulties, misunderstanding, and negative attributions between teachers and students in the classroom... The cultural differences consisted principally in implicit assumptions, learned outside conscious awareness in everyday life in the home and community, about the appropriate conduct of face-to-face interaction. Some of the basic properties in the organization of interaction that were investigated (often through comparative studies of children's lives at home and at school) were phonological and grammatical dialect features in children's speech that teachers had difficulty understanding, children's means of showing attention and understanding through nonverbal behavior such as gaze and nodding, and differences in the organization of turn-taking in conversation that lead to overlapping of speakers or to long pauses between turns" (pages 120-121).

Teachers need to become familiar with the culture of the students that they propose to teach.
4. Schooling on the Navajo Reservation

Why do so many Navajo students drop out of school? The potential reasons are numerous, ranging from personal problems to reactions to societal discrimination. One study found that many drop out because they are unable to pay their fees or buy supplies, and yet school officials do not inform them that they are "entitled to federal dollars to meet these needs" (from *An Even Chance*, quoted in Huff, page 12).

Even those students who do stay in school lag behind their Anglo counterparts. Peterson Zah, former Chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council, notes that "as Navajo children move up through the grade levels they fall further behind their non-Indian counterparts with each year in school. By the fifth grade they average about two years behind the national norm, and by ninth grade they are almost four years behind. Furthermore, of all the Navajo students who go to college, only 5% graduate" (page 2).

It has been found that "Navajo speaking children who participate in well-defined Navajo language instruction programs do not fall behind like their fellow Navajo students who participate in English-only programs" (Zah, page 2). This supports the idea that, for Navajo students, English immersion programs are a contributing factor of subtractive bilingualism.

4.1 Tribal schools
In the years following the Self-Determination Act, tribally controlled schools have sprung up across the nation. These schools are reflections of the distinctive cultural values of the tribes that created them. Not surprisingly, tribal schools have also enjoyed a success rate in the education of Native American students that has been unequaled for centuries.

Huff argues that the success of tribal schools lies in the fact that "tribal schools offer Indian children comfort in being who they are and a safe haven to learn about themselves and the world around them. They are multicultural precisely because Indian Country wants Indian children to function in both societies" (page 49).

Interestingly, another study found that the enrollment of tribal schools generally differed from that of BIA and public schools, in that students in tribal schools were most likely to come from traditional family backgrounds where the parents are tribally enrolled and speak the tribal language natively, with a family income of about $9,000 per year. Sixty percent of students in public schools hail from backgrounds with "only one tribally enrolled parent, speak English as a primary language, and have a family income of $13,000 a year. Students attending BIA schools had fewer ties with their tribe, tribal language, and traditions, although family income is about the same ($10,000)" (Huff).

Navajo Community College became the first tribally controlled college in the United States in 1968. Since that time nearly thirty other tribally controlled colleges have been created on other reservations. These colleges
have set themselves apart both in terms of their success rate with Native students, and in their distinctive mission to respond to and be relevant to tribal needs. Paul Boyer testified before a Congressional hearing committee that

"Tribal colleges offer culture-based curriculum where traditional Indian culture is celebrated... While much of white society identifies Indians with objects of the past - from tipis to peace pipes - tribal colleges argue that traditional cultures is more than artifacts... But this emphasis on Native American culture should not be seen as an attempt to withdraw from contemporary society. Instead, an understanding of their past is seen as a way to build a strong future. For example, at least one study has shown that the Indian students who understand and accept their heritage have greater self-respect and are more likely to succeed academically."

The progressive and holistic vision of these schools is very exciting to the prospect of education reform. Perhaps specifically because there has not been a history of tribally-controlled education in the years between colonization and the Self-Determination Act, current Navajo education efforts could develop into a proving ground for innovative educational theories.

4.2 Navajo linguistic patterns that differ from English

There are certain Navajo linguistic patterns that have the potential to interfere with successful classroom teaching. This has particular ramifications for non-Navajo teachers, who constitute a majority of the teaching pool on the reservation (Carnegie Foundation Report, page 32).

There are linguistic conventions in Navajo that do not have parallels in English. For example, in traditional Navajo culture, it is taboo to address someone by their given name, and in its place it is customary to use a kinship
Introductions are used to establish clan relationship, and following these introductions it is culturally appropriate to use a familial form of address (Benally, page 28). The English language does not have nearly the richness and complexity of Navajo kinship terms.

Perhaps a more exasperating linguistic convention for Western teachers comes in the form of turn-taking in conversation. A Navajo, when asked a question, will typically think about the question before answering - a period of time that can last from a few seconds to over a minute. This takes place without the filler noise present in Western conversation (e.g. “hmmm, let me see... um... well...”). The Westerner is often inclined to assume that the Navajo individual did not hear them, did not understand the question, or is ignoring them, and as such will repeat the question, rephrase the question, or answer it themselves, which is found to be pushy and rude by the Navajo. Benally argues that, for the Navajo “thoughts and words are sacred. In the Navajo tradition, words and thoughts are alive, so they must be carefully thought out before they are spoken. Thoughts and words have the power to honor, heal, degrade, and curse. The people were and are cautioned that things may happen according to what they think and say” (page 28).

In recent years, much has been made of culturally congruent curricula and classroom organization. In 1979, Mehan published a study examining “question-answer sequences in school lessons that revealed the tremendous

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10 The clan system is particularly important in this, as it governs the patterns of interaction between Navajo individuals. There are roughly sixty clans in all, and each full-blooded Navajo is likely to have four, inherited from their grandparents.
complexity involved in managing such conversation. His analysis suggested the possibility of miscommunication due to different cultural expectations for the fine tuning of classroom discourse. More global aspects of interaction patterns that differed between home and school were also identified. These had to do with the cultural organization of social relationships in communication, that is, with foundational definitions of appropriateness in leadership and followership, in adult roles and child roles” (Erickson, page 121). Although this study was not done in Navajo classrooms, its findings are highly relevant to the Navajo circumstance.

4.3 Navajo written language

The very novelty of the Navajo writing system, which was not developed until this century, can be directly linked to the shortage of instructional materials in the language, the small number of Navajo literates in the world, and the difficulties faced by those endeavoring to promote its usage in more than social and religious environments.

Creating an orthography of an oral language has interesting challenges. Due to phonetic variance around the reservation, determining a Navajo standard to be used for the first dictionary has some political connotations. Although there is one comprehensive dictionary and grammar of the Navajo language available for popular use, there remains some discussion between
individuals on the ‘correct’ way to spell various words. Young and Morgan\textsuperscript{11} helped to create a standard, but for many it is not set in stone. A case in point is the word Diné, meaning “children of the holy people,” and the term Navajos use to describe themselves\textsuperscript{12}, which, depending upon who you ask can be spelled Diné or Dineh.

Theoretically, because written Navajo utilizes the Roman alphabet and is in some measure a phonetic transcription of the present-day oral language, it should be a relatively easy task for Navajo speakers who are literates in English to acquire literacy in Navajo. However, that is not always the case. Non-literate speakers of a given language are often not cognizant of word boundaries in their own speech and as such have a difficult time determining (such knowledge is generally acquired with literacy) what they might be on paper. I have witnessed Navajos laboriously sounding out syllable and words hoping to make sense of a page of Navajo text.

In greater American society, authority is often associated with high levels of formal education as opposed to lived experience. In establishing a system of Navajo literacy, the circumstance is somewhat reversed. Interestingly, according to Goldtooth, et al, “part of the difficulty is that the recognized ‘storehouse’ of the articulate command of Navajo is not the literate, but in fact nonliterate older people (a group of about fifteen to twenty thousand perhaps)... A literacy program that fails to interact in a rich way

\textsuperscript{11} Young and Morgan published The Navajo Language: A Grammar and Colloquial Dictionary in 1980, with a subsequent second edition published in 1987. To date, it is the most
with this group will lack local legitimacy, and access to the most fertile
ground for developing the use of written Navajo in the most intellectually
rigorous and creative ways” (page 259).

Nearly all reading and writing occurs in English in reservation schools,
a fact that is likely tied in with the relative newness of written Navajo, and
the limited spheres of its usage (McLaughlin, Daniel, page 86). A common
sentiment among individuals on the reservation is one of not wanting to
learn to write or speak the Navajo language if it is going to impede their
progress academically, and their quest for economic advancement. For this
reason alone, some parents have opted not to teach their children the Navajo
language.

comprehensive dictionary of the Navajo language, and to my knowledge it is the only
dictionary in widespread usage on the reservation.

12 The Navajo label was thrust upon them by the Spanish.
5. Reform Efforts and Models for Change

*Education is the Ladder*

My Grandchild,
The Whites have many things which we Navajos need.
But we cannot get them.
It is as though the whites were in a grassy canyon.
And there they had wagons, plows and plenty of food.
We Navajos are up on the dry mesa.
We hear them talking, but we cannot get them.
My Grandchild. Education is the ladder. Tell our people to take it.

Old Chief Manuelito, Navajo

5.1 Navajo philosophies of learning

A consistent theme found in the most progressive reservation schools is the attempt to incorporate Navajo cultural mores into the standard Western educational system. These values involve the integration of all knowledge “so as to promote the development of harmonious relationships of the individual with his social and natural environment” (McNeley, page 1). Writes James McNeley, “the traditional Diné (Navajo) philosophy of learning is embedded in oral traditions accounting for the creation and evolution of the Navajo world... Knowledge is identified with the cardinal directions: The values and other principles by which people live are identified with dawn and the east; knowledge for making a living, with daylight and the south; planning for social well-being is identified with evening twilight and the west; contentment and reverence for all life, with
darkness and the north. Knowledge from all these sources is essential for a balanced life” (page 1)\(^\text{13}\).

One individual estimated to me (see Appendix 2) that ninety percent of all certified teachers on the reservation were non-Navajo. Given this data, it is highly important that these teachers be made aware of culturally congruent pedagogical methods that will be more likely to ensure success of Navajo students. Becktell (1986:54) recommends that “teachers of Navajo students adopt teaching strategies that are better attuned to Navajo learning styles including greater use of example and metaphor, increased opportunity for learning by observation, and greater opportunities for self-discovery and self correction” (McNeley).

5.2 Diné College

Perhaps what will come to be the most influential factor in shaping the future of Navajo education is the efforts on the part of Diné College (formerly Navajo Community College, or NCC). With far-reaching programs in

\(^{13}\) This notion of various types of knowledge being incorporated into the four cardinal directions is a small aspect of an intricate and far-reaching Navajo concept of the world. It has its origins in the Navajo religion, and is yet at the same time an intrinsic part of Navajo culture, and so provides an interesting quandary for those wishing to separate church and state (primarily for Navajos converted to Christianity). As Ted Fernald has suggested to me, although in Western society secular and religious domains are quite distinct, in Navajo culture it is difficult to separate quotidian events from their religious origins.

Diné College has so fully integrated the concepts of the four cardinal directions into its educational plan, the campus of the original branch of the college in Tsaile, AZ was designed with the cardinal directions (and the qualities associated with each) in mind. Circular like the hogan (the traditional Navajo dwelling), the campus’ administrative buildings, dormitories, library, classrooms, cafeteria, etc., have all been designed and positioned on the land in accordance with this philosophy.
community education, Navajo literacy, and teacher development, it is likely the Navajo Nation’s most valuable asset.

One representative of the college stated, “We consider ourselves to be participants in the ‘whole language movement’ in literacy instruction, an orientation to the teaching of reading and writing (chiefly among elementary school teachers) in which teachers integrate speaking, listening (we read to our classes on a daily basis), reading, writing, and thinking in all activities. Further, all texts for reading and writing are real literature, not material selected to impart some subskill of reading or writing; all are carefully rooted in clear functions and purposes of authors and audiences... In general, this summarizes the orientation we have taken to Navajo literacy instruction at NCC” (Goldtooth, et al, page 258).

Diné College offers a number of programs to its students, faculty, and staff that intend to improve the quality of Diné education throughout the reservation. For individuals with a BA, it is now possible to take additional classes and receive certification as a Bi-Cultural Specialist. Designed for current reservation teachers, this program should effectively promote cultural understanding and sensitivity in classrooms.

There are also a number of other Associates degree programs (AA) available at Diné College to improve the quality of future educators on the reservation; among them an AA in Navajo Bilingual/Bicultural Education, in Navajo Language, in Navajo culture, and in Navajo History and Indian Studies. It is also possible to receive certification as an Instructional Assistant,
with emphasis on the skills necessary for reservation schools. Two courses in Diné Educational Philosophy are offered with enrollment restricted to the faculty and staff of Diné College.

The Navajo Language Program was designed primarily for two classes of students. The first, for those students intending to go on for teacher certification, with the eventual goal of becoming teachers of the Navajo language or in bilingual classrooms. The second, for students interested in pursuing degrees in Interpretation, Anthropology, Linguistics, and other related fields. A Navajo Proficiency test has been developed to confirm the skills of students in that department. The test was developed in the capitol of the Navajo Nation, Window Rock, and is administered through Diné College.

Annually, over two hundred students learn to read and write Navajo through Diné College (Goldtooth, et al, page 257). Although this represents only a small percentage of the population, it is an important event in literacy transmission.

Diné College has been working with other area universities towards furthering the cause of the increase in Navajo teachers and culturally knowledgeable and sensitive non-Navajo teachers on the reservation. Among the affiliations are the University of New Mexico, Northern Arizona University, and Arizona State University. In collaboration with Arizona State, the Diné Teacher Education Program (DTEP) has been formed, with seventeen students admitted as part of the first cohort two years ago.
Difficulties remain, however. In area universities, mimicking a trend found across the nation, it has been noted that "in the eyes of advisors at the school and tribal level, education appears to be a profession for those who do not qualify for other white-collar jobs. Participants who were most qualified had been encouraged by counselors to consider other occupations. Emphasis on professions such as business, engineering, and other higher-status occupations appears to direct capable students to other majors and usually off the reservation for employment" (Halloway, page 213). This seems highly irresponsible in light of the serious shortage of Navajo teachers on the reservation.

The Navajo Nation has taken action against this trend, by agreeing "to fund students who completed a bachelor's degree in another discipline and were admitted to post-degree studies in education." However, Halloway and Cooper also note that the "success of this program assumes the availability of funds and effective informational program" (page 214).
Conclusion

Over the past several centuries, the Navajo tribe has suffered a loss in its cultural stores due to the diminishing importance of the language in tribal transactions, and assimilation efforts on the part of the US government. In this century, a few key pieces of legislation have returned the right of educational self-determination to the tribe, opening the doors for innovative and progressive educational reform.

With the creation of tribal schools that offer bilingual programs and culturally congruent pedagogical methods, it is likely that the Navajo tribe will be able to increase the number of students that successfully pass through schools, and so achieve the skills necessary in today’s society for economic independence.

Efforts must continue to be made on the part of Diné College and other groups to recruit Native teachers for the reservation. Native teachers are key if the tribe wishes to assume full control over the schooling of its youth.
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Appendix 1

United States Code - Title 25 - Indians\(^{14}\)

§ 2901. Findings

The Congress finds that -

(1) the status of the cultures and languages of Native Americans is unique and the United States has the responsibility to act together with Native Americans to ensure the survival of these unique cultures and languages;

(2) special status is accorded Native Americans in the United States, a status that recognizes distinct cultural and political rights, including the right to continue separate identities;

(3) the traditional languages of Native Americans are an integral part of their cultures and identities and form the basic medium for transmission, and thus survival, of Native American cultures, literatures, histories, religions, political institutions, and values;

(4) there is a widespread practice of treating Native Americans languages as if they were anachronisms; So in original. Probably should be “American”.

(5) there is a lack of clear, comprehensive, and consistent Federal policy on treatment of Native American languages which has often resulted in acts

\(^{14}\) Source: Cornell law web page.
of suppression and extermination of Native American languages and cultures;

(6) there is convincing evidence that student achievement and performance, community and school pride, and educational opportunity is clearly and directly tied to respect for, and support of, the first language of the child or student;

(7) it is clearly in the interests of the United States, individual States, and territories to encourage the full academic and human potential achievements of all students and citizens and to take steps to realize these ends;

(8) acts of suppression and extermination directed against native American languages and cultures are in conflict with the United States policy of self-determination for Native Americans;

(9) languages are the means of communication for the full range of human experiences and are critical to the survival of cultural and political integrity of any people; and

(10) language provides a direct and powerful means of promoting international communication by people who share languages.

§ 2903. Declaration of policy

It is the policy of the United States to -

(1) preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages;
(2) allow exceptions to teacher certification requirements for Federal programs, and programs funded in whole or in part by the Federal Government, for instruction of Native American languages when such teacher certification requirements hinder the employment of qualified teachers who teach in Native American languages, and to encourage State and territorial governments to make similar exceptions;

(3) encourage and support the use of Native American languages as a medium of instruction in order to encourage and support -

(A) Native American language survival,

(B) educational opportunity,

(C) increased student success and performance,

(D) increased student awareness and knowledge of their culture and history, and

(E) increased student and community pride;

(4) encourage State and local education programs to work with Native American parents, educators, Indian tribes, and other Native American governing bodies in the implementation of programs to put this policy into effect;

(5) recognize the right of Indian tribes and other Native American governing bodies to use the Native American languages as a medium of instruction in all schools funded by the Secretary of the Interior;

(6) fully recognize the inherent right of Indian tribes and other Native American governing bodies, States, territories, and possessions of the United
States to take action on, and give official status to, their Native American languages for the purpose of conducting their own business;

(7) support the granting of comparable proficiency achieved through course work in a Native American language the same academic credit as comparable proficiency achieved through course work in a foreign language, with recognition of such Native American language proficiency by institutions of higher education as fulfilling foreign language entrance or degree requirements; and

(8) encourage all institutions of elementary, secondary and higher education, where appropriate, to include Native American languages in the curriculum in the same manner as foreign languages and to grant proficiency in Native American languages the same full academic credit as proficiency in foreign languages. (Cornell law page)

§ 2904. No restrictions

The right of Native Americans to express themselves through the use of Native American languages shall not be restricted in any public proceeding, including publicly supported education programs.

§ 2906. Use of English

Nothing in this chapter shall be construed as precluding the use of Federal funds to teach English to Native Americans.
Appendix 2

In the final stages of the preparation of this thesis I made a few phone calls in order to try to locate pertinent (and sadly, still missing) statistics on language and literacy education on the reservation. I was eventually directed to speak with C.P., an employee of Diné College and, according to the receptionists, an authority on Navajo language education. I include some of his comments here, in the appendix, as they raise very important issues regarding the role and history of non-Navajo interference in Navajo affairs.

C.P. greeted my inquiries with suspicion and some measure of hostility, an understandable reaction given the checkered history of the East Coast (this region incurred his particular disfavor) educational establishment’s relationship with Native peoples. C.P. was justifiably on the defensive, not knowing if within my writings he should expect to find prejudice, baldly inaccurate reporting, or fetishism of his culture and ideas. The general tone of the interview was one of bitterness, and C.P. at different points contradicted himself in his arguments and his broad generalizations. It is for this reason that I elected to put the interview in the appendix, rather than incorporating his statements into the main body of this research.

This interview was the first time I had received criticism for my choice in topics, and I fielded regular, if somewhat covert, accusations that I was: pretending to be an authority on Navajo culture; that I irresponsibly conducted my research without setting foot in reservation educational

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15 Name has been changed in the interest of privacy.
establishments (although I corrected him in that I have twice gone to the reservation collecting data); and that it was not my place (as an Anglo) to determine whether or not Navajo language and culture were worth being preserved (or to judge others on the Navajo-ness of their own lives).

It was C.P.'s view that the loss of Navajo language and culture was occurring on the reservation in some measure intentionally, as fulfilling a prophecy outlined in a ceremonial (he declined to say which) that outlined a movement into the next world (a positive event) when the Navajo language was completely extinct. This doomsday prophesy, he asserted, was a motivating factor for Navajo medicine men and others to allow the language and culture to go to waste. He argued that efforts to institute bilingual education and Navajo language programs on the reservations were championed by Anglos and not by the Navajo themselves, with "Save the Navajos! Save the Indians!" as their battle cry.

Concurrently, C.P. cites the principal causes of the shortage of Navajo bilingual programs in schools as being the inactivity of Anglo administrators and the opinion held by both administrators and Navajo parents that English is the only valuable language to be taught in schools. He said that there were not as many bilingual programs as he believed there should be.

I have not been able to confirm this, and as such can provide no background information, but C.P. also asserted that the Navajo language core program at Diné College has been disbanded because of a shortage of money, and that Ford Foundation efforts ended two years ago.