

EDUCATION AND INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION

IN THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST

By

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Abstract

United States federal and state-level policies restricting the use of languages in public schools have negatively impacted the use of Indigenous languages and the overall education and wellbeing of Native Americans. Policies such as the boarding school era of the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as more recent decisions such as Arizona’s “English for the Children” act and “No Child Left Behind,” have claimed to assist Native American children but instead had measurable negative effects on their education. Meanwhile, Native groups across the Southwest have undertaken their own language revitalization and immersion programs, from Rock Point’s immersion program in Diné Bizaad to smaller programs such as the summer camps of the Pueblo communities. When Native groups make their own choices in leading their language and teaching their children, there are measurable positive effects both in language use and in students’ overall school performance.

Outside Challenges to Language Revitalization

In 2000, Arizona's elections featured Proposition 203 (Arizona Secretary of State, 2000), designed to require all classes in public schools to be taught in English. This proposition was an echo of California's recently-passed Proposition 227, which was likewise sponsored by Ron Unz under a campaign of "English for the Children" (Wright, 2008). The opening text of the amendment claims that English literacy is "among the most important" skills people need to become "productive members of our society," in part because English is spoken by a "vast majority" of Arizonans (Arizona Secretary of State, 2000). It characterizes bilingual education as failing "immigrant children" by "wasting financial resources on costly experimental language programs" and blames this and this alone for high drop-out levels among immigrant children (Arizona Secretary of State, 2000).

According to Arizona's 2000 census, 25.9% of the state's population, or 1.2 million people, spoke a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a). Not all, nor even most, of these children were immigrants: Gándara and Hopkins (2010) found that 80% of English language learners in Arizona's public schools were born in the United States and were citizens thereof (as cited in Combs & Nichols, 2012). Likewise, while the bill was mainly aimed at Spanish bilingual programs, nineteen Indigenous languages are still spoken among the twenty-two federally recognized tribes of Arizona (Combs & Nichols, 2012), with Navajo being the third most commonly spoken language in Arizona (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Not only was the focus on immigrants inaccurate, but the negative characterization of bilingual programs recognizes neither the widespread history of immersion programs on Arizona's reservations (Combs & Nichols, 2012) nor the wealth of studies showing the benefits of bilingual education to students' overall school performance (McCarty, 2003).

The proposition specified that its restrictions on immersion programs applied to public schools; still, at the time 58,000 Native students were in the state's public schools, whereas only 11,000 were in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools (Combs & Nichols, 2012). All of Arizona's 22 tribes opposed Proposition 203 during the vote, with tribal councils warning that it placed language revitalization efforts in danger (Combs & Nichols, 2012). The cultural-preservation director for the Yavapai-Apache Nation, Katherine Marquez, warned that "if you lose your language, you lose your culture" (as quoted in Zehr, 2000); educators at the Hualapai reservation and the Pima-Maricopa Indian Community warned that the proposition would bring setbacks to language education (Zehr, 2000). In official election materials, the Navajo Nation's statement against the proposition warned that it "abolishes the civil rights of Arizona children, denies parents the right to a choice in their children's education, threatens educators, and encourages the genocide of Native American cultures" (Arizona Secretary of State, 2000). Unz, meanwhile, claimed that he had not considered the perspective of Native Americans on the proposition because "in California the numbers are so small" (as quoted in Zehr, 2000); in the 2000 census, 627,562 Californians reported themselves as American Indian and Alaska Native (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b).

Despite the clear inaccuracies and fallacies of the bill, and despite receiving no more than 20% of the vote in any Navajo precinct (Arviso & Holm, 2001), Proposition 203 was approved by 63% of state voters and was written into law (Wright, 2008). Of the four states with "English for the Children" measures, Colorado rejected their Amendment 31 with 55% (Benz, 2005), while California repealed its Proposition 227 with 73.5% of the vote in 2016 (Padilla, 2016). However, Proposition 203 still remains law in Arizona.

The process of Proposition 203 is only one entry in a long history of English-only legislation and practices that have repeatedly reemerged at state and federal levels, always negatively impacting Native American communities. Starting in the late 19th century and stretching into the 20th century, federal boarding schools were designed to remove Native American children from their families so as to “civilize and Christianize” them (Lomawaima, 1993). Schools used the “regimentation of the external body” in an attempt to start internal transformation (Lomawaima, 1993); the schools were highly gendered, with male students’ instruction trending toward labor and agriculture while female students’ focused on domesticity (Lomawaima, 1996). At the Phoenix Indian School, girls’ teaching was geared toward providing domestic labor for nearby white families (Lomawaima, 1993). Language eradication was a main goal of the boarding school system; children were punished for speaking their language anywhere on the school grounds (Hinton 2001a). As such, the students felt that their language was “evil or inferior to English,” and frequently refused to teach their own children the language, for fear of how they would be treated (Hinton 2001a). Today’s children frequently feel “linguistic shame” that they do not know their heritage well enough to speak it with grandparents (Deyhle, 2013).

Though the bulk of boarding schools in the United States closed or changed their policies in the 1930s, the memory of the institution still impacts how Native Americans think of their relationship with culture and language today (Child, 2018). The closing of government boarding schools also did not mean the end of colonialist forms of education. In many cases, “assimilation lasted longer as a practice than as policy” (Child, 2018), and practices like the forced sterilization of Indian women (Lawrence, 2000) echoed the policies of the schools themselves.

Understandably, the legacy of boarding schools has left a measurable mistrust (McCarty, 2009) of federal oversight of schools even today.

Not all legislation against the teaching of Native American language has held that as a target; for some legislation, the existence of Native Americans seems to be an afterthought. While the Native American Languages Act of 1990/1992 made some promises toward Native language education, other measures have limited the extent to which Native Americans can control their own education. On the heels of Proposition 203, the Federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed into law in 2002. Despite being intended to decrease achievement gaps, it resulted in many challenges for indigenous communities, including roadblocks to language revitalization programs. The act established “unprecedented levels of testing” in the form of state standards assessments from grades 3-8 and grades 10-12 (McCarty, 2009). The Bilingual Education Act, passed in 1968, was eliminated by NCLB, greatly decreasing funding for bilingual education (McCarty, 2009). NCLB also uses standardized tests in English as the only measurement of “adequate yearly progress,” or AYP; if a school fails to meet AYP, it may eventually face outside intervention and replacement of staff, resulting in high stakes for teachers (McCarty, 2009).

In 2005 and 2007, the National Indian Education Study found that the achievement gap had not been decreased for American Indian and Alaska Native students, and also that Native American language and culture programs were being removed to make room for the strict state standards (McCarty, 2009). Where the reading and mathematics scores of non-AI/AN students seemed to slightly increase from 2005 to 2007, AI/AN students’ stayed steady or slightly decreased (McCarty, 2009), showing that the imposition of high-stakes accountability standards might have actually widened the observed achievement gap. Garcia (2008) found that while

Native students' achievement rates appeared to increase after NCLB, this was only the result of lowering state standards, and their achievement rates actually dropped sharply after 2002.

Despite assertions of English-only programs as standard and beneficial—whether coded in explicitly colonialist terms or cloaked in equalizing language--their implementation has repeatedly damaged the learning opportunities of Native American children. However, even through a cycle of these policies, Native American educators have enacted a variety of educational programs in their own languages. These programs' structures may vary greatly, but at their core is proof of the benefits of these programs both for students' achievement in school (McCarty, 2009) and for their overall health and well-being (McIvor, Napoleon, & Dickie, 2009).

Self-Determination In Education: Native-Run Revitalization Programs

Manuelito (2005) observed that Ramah Navajo elders, speaking their Native language, described their concept of self-determination as “communal, positive, and integral” to their lives, something centered proactively within the community. Contrastively, surrounded by words of their own language, they used the English term “self-determination” to refer to a system that promoted “chaos and consternation in Navajo communities” (Manuelito, 2005). Ever since the colonial era, Native American communities have faced impositions from the outside over their languages, which have caused community strife rather than those positive connections. Some tribes, such as the Lumbees of North Carolina, have no history of what languages they once spoke (Hinton, 2001a); other tribes only have a handful of elderly speakers. Still, Native speakers from across the continent have found many ways to keep teaching their languages.

Even at the height of the boarding school period, memories of the schools vary; some students recalled welcoming the meals at the height of the Great Depression (Child, 2018). Moreover, students across the continent resisted the authoritarian practices of the schools in a wide range of ways, with what Lomawaima (1993) describes as a “commitment to the idea of themselves.” Some prior boarding schools have transformed entirely: in New Mexico, the Santa Fe Indian School went from an assimilationist federally-controlled school in 1890 to a community-controlled school in 1981 (Davis, 2001).

Unlike legislation such as No Child Left Behind, some government decisions have bolstered the health of Native American languages. The Native American Languages Act, or Public Law 101-477 of 1990, declared that it was United States policy to “fully recognize the inherent right” of Native Americans to use their own languages (1990). In 2006, the Esther Martinez bill added grants for communities to establish language nests and immersion programs for children under seven years old (Lockard & Hale, 2013). Decisions such as *Lau v. Nichols* in 1975 established that schools were responsible for providing ESL programs for children (Hinton, 2001a), even if these decisions have been followed by a wide range of attempts at English Only policies (Combs & Nichols, 2012). Legislative decisions, however, are not simply handed down from on high; the Native American Languages Act was greatly influenced by a Hawaiian language resolution from 1987, and its reach to the entire United States was influenced by Native American advocates (Arnold, 2001).

Likewise, education and language revitalization programs undoubtedly flourish the most in the hands of the tribes themselves.

Rock Point and Fort Defiance: Public School Immersion

Diné Bizaad, or Navajo, is an Athabaskan language spoken in the Navajo Nation, which in state terms spans northern Arizona and southern New Mexico, reaching into Utah and Colorado (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2019). As of one 2015 census it is spoken by roughly 167,000 people (Eberhard et al., 2019); however, due to difficulties in determining who counts as a speaker of a language, other sources place the number closer to 100,000 speakers (Hale, 2001). In either case, Diné Bizaad holds the highest number of speakers of any North American language north of Mexico (Hale, 2001). As such, a large portion of research on indigenous language revitalization in the United States focuses on Diné Bizaad.

In the 1970s, one of the first modern indigenous literacy programs began at Rock Point, Arizona (McCarty, 2003). Rather than viewing ESL programs and bilingual education as “mutually exclusive,” educators at Rock Point expressed belief that “bilingual education was simply the next logical step” (Holm & Holm, 1990). The school also focused on integrating “bicultural activities” into the overall school programs, including a Navajo Social Studies program (Holm & Holm, 1990). Preliminary research of the program found that students at the school who first became literate in Diné Bizaad received higher scores on English literacy tests (Rosier & Farella, 1976). Holm & Holm (1990) observed that the bilingual program empowered not only the students, but also their parents, alongside the staff and the educational board. Members of government agencies frequently doubted that the Board “could actually be operating the school,” as the Board was comprised of “allegedly educated” older Navajo people (Holm & Holm, 1990). These doubts intermingled with the tendency for prior schools to take choices away from parents, the implication being that outsiders knew what was better for their children (Holm & Holm, 1990). The Rock Point school let students and older community members have a

say, as well as teaching students to “value their Navajo-ness” and see their capabilities “because of, not despite, that Navajo-ness” (Holm & Holm, 1990).

Following the pattern of Rock Point, a large number of schools on the reservation adopted programs in Diné Bizaad, such that “nearly all” the public schools provided at least a period of immersion per day (Combs & Nichols, 2012). In 1986, the Navajo Nation began an immersion program at the Fort Defiance Elementary School, located in northeastern Arizona. Fifteen years prior, 95% of Navajo six-year-olds entered the school speaking Navajo; however, in 1986, teachers at Fort Defiance estimated that only a third of kindergarteners and first graders did, and those who did speak Navajo were reluctant to do so in public (Arviso & Holm, 2001).

The Fort Defiance program began in 1986 in an effort to help students “experience success in school *through* Navajo” (Arviso & Holm, 2001). The program was voluntary; the school encouraged parents who enrolled their children in the program to keep them there at least through third grade, but did not require anything (Arviso & Holm, 2001). Rather than prioritizing English, the program started with nearly all instruction in Navajo in lower grades, slowly increasing the amount of English time for older students (Arviso & Holm, 2001). In some subjects, especially math, the teaching methods in Navajo and English differed greatly (Arviso & Holm, 2001). Teachers had to adapt to the classroom as well: at first, they felt it would be easy to slip back into English, but they continued to use Diné Bizaad even on the playground and at lunch. Staff also found that the parents of students in the program were more involved in their children’s education (Arviso & Holm, 2001).

In 1990, the Fort Defiance staff found that third- and fourth-graders in the Native Immersion program scored nearly 10 percentage points higher on standardized math tests than their peers, and their English language test results were comparable (Arviso & Holm, 2001). All of the

children in the Native Immersion program made progress in Navajo; comparatively, students who had entered school speaking Navajo, but had attended the monolingual program, seemed to have lost some ability in the language (Arviso & Holm, 2001). The success of students in subjects not directly related to language showed not just a positive result from bilingual education, but a “powerful negative effect of the *absence* of bilingual/immersion schooling” (McCarty 2003). English-only programs are treated as a default, yet immersion programs bolster not only the indigenous language but also the students’ performance and cultural connections.

Pueblo Communities: Generational Connections

Smaller Native American communities may be able to adapt similar public education programs, or they may develop different programs to suit their own resources and needs. Acoma Pueblo and Pueblo de Cochiti of northern New Mexico are traditionally Keres-speaking communities; today, about 600 people speak Cochiti Keres and about 1900 speak Acoma Keres (Eberhard et al., 2019). Both Pueblos have maintained traditional governing systems; at Pueblo de Cochiti, government activities and religious ceremonies require fluency in the Native language (McCarty, 2003). However, histories of colonization including boarding schools and the loss of family land and livelihoods (Hinton, 2001b) led to a decline in the use of both languages (McCarty, 2003).

When a community survey at Acoma Pueblo found that children were no longer acquiring Acoma as a first language, yet adults and young people were interested in revitalizing their language, the Pueblo created a youth summer immersion program (McCarty, 2003). Parents observed that after the summer camp, children would use the language games and songs they learned at home, and that they “were using each other’s Indian names rather than their English names” (Sims, 2001). Children would start Acoma language games with their parents, and many

parents took effort to speak more Acoma at home (Sims, 2001). The program also led to the increased teaching of formal language registers by traditional religious settings, and to the development of the Acoma Language Retention and Revitalization Plan, which outlined future actions including immersion schools (Sims, 2001).

In 1996, a similar study at the Pueblo de Cochiti, which found that two-thirds of the population did not speak Cochiti Keres fluently, led to the establishment of a Keres education program at the local elementary school (McCarty, 2003). The study found that 91% of children wanted to learn Keres better (Pecos & Blum-Martinez, 2001). However, challenges arose with the administrators of the school, who frequently shortened Keres lessons or spoke English during them; in response, the language committee developed a series of programs completely under their control, including a summer immersion program like the one at Acoma Pueblo (Pecos & Blum-Martinez, 2001). The summer program was held next to the tribal offices, so children's clear enthusiasm in their learning increased community members' interest in adult language learning courses, and many parents created Keres-only times at home (Pecos & Blum-Martinez, 2001). Like at Acoma Pueblo, the language council plans for greater Keres language classes and immersion programs, including language nests (Pecos & Blum-Martinez, 2001).

Learning to Teach, Learning the Language: Adults in the Community

Establishing immersion programs can be difficult when few adults speak the language either. Speakers of indigenous languages may not have the official credentials to teach in public schools (Hinton 2001c), or outsiders may doubt their credentials (Holm & Holm, 1990), forcing the pattern of a white English-speaking teacher with the Native language speaker as an aide. In the cases above, educators have learned from the organization process too, and parents have frequently increased their use of the language at home in response to their children's enthusiasm.

It can be difficult to teach Native languages, however, due to a lack of resources and networks. One answer to this challenge has been the American Indian Language Development Institute, or AILDI. Beginning as the Yuman Language Institute in 1978, AILDI was created by parents and elders representing Yuman language communities and has grown to reach language educators throughout the western hemisphere (McCarty, Watahomigie, Yamamoto, & Zepeda, 2010b). Summer sessions are now held yearly at the University of Arizona; recent years have drawn over a hundred participants representing dozens of language communities (McCarty et al., 2010b). AILDI's mission "emphasizes bilingual/bicultural education" and embraces "'empowerment' pedagogies" (McCarty et al., 2010b).

At AILDI, participants have created or standardized orthographies for previously unwritten languages; at the same time, speakers of other languages have chosen not to constrain their language to writing, and have worked to create educational materials without it (McCarty et al., 2010b). Members have also created and carried out assessments on the language practices of Indigenous youth, examining "language shame" and addressing how to empower youth in learning languages (McCarty, Romero-Little, & Warhol, 2010a). Participants have gone on to teach their language formally or become language planners for their communities (McCarty et al., 2010b); the act of learning has led to even more teaching.

Choice; Community

All of the Native-led programs above have led to both growth in language use and growth in community connections. The boarding schools of the late 1800s sought to remove 'Indian-ness' by removing children from their home and from their language; today, communities such as the Navajo Nation and the Pueblos of Acoma and Cochiti, as well as transnational institutes such as AILDI, seek to increase health and connections through revitalizing languages. Studies at

a wide range of immersion schools have shown the negative impact of English-only programs compared to bilingual or immersion programs in indigenous languages. Governmental acts toward bilingualism have been spearheaded by Native American activists, while detrimental English-only acts have ignored the clear, factual criticisms made by Native Americans. Meanwhile, the decisions of individual Indigenous groups toward their own education and language plans have increased not only language use but school performance, community connections, and health among Indigenous youth; when Native American groups can plan their own education around their language and culture, youth have measurably better experiences.

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