Diné Language and English Language Instruction in Navajo Nation

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract:

Language is the ever-changing, complex cord that ties people together. For human beings, there is no escaping it. The ways humans speak and communicate create a collective identity, feeling of comraderie, and security. As a white, English-speaking American teacher going into Navajo Nation to teach math and Language Arts in Spring 2016, I sought out relationships and experiences that would define for me the character of Navajo language. In school, I also sought to define the expectations placed on students for English Language Arts achievement. In looking at these two components of my students' daily lives and identities: their native, cultural language and the Common Core Language Arts standards, I found that there exists a dissonance or a gap between the two. The following chronicles my experiences, insights, and instructional strategies to combat the achievement gap as I lived and worked in Navajo Nation.

Acknowledgements:

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I would like to thank the faculty, staff, and students at Aneth Community School for their support, acceptance, and openness. Ahéhééé.
Introduction:

In January 2016 I left the Midwest for Navajo Nation to spend the next four months student teaching 3rd grade and immersing myself in Navajo culture. Over the past semester, through building close relationships, making observations, and teaching in a Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) school in Navajo Nation, I have learned as much as I could about Navajo language and communication, and their effects on students' abilities to achieve the benchmarks set for Language Arts and Writing as set by the Common Core. Being speakers and learners of both English and Diné bizaad (Navajo language) put my students at the potential advantage of being bilingual in a country that values multilingual citizens, but also the disadvantage of facing assessments and standards that ask them to express their reasoning in writing. There is a wide gap between Navajo students' traditional language and cultural values when compared with Common Core standards. As an outsider immersed in a small, isolated Navajo community, I was able to absorb and reflect upon the values, linguistic patterns, and history that affects Navajo expression, as well as develop instruction that addressed the linguistic and cultural needs of my students, in the hopes of raising their achievement as well as growing my own cultural awareness, pluralism, and sensitivity as an educator.

It could be said of any society, East or West, from Azerbaijan to Zambia, that its values and character are carried and displayed most clearly in its language, primarily through its stories. The inherent values that may or may not be explicitly expressed are handed down in English through stories like Hanzel and Gretel and Cinderella, and continue to shape Western culture today through the books, films, and stories that capture audiences' imaginations and hearts. Language is the trait that sets humans
apart from other beings, allowing us the unique ability to sustain an inner dialogue, form ideas, and then express our inner thoughts and feelings to others. Language, although it is what ties members of a society together, also has a history of creating barriers between groups as well. It is language that is causing great anxiety in Navajo Nation today. As with many other indigenous groups, Navajo language, or Diné bizaad has been under attack since Spanish colonization, and later American BIE schools sought to exterminate the language. Today, Navajo Nation is seeking to hold onto its heritage and roots while revitalizing its language. Diné bizaad is a complex, opaque language that allows Diné (Navajo, “the people”) to express their unique and detailed cultural identity.

At the heart of Navajo spirituality and traditional worldview are stories. It is springtime on the Reservation now, and the time for telling coyote stories under the stars has passed. Children will not be seen carrying their loops of yarn for “string games” based on the constellations that tell the stories of Navajo creation and evolution again until next winter. “Shoe Game”, a winter tradition to celebrate the traditional tale of the separation of night and day, will be replaced with trail rides on horseback, Kínááldas for girls who have reached womanhood, cookouts, and softball games in the bright sun and red earth. As the seasons change, and in the endless cycle of time, there is an ebb and flow of traditions and tales.

Stories, told through songs, are heard in hogans around Navajo Nation during ceremonies and meetings. During my first week in Aneth, I was invited to a Kínáálda, or “Puberty way” ceremony for a student and relative of a cafeteria worker who had just
begun her first period and was about to become a Woman in the eyes of the community. From before midnight until past sunrise the following day, the smokey, ceremonial hogan was filled with song after song that moved in a sequential story about preparing to build a house, bringing together the community, moving one's possessions into the house, the happiness of being in the home, a child leaving home, and eventually returning. Songs of stories about horses, children, and mountains followed. As an outsider and a guest in the ceremony, I mostly sat and observed through the night as the meaning of each song was whispered to me and a leather pouch of corn pollen was passed around the hogan for us, the attendants, to bless ourselves. However, when morning came and the sunrise was seen through the east-facing hogan, I was invited to participate in the blessing rituals. When a girl has become Kináálda or gone through her Kináálda she is able to bless those in attendance, so I was invited to give her hugs and have her “stretch” out my hair and body to make me grow tall and live a long life. I helped serve breakfast to the large family, and shook hands, offering “Ahéhéé” (thanks”) to all of the people who had allowed me to experience something so intimate and sacred with their family.

Traditional Navajo teaching and parenting, particularly in Diné bizaad, or Navajo language, moves in a cycle, with complex themes, imagery, repetition, and symbolism. During winter months, yarn string games and winter stars are used to tell ancient coyote stories in which the coyote, usually full of hubris and cunning is deceived and thwarted, foiled by his own attempts at the easy life. Children grow up hearing these cautionary tales to learn Dinée values such as hard work, honesty, and respect. Diné Bahane’, the Navajo creation story is knitted throughout with coyote stories and other cautionary tales
that explain why cultural structures are set in place. I was told that the reason lice, hunger, and laziness are problems on the Reservation and in the world today was caused back in the creation of the world when the Warrior Twins, sons of the First Man and First Woman happened upon dietsies living in the ground that represented the hardships in life. Lice, for example, maintained that he would remain on the earth in order to keep Diné from becoming lazy and to motivate them to take care of themselves. Additionally, the complex Navajo clan system, which is central to the Navajo cultural identity as it prevents incest and maintains order and familial support, is explained through Diné Bahane' as the first peoples of the earth marry, identify, and organize themselves in groups as they travel and inhabit the earth (Zolbrod, 290-291). Navajo language is vital to Navajo cultural identity, and its history and future are as complicated as the language itself. Although there has been a recent resurgence of programs to support Diné students develop their Diné bizaad, many Navajo adults fear that the language is endangered and this facet of Diné culture will dissolve completely.

In the process of preparing for the semester in Navajo Nation, I had repeatedly been told that I must approach my school setting, the community members, and the culture as an outsider. I found that, although I had a sense of respect, curiosity, and appreciation for Navajo culture, the more I learned, the more I found I didn’t understand. While attempting to unearth the concept of the Navajo creation story and the values embedded in the telling of the tale, I found that I vastly underestimated the complexity of Navajo story telling. While I could summarize the Biblical account of the Creation Story in a few minutes, the Navajo creation story could take hundreds of pages and many
hours to recount in its entirety. Through reading and hearing parts of the Navajo creation story, I began to realize I had far underestimated Diné culture in general.

While other ancient cultures in the Western world, such as ancient Greece, Rome, or Britain left behind looming architectural, literary, and artistic works, many indigenous cultures, and particularly more nomadic peoples have left their legacy and maintained ancient ways of living chiefly through oral, craft, or agricultural tradition. As a member of Western, anglo-American society, I had subconsciously accepted the belief that a society's value, or at least its legacy was contained in the things or the words it left behind. The process of learning that I was wrong, and learning to love, wonder at, and learn bits of the Navajo creation tale, among other stories and teachings began to show me my own biases and thinking patterns, and allowed me to appreciate the stories that, like Navajo baskets are tightly and deliberately woven together to represent traditional Navajo culture and identity. Paul Zolbrod, in his translation of Dine Bahane', the Navajo Creation story reminded his readers that, even before Navajo writing "the capacity of the collective memory among no literate people to reach far back into the past is greater than the white man ever supposed...The voice of he storyteller can be every bit as much of an artistic medium as print can be" (20).

Over the course of the past four months I have lived, learned, and worked in Navajo Nation as a student teacher. Through building close relationships and immersing myself in the host culture, I have learned, in part, some of the stories that weave together the traditional Diné (Navajo) identity. While teaching in a BIE (Bureau of Indian Education) school, I have also observed the gap created for students based on cultural
and linguistic discrepancies between traditional Navajo teachings and communication and the demands imposed upon students based on the Common Core.

I: My Transitional Experience

On January 4th, the first day of my student teaching placement in Aneth, Utah, I was ushered into an early-morning professional development meeting with the whole school staff. I was introduced to my cooperating teacher and the rest of the staff, and then participated in a goal-setting exercise to prepare and set the tone for the upcoming semester. Lining the four sky-blue walls in the staff room, down each hallway of the school, and plastered on every classroom wall were dozens of anchor charts, white posters filled with academic content, vocabulary, and learning strategies. The school works with a private company that specializes in supporting institutions like Aneth Community School in meeting state benchmarks for testing and achievement, and the anchor charts are part of supporting student academic development, as well as teacher professional development.

One anchor chart near the door of the staff room contained the school’s “Problem of Practice (POP),” or overarching, teacher-created goal of improvement for the year. The school’s POP for the past two years states that the students should improve in the area of written expression as it relates to their Depth of Knowledge and Common Core standards. Noting the school’s POP sent me into the semester with an idea of what the school would describe as its own weakness, even before I experienced it myself.

Aneth Community School is a pre-school through sixth grade elementary school in which each class (besides the pre-schoolers) switches classrooms between subjects.
Although I worked chiefly with one cooperating homeroom teacher for 3rd grade, in reality I worked with the reading teacher, math teacher, science, and culture teachers as well. All of these are Diné women, most of whom are from the Aneth/Four Corners area. The homeroom and math 3rd grade teacher is a Navajo woman who was not raised traditionally. She spoke enough Diné bizaad to communicate with Navajo-speaking grandparents during parent-teacher conferences, but admitted to me that she struggles and has anxiety about speaking with elders, especially when using academic language. Outside of the students’ 45 minute Navajo culture class block, students speak and learn entirely in English. The science or reading teacher may use a phrase in Navajo when speaking with a child individually, but instruction is always given in English.

As part of my student teaching and housing partnership with Aneth Community School, I spent my post-school afternoons, Monday through Thursday tutoring students that stayed in Aneth school’s residential dorm. From the end of the school day until dinner at 5 o’clock, I helped students with homework and individual academic goals, then joined the students and helped manage behavior during dinner at the school cafeteria before students returned to the dorm for the evening activity, which I helped plan, manage, or carry out. I had the opportunity to work with and get to know two residential dorm staff. One in particular, my “dorm dad,” an adherent to traditional Diné beliefs and practices, shared with me his views on Diné issues and modern culture, language, and even some sacred stories. Throughout the semester, he not only taught me a few useful phrases in Diné bizaad, but also tried to build in me an understanding of the complexity and tone of the language. For example, “yá’ át ééh,” the Navajo...
greeting, translates into “hello” in English, but, as I learned, syllable by syllable, the phrase has a much more visual and complex meaning: from “yá,” meaning “right here,” to “át,” the heavens, to “ééh,” all around us, all is well, or, in my understanding, “It’s all good.” He also described for me how to tell my heritage in Navajo, an important part of introducing and identifying oneself in Diné circles.

Listening to stories and holding conversations with a traditional Diné might take some getting used to for an outsider to the community. When I attended a local Baptist church in Aneth, the message was spoken primarily in English, with only occasional phrases in Navajo, but the organization and sequence of the sermon was strikingly different from what I expected. My “dorm dad” explained the way that Diné speak as being “round-about.” We might imagine a typical white speaker as delivering a message or sentence “linearly,” moving towards one main idea. Linguistically, this makes sense; English puts one’s subject of the sentence before the verb, whereas a native Navajo speaker, when translating into English, would have to think “backwards.” On a larger scale, though, traditional Diné speaking and storytelling takes place in examples, imagery, story, and metaphor. I will be the first to admit that deciphering the “main idea” in a Navajo-speaker’s conversation was, at times, a challenge. I realized that, ingrained in my thinking, was a need to know, “What’s the point?” in each conversation, and when it was difficult to decipher, when I felt myself becoming lost in the references, imagery, or language of whoever was speaking, I grew anxious that I was missing some vital piece. Over time, however, I learned to slow down my internal dialogue, and listen closely, rather than waiting for cues to respond or scanning for the speaker’s “point.” Sometimes a single conversation could change course in confusing or unexpected
ways. I noticed this among my students, as well as adults; when asked a question, “Where is one place in the whole world you would like to travel?” for instance, the speaker may choose to answer one part of the question, and then launch into a description of her or his favorite memory in Albuquerque last summer. My dorm dad described this to me as well as being caused by the remnants in Navajo language that still influence Diné youth, although they may speak English as their first language.

II: My Observations, Experiences, and Discoveries

Beginning in February, I took on more and more responsibility in the classroom, until I taught 3rd grade reading, mathematics, and social studies, as well as overseeing the students’ homeroom and P.E. time blocks. As I began planning and taking on responsibility in the classroom, I was handed a large stack of dense basal textbooks for reading and math on which to base my instruction and turn in weekly lesson plans. I followed the prescribed objective-based weekly lesson plan template and followed the teachers’ model of using the basal books to dictate what stories students read for each objective, which activities to facilitate, and even what questions to ask during a read-aloud. It was difficult to maintain enthusiasm and creativity while I felt as though I was teaching someone else’s work, and the students were accustomed to workbooks, worksheets, and paper-pencil lessons that didn’t seem to contain much real-world application or motivation. Throughout the semester, I heard more than a handful of teachers remark on their students’ lack of motivation and participation, and after planning instruction primarily from a textbook without authentic texts or experiences, I could see how anyone could become lethargic and discouraged after a while. I began
thinking of ways, without many resources or much support, that I could create instruction, *using* the basal readers and workbooks and their objectives, that would engage students in new ways, to get them moving, and even communicating more effectively.

In February, I helped design a school-wide reading and writing incentive program for the month of March. In the first week of March, students were required to read one chapter book. After completing the first challenge, students were asked to write a book report on the book that they read the first week. To complete the March Madness challenge, students were assigned to write their own story by the last week of March. The last third of the challenge provided me with ample writing samples to analyze during a professional development writing workshop in the end of March, and I found that, according to "The 6 Traits" writing rubric for elementary students, most of my students work fell on the low end of the scoring spectrum, scoring primarily 1s, 2s, or 3s, on a 5-point scale for writing quality in terms of the author's idea, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation. When held up to the "6 Traits" standards, the student work was disorganized, lacked focus, and was riddled with punctuation, grammatical, spelling errors. Sentences, for most students, were simplistic and lacked unique voice and word choice. Even the highest-scoring students struggled with mechanics like writing conventions and organization. Overall, the students' lack of writing confidence and proficiency was apparent.

My cooperating teachers and I both conducted daily formative, informal assessments through quick-writes and exit tickets. I found that, when asked an open-ended question, the majority of my students knew how to directly address the prompt
and turn the question back into an answer. However, I found that the first time I gave my
students a quick journal prompt, I wrote the prompt out on the white board, read it out
loud with the students, and when I said "ready, set, go," all but about four of my
students picked up their pencils, and most proceeded to gaze at their papers for the
next two or three minutes. At the end of the eight or nine minutes allotted for the journal,
most students had only written the question, while the struggling students had a blank
paper before them, and the higher-achieving students had written one or two sentences.
Sure enough, written expression was indeed a struggle for these students.

Although written expression is only one vehicle through which students can
express themselves, (and I am becoming, more and more as I become a professional, a
believer in multiple means of representation both for instructing students and having
them express their learning) writing is integrated in every part of Common Core
curriculum requirements. Students are asked to explain and defend their reasoning in
mathematics and write essays describing a text's main idea and supporting it with
details in the reading exam. As much as it was tempting to confine my thinking of writing
as being contained in the reading/writing block of the school day, students needed to
know how and to practice writing skills as a part of their requirements for math and
science testing in both NWEA (Northwest Evaluation Association) and PARCC
(Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) standardized
testing. Equally important, written expression is the standard for English grammar in the
majority of dominant American culture.

As stated previously, Navajo language is hovering over the brink of extinction in
the current generation, a condition brought about due to the systematic extermination of
its use during the 20th century in Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools run by white Americans. This condition is not unique to Navajo Nation. It is estimated that as many as one-third of indigenous groups in the United States are down to less than 100 fluent speakers of their native language (Crawford, 18). As such, many of my students are the children or grandchildren of English Language Learners. Most of my students speak English as their first language, most speak and/or understand Diné as their secondary language. James Crawford, in his article on the disappearance of indigenous languages, also observed that, overall, "young Native Americans grow up speaking only English, learning at best a few words of their ancestral tongues." (18).

However, my students’ English language skills fall far below benchmark as compared to the rest of the state and the country; in this spring’s NWEA Language Arts testing, only 4 students out of the class achieved at or above benchmark scores. It seemed to me, for many of the students at Aneth Community School, neither English nor Diné is a language in which they can completely express their thinking.

Multiple factors could be behind the apparent delay or deficit in these Diné students' language development. Motivation and management are both dismal. The lack of structure in students' home environments, due to poverty, violence, drug or alcohol use, illness, hunger, economic instability, or crime, among many other factors, makes it difficult for students to focus on the task at hand. Additionally, when one or both parents are absent due to separation or work, students' language development is reliant on what they see and hear on television, video games, and among their peers. Even students that are raised in English-speaking homes, native speakers of English, require language support and regular practice with proficient English-speakers.
However, some of my students' parents were in a generation that had their native language forcefully removed and replaced by English in the BIE schools, making their L2 (second language) development, therefore, not only traumatic, but, in many cases, nonstandard.

III. What you can learn from my experience

My experience in teaching, living, traveling, and connecting with community members in Navajo Nation has formed my professional and personal identity. I found myself continually humbled by the vast and harsh landscape, the unjust and chaotic home lives of my students, the kindness and generosity of the Navajo people I met, and, most of all, my experiences solo-teaching in the classroom.

I realized early into my teaching experience in 3rd grade that teaching content and delivering meaningful lessons would be an uphill battle as long as my students were unmotivated and disengaged and if I was not in control of the class. The lack of consistency in the school (as many as six students were absent some days, and the class schedule changes every day with changing classrooms and many, many transitions) makes structure and order difficult to maintain, and I learned the hard way that setting clear and positive expectations is necessary for an effective teacher. I worked with a notoriously difficult group of students in 3rd grade this semester, and they proved to be a challenge, although they made great strides. Using a visual and consistent system to monitor and cue students to modify their behavior was helpful. I used a glass jar and 45 glass stones. The sound and visual of taking the stones from a plastic basket into the glass jar was a way to nonverbally affirm my students' positive
behavior, particularly weekly focus traits, like respect or responsibility. Giving the students a positive and exciting goal (our big pay-offs included a shoes-off movie afternoon or unstructured basketball time in the gymnasium) was elemental because the students' day is jam-packed with academic content, with no social studies, no arts, music, or P.E. built in to the day, and only 15 minutes for recess once a day for all grades. Building fun and goal-setting into the day, as well as making lessons interactive is crucial to reaching all students.

Another admission I will concede is that I was afraid of teaching math in my 3rd grade classroom before this semester. I was not familiar with Common Core strategies or standards, and I lacked confidence in every arena. However, I've found that my students love math, and making math interactive, hands-on, visual, and engaging was far simpler and exciting than I expected. During my first week of teaching, I made the students' daily spiral review into a musical-chairs game, and they were partially shocked, and partially gleeful to be invited out of their seats to dance and move while doing multiplication. In the last week of class, I brought supplies and a recipe to make pancakes with the students, modifying a recipe by multiplying fractions for each ingredient, then helping me measure, mix, and enjoy the fruits of our equivalent fractions work. The students' were not only engaged, but learning, communicating, and working cooperatively. I even had one student bring me homemade pancakes the next morning. She radiated pride as she placed the plate on my desk and told me that she even helped measure and make the pancakes, just like we did in class. Making learning cross-curricular, as hands-on as possible, and include practical application and use is
clearly best practice. If I had the semester to teach again, I would try to bring in cooking or crafting for each lesson, or at least a few times a week.

Building personal and close relationships with parents, teachers, school staff, and community members allowed me to gain insight into the history and complex identities of my students in ways that would have remained a mystery otherwise. My personal teaching philosophy centers around management and cooperation based on mutual respect, and in order to truly know someone, it takes some investigation into their context and setting. Any belegana, white, or non-Native teacher should take advantage of any opportunities to ask questions, listen closely, and begin to understand the character and values of the local and national community. Attending ceremonies, sweat lodge, powwow, traditional Song and Dance, community programs, and participating in any extracurricular programs and events that I could allowed me to build relationships and trust with parents and community personnel. While standing on a mesa overlooking a sheep herd, I listened to a retired teacher from the community explain the changes she saw in the students over her career. Listening to stories from the school dorm staff as the sun set after dinner gave me insight into Navajo values, language, and beliefs, and even lead me to explore ways that my host culture and my home culture might be similar or different.

Personally and professionally, an effective non-Native teacher on the Reservation must seek out opportunities to build relationships, building a sense of cultural sensitivity and curiosity, rather than judgement. My short four months on the Reservation left me with more questions than answers, but my students knew that I loved and respected them for their individuality as well as their cultural identity. I
frequently asked students to repeat a phrase in Diné bizaad, teach me or clarify for me new words, or explain folklore or superstition. Allowing my students to be heard, and letting them experience the idea that what they have to say and who they are is important is an empowering and motivating aspect of student engagement. In March, my students became pen pals with 3rd graders at a primarily white Christian school in Indiana, and I encouraged them to teach their new pen pals a word or phrase in Navajo. When students were given practical application and incentive for writing, when they felt that their writing was meaningful to someone else, they worked more diligently and precisely than I had ever seen before. I barely began to introduce brainstorming responses with the whole group before half the class was already writing away to their pen pals, and students who would normally struggle to produce a sentence were writing whole paragraphs and complete thoughts to their new friends. Validating the students’ identities, incorporating social and practical implications, and making learning and writing cross-curricular and culturally relevant could mean the difference between failure and progress for some students.

Embracing the new, asking questions, taking risks, and listening deeply will allow an outsider to begin closing the historically bleeding gap between dominant anglo-American culture and Navajo Nation by unearthing and undoing deep-seated stereotypes, building trust, and cultivating cultural pluralism. Above all, a teacher that knows, or even seeks to understand the context of his or her students is one step closer to managing a classroom where respect, curiosity, and diversity are celebrated. My experience student teaching in Navajo Nation was a fleeting, brilliant time, full of challenges, struggles, confusion, joy, and growth. Any teacher immersing his or herself
in a new cultural context is undertaking a brave endeavor, one that, with a little luck and a lot of hard work, will make one a culturally-responsive teacher and a more aware global citizen. The challenges that students face as their cultural and linguistic heritage is met by ever-rising academic standards are no small issue. Students who struggle to express themselves verbally will be asked to defend and explain their reasoning in writing, which can seem impossible, but by motivating students through socially and culturally relevant tasks and providing appropriate language support in all academic subjects, teachers can build students' self-efficacy, increasing their drive to succeed.
Works Cited


Authority ID OCA06242544

Basic authority information
Authority ID: OCA06242544
Record format: PERSONAL
Source: DLC

Authorization
Date authorized: 5/11/1999
Authorization level: AUTHORIZED

Authority creation
Date created: 4/1/2013
Created by: BWILKINSON

Basic authority information
Date modified: 2/9/2015
Modified by: BWILKINSON

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SOURCE DATA FOUND: Painless reading Comprehension, 2012:|bECIP t. p. (Darolyn Lyn Jones)

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