

Case Study of a First Year Navajo Language Immersion Teacher¹

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Nancy has lived nearly her entire life on the Navajo Nation. In her early childhood years, she and her mother lived with her grandparents where Navajo language and culture framed her daily life. She was strongly influenced by her maternal grandfather:

My late grandfather use to say, “Never forget your language. Do not be ashamed of who we are and where we are coming from.” I was taught never to take life for granted and that my being had its purpose. I was told to respect myself and all walks of life, from the newborn baby to the elderly man across the field, even the red ant and the stinkbug.

In preschool Nancy attended a small community-controlled school where the Navajo language and culture were integrated into academic instruction. This was not the case in her elementary school experience, however. She was sent to live at an on-reservation Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Boarding School, an experience that has left her with a mix of good and bad memories. “I had an awful time,” she recalled, “mainly because of the...dormitory attendants. They...were cruel in their discipline.” As an example she described having to clean toilets with a toothbrush. The dormitory attendants, who, it should be noted, were all Navajo and from the community, also brushed their hair roughly and braided it so tightly that their scalp would hurt. She remembers them as non-nurturing, cold, and detached. However, Nancy remembers fondly her daytime schooling experiences. She had three Anglo (Caucasian) teachers and one African-American teacher, who she says “were nice.” Nancy later attended Junior and Senior High School in the public school in her home community on the Reservation where she had many teachers and principals, both Tribal members and non-Natives, who were caring and who influenced her positively by being interested in her personally.

After graduating from high school, an event occurred that would have a significant impact on the future direction of her life. Nancy won a coveted position as the official ambassador for her Nation. The winner of this title is not only physically attractive but is knowledgeable about their Navajo language and culture.

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Contestants are judged on their ability to demonstrate knowledge of the culture, perform traditional skills, and tell a story and/or joke in Navajo. As ambassador, Nancy had the opportunity to represent her People at numerous functions both locally and across the United States. During her year-long reign she visited most of the communities within her Nation and, in so doing, gained an awareness of the status of the language and culture. She recognized that a serious language shift was occurring. "I learned that the language was not spoken as much and that culture and traditions were not carried on. This made me want to go out and do more." Nancy became fervent in promoting the maintenance of her language and culture and pride in her heritage.

The knowledge and experience she acquired during her reign also motivated her to attend college. Originally Nancy had wanted to become a lawyer but, as she reflected on the important influences in her life, she became aware that all of her role models from high school as well as her mother were educators. She too wanted to be an educator. In pursuit of her goal, Nancy enrolled in the Teacher Education program at the nearby Tribal College, a program that is offered through a partnership with a major State University. This choice carried with it two major advantages—it was close to home allowing her to be near her baby son and the support of her family and it fulfilled her desire to learn more about her own Tribal traditions and culture. The College was specifically founded to promote Navajo language and culture. It provides language courses not only for conversational fluency but as a prerequisite for teacher education courses. Students in the teacher preparation program, in fact, learn to deliver instruction in Navajo. Nancy graduated with a Bachelors Degree and teacher certification and was immediately hired by the school in which she had completed her teaching internship and, prior to entering the Program, had been employed as a teacher's aid.

The school is located less than two miles from the commercial center of the Tribal Nation's capital. Situated in the high plateau country of North-Eastern Arizona, this community, which Nancy has called home for the past eight years, appears to have more pick-up trucks than cars, evidence of the rural nature of the community where residents and commuters must endure muddy road conditions during spring, fall, and winter months. On a typical weekday morning vehicles fill the roads as citizens make their way from outlying suburban-like planned communities, from the more centralized low-rent housing districts and individually owned homes, or from other reservation communities to their jobs in the capital. Most are headed to one of the many tribal enterprises, such as the Housing Authority and Utility Authority, or to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) or Indian Health Service (IHS) agency headquarters. Other sources of employment include the Tribally-run and operated museum, zoo, radio station, TV broadcast station, arts and crafts enterprise, inn and restaurant, newspaper, and transit system. The visible culture of the community reveals signs of transition. People dress variously in business suits, casual American clothing styles, western attire with cowboy boots and cowboy hats, and traditional long three-tiered skirts with velveteen blouses. With the variations in dress however, there

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is always included the attractive turquoise, coral, and silver jewelry which is worn with suits, western wear, and traditional clothing. It is worn not only for adornment but as an expression of identity and spirituality.

Navajo language use also bears the markers of transition. While sitting in the Tribal restaurant or standing in line in the Supermarket, one can hear Navajo spoken just as much as English. It is also heard over the local radio station. It seems, however, that it is mostly older people who are speaking the language. Regarded by most local people as an important element of their identity, the language is experiencing tremendous change and Nancy worries that the community is not taking this seriously enough. But she is comfortable in this community. She is remembered and admired for her tenure as ambassador for her People and she receives many compliments from community members who tell her "It's wonderful that you're teaching." Many recognize that she is very special and very adept at teaching.

A visit to Nancy's school and classroom corroborates this assessment. Just off the main highway north of town, a tree-lined road, whose pavement has eroded into a random course of potholes, leads to the elementary school. It is a large single-level stucco building with the entrance opening to the west. From one central area containing a small library, a teacher's workroom, and the offices for administration, the school nurse, a receptionist, and the school liaison, four wings of classrooms reach out to the four directions. On the walls of the large open area in the central structure are attractive colorful murals of traditional Tribal life. Seating is available for visitors, families, and students in this inviting and appealing area. Adjacent to the main school building are playgrounds, two mobile classroom buildings, and the new kindergarten through second grade building which is under construction. One mobile unit contains the school library. Another unit contains the classroom for Navajo language and culture. The mobile units are weathered and shabby compared to the main stucco school building.

The school's faculty is well qualified and unusually stable for a reservation school, perhaps owing to the fact that so many are from the community. Fifty-seven percent of the teachers have master's degrees or higher and as a group they average more than seven years of experience. Forty-two of the 45 teachers in the school are Native; about three-fourths are Tribal members and half of these come from the local community. The 13 paraprofessionals who assist with instruction are all Native.

With over 500 students enrolled in kindergarten through fifth grade, 98 percent of whom are Tribal members, the elementary school is "below average" in overall test score performance but well above average when compared to similar schools. The State Department of Education has labeled it a "school under improvement" based on results from Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) and the Stanford Nine. AIMS testing begins in third grade and Stanford Nine statistics for this school district begin with second grade. It appears that in the first three grades students are engaged in their learning but test scores increasingly divert from the norm the longer students are in school.

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Nancy's students are among the "engaged ones" not yet subject to statistical branding, as hers is a first grade immersion class.

After earning her degree, Nancy taught immersion Kindergarten in this school for one year. Half of the students from that kindergarten class are now in her first grade immersion class. One Navajo language immersion class is represented at each grade level kindergarten through 5th grade. The kindergarten and first grade immersion classes are taught totally in Navajo; English is introduced in second grade, and by third grade the immersion class is taught in English from 8 a.m. to noon and in the Navajo language from 1 p.m. until 3 p.m. Teachers in the five immersion classes are highly qualified to teach utilizing this methodology. A veteran immersion teacher who has served as an important mentor to Nancy describes their commitment: "Here, the immersion groups, we work closely together. We try to have monthly parent meetings and we try to teach the parents to write and read as well. Last year was very intense, we had a meeting every month. It was quite a challenge. It took a lot of time."

Aside from the immersion classes, the only other exposure to Navajo language and culture is in the 30 minutes per student per week pull-out program. The language and culture specialist, a fluent speaker of Navajo, is a certified teacher with 20 years of experience. Enigmatically, since the passage of English Only legislation in Arizona, her title has been changed to "foreign language teacher." Her language and culture program is housed in one of the shabby mobile classrooms next to the main school building. Because heating in the classroom is unreliable, the teacher often spends time in the immersion classes. In Nancy's first grade class, she assists daily by working with approximately seven children who are experiencing particular challenges in learning the Navajo. She is very energetic and enthusiastic about her work and has been a strong supporter of the immersion program and an invaluable mentor for Nancy.

At the beginning of this year, Nancy relied heavily on both of her mentors, the veteran immersion teacher and the language and culture specialist, to guide her in the organization of all academic work in the Navajo. In her journal she reflects on the impact the language and culture specialist has had on her life:

This person was a life saver at the beginning of the school year, and still is. She is a wonderful person...she helped by picking me up of the ground and lent a helping hand. I really don't think I would have gotten off my feet this year, if it weren't for her. She has helped me identify and set a schedule, what and when we would be teaching what, how we would adapt Native language phonics into Spalding. She laid stuff out for me, and I picked it up and RAN with it.... She helped establish a routine...one that I still use to date.

About her fellow immersion classroom teacher, Nancy offered: "She's everything I strive to be like as an educator. She's there for support and advice. When I feel overwhelmed, I usually see her and we talk. I'm not exactly sure what it is...I feel safer knowing that she's just next door."

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With the moral and technical support of her mentors, Nancy is developing her own understanding of what it means to be an immersion teacher and her classroom reflects this. Rules for the classroom are written in the Navajo language on professionally created posters that depict Tribal children traditionally dressed. There is a bookcase stocked with books printed in the Navajo language—although they are few in number. Navajo songs play on a boom box while the children work. From the beginning of the school day, the children recite the pledge of allegiance to the Tribal flag and sing the Tribal flag song. They do calendar work, alphabet sounds, identification of money (coins), math, reading and writing, and storytelling all in the Navajo. Navajo cultural values are embedded in Nancy's classroom pedagogy. She addresses all her students according to their kinship relations and encourages them to praise one another. As she models these interactions, the students echo the behaviors in their responses and interactions with one another.

Most of the seventeen children in Nancy's class are primarily English speakers even after having been in an immersion Kindergarten class and, therefore, resort to speaking English outside of the classroom, i.e., at the washrooms, in the hallways, and on the playground. This is not surprising given that only one set of parents speak the language fluently and approximately six others can understand and speak it minimally. Despite the reservation-wide mandate for language immersion in all Head Start programs on the Nation and the many immersion classes and bilingual programs that exist across the Reservation, the Navajo language has been challenged by attitudes carried over from the boarding school days when English was considered superior to the Navajo language. Nancy is concerned that the language and culture is seldom stressed in the homes of community people. She acknowledges that some teachers and parents feel that the Navajo language and culture hinder academic progress. But she is intensely passionate about maintaining the language and culture. She emphatically states:

English can be learned anywhere.... The learning of the Native language should be fun and desirable by the child. I don't want to be the teacher that turned them off to the whole idea of learning the language just because Mom and Dad thought it would be cute.... Our language is not cute; it is a tough language to learn. And I need parental support in order for our children to learn our precious language.

Although the immersion classes enroll a small percentage of students in the school system, they have had a broad effect. With the guidance and activism of teachers like Nancy, they have impacted the total school program and have promoted the value of Navajo language and culture across the community and beyond.

Nancy chose to be a teacher who taught through the language and culture of her People because of the strong influence of her maternal grandfather and her mother's teachings. Throughout her early childhood years her grandfather

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stressed the beauty of the language and traditions. In her journal she speaks of her mother's influence as well:

My mother has taught me to believe in myself. She always says, "Never let people walk all over you. If you know that something is not right, then speak up." Through her teachings, I have grown into a responsible adult. My mother also tells us that, "Nothing is given to you on a silver platter. You have to work hard for what you need and want." Children can overcome and withstand any obstacles that may come their way as they journey through life. With these sacred teachings, I strongly believe and feel that my purpose upon Mother Earth and Father Sky is to serve our children. This is why I am a teacher of our... children.