Tuba City

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Tuba City, Arizona, is located in the heart of Indian country on the western part of the Navajo Nation adjacent to the Hopi tribal lands. Nevertheless, only some fifteen percent of the Navajo children who enter kindergarten each year at Tuba City comprehend and speak their ancestral language. The situation is far more precarious for the Hopi language. The challenges faced by residents of Tuba City to preserve the Navajo and Hopi languages mirror those faced by many American Indian communities throughout the U.S. and other indigenous peoples around the world.

In September, 1993, workshops were held across the Navajo Reservation aimed at the maintenance of the Navajo language. Joshua Fishman served as the key facilitator. He cited findings from a study he is currently finishing up that compares successful and unsuccessful actions of threatened speech communities, involving seventy-five endangered languages. During presentations and informal discussions, Fishman continually returned to a key point—when over-relied upon, or relied upon exclusively, schools fail to save languages.

Examples reinforced this message. Innovative schools have been founded to save languages. Some have been well funded, employed dedicated teachers, used excellent materials, and focused an enormous amount of time on the endangered language. Nevertheless, despite all the expertise, funding, and hard work, most children failed to learn their endangered language. Why? Fishman noted that schools are generally successful in preparing students for a reality outside of school, but not very good at teaching what is beyond the out-of-school reality for children, regardless of whether the subject is an endangered language, social studies, or algebra.

Efforts to save languages must ultimately deal with the intergenerational transmission of mother-tongues. This is, to a large extent, a family and community issue. Exclusive focus on education compounds, rather than solves, the problem of language shift. Groups who are succeeding in saving their language (the Basque of Spain, for example) find ways to revitalize and stabilize their speech community. In these cases, schools play a role, but the community is the primary focus of action.

Redirecting Efforts

Several courses of action would greatly assist American Indian communities in developing the effective right to maintain their languages. Such actions include: 1) fostering of new, innovative, community-based approaches to strengthen and stabilize threatened languages; 2) directing more research efforts toward analyzing community-based successes in resisting loss of Native American languages and other minority languages as well; 3) fostering communication and partnerships between communities and organizations trying new approaches to maintaining languages; and 4) promotion of heightened consciousness of the catastrophic effects of language loss both among members of lan-

guage minority populations and among members of the mainstream population. Unfortunately, the human and financial resources needed to stabilize or restore American Indian languages extend beyond the resources of nearly all Indian communities.

Turning Point in Tuba City

The people of Tuba City, like those in many other Indian communities, are at a critical juncture. The children of Tuba City could come of age in a community steeped in the joys of Navajo and Hopi life as well as enjoy the benefits of participation in the larger society — particularly higher income and higher education. However, such achievements will not come easily.

A vicious cycle persists that is very difficult to break. Lack of community infrastructure and many social problems contribute to language shift; language shift fosters dysfunctional behavior, and so it goes. So much damage has been inflicted on the local cultures that many people seem rather fatalistic about language loss, not to mention failing to solve the many social problems associated with the accompanying cultural unraveling.

Reasons for optimism, however, are clearly evident. Increased awareness of key issues and alternatives concerning the role of Navajo language in the future is occurring in families, the schools, and various organizations. Indians and non-Indians are collaborating rather effectively in addressing language-related issues. Intelligent youth, many destined to be leaders of tomorrow, demonstrate renewed interest in joining with their elders in preserving their most valuable birthright—their language, culture, and land. A special resiliency as well as a vision for a brighter future clearly exist in Tuba City.

Can sufficient action be taken quickly enough to stabilize local languages and, hence, the cultures? This is the fundamental question in Tuba City today because opportunities to stabilize local languages may be gone in a very short period of time — perhaps in five years. Elements of the community are aware of the situation and have held monthly symposia and other activities to address the problem of language loss. The response of Tuba City Public Schools to the threat to the Navajo language is described below.

Tuba City Public Schools Response to Language Loss

Tuba City Public Schools in Arizona instituted a Title VII funded two-way Navajo-English bilingual program in 1992. The program is a response to a 1984 mandate by the Navajo Tribe that all schools within the Navajo Nation teach Navajo and to a 1989 mandate by the Arizona State Board of Education that all students be able to speak and understand English plus a second language by the completion of eighth grade.

Arizona's 21 semester credit requirement for a bilingual teaching endorsement has also aided the establishment of Tuba City's program. The endorsement requires bilingual teachers to have courses in linguistics, bilingual methods (using the children's first language, in this case Navajo), community involvement, and the foundations of bilingual education. In response, Arizona universities are

now offering the courses needed so that Tuba City and other school districts can staff their programs.

Tuba City's two-way program started for first grade students in 1992-93 and includes one half day immersed in a Navajo Language classroom and one half day immersed in an English language classroom. In 1993-94 both first and second graders had 1/2 day of Navajo instruction and 1/2 day of English instruction, while third grade students in 1994-95 had a mixture of 1/5 Navajo and 4/5 English. Emphasis is on language development with whole language activities, including thematic units, that integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing in both languages.

First grade thematic units include family, food, clothing, seasons, animals, plants, and so forth. The program employs a variety of strategies, including students writing booklets, language immersion activities, and informal language use. Preliminary results show that student English writing skills are better than when they were taught in English all day. The enriched curriculum of Tuba City's Two-Way Bilingual Program costs about the same as the old monolingual curriculum. Additional in-service teacher training in various aspects of bilingual education is the only extra cost as the overall pupil-teacher ratio remains the same.

That is not to say that past supplemental Title VII funding was wasted. Today's Two-Way Program at Tuba City is an out-growth of an older bilingual program based on a transitional model. Planning started in 1977 for a Title VII supported program that would allow students to learn academic concepts and reading in Navajo and then to apply this knowledge as they learned English.

The curriculum planners believe that bilingual instruction will build bridges between home and school, will maintain positive attitudes towards family, and will set the stage for learning English better. In addition, over the years, the district has established a model cultural center and a model bilingual center. The culture center has exhibits and an extensive library of American Indian, Navajo, and Hopi books.

The training and experience of past Title VII projects helped lay the groundwork for the current program. However, the new Two-Way Program represents the beginnings of a departure from the old transitional philosophy. Now it is clearly important that non-Navajo speaking children in Tuba City learn Navajo as well as non-English speaking students English.

Whether the need is to speak to non-English speaking grandparents or just play with one's peers, bilingualism in Tuba City is an asset for any child. It is for the future to tell if some subjects will be taught in Navajo right through high school as recommended by Stephen Krashen and others. However, the fact that Tuba City High School presently is one of the few high schools with a Native American Studies requirement for graduation indicates K-12 commitment to bilingual and bicultural education.