

Early Childhood Session Summary

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Participants consisted of about thirty parents, teachers, and administrators representing a variety of universities, school districts, and tribes. Discussion among participants in the session on Early Childhood Education started slowly as presenters explored their approaches, successes, and failures in reversing loss of native languages by focusing on the youngest members of tribes and communities.

Developing a Navajo Day Care Center

Dorothy Denetsosie and Ellavina Perkins discussed their experiences in creating a Navajo day care center in Flagstaff, Arizona. Some 4,000 to 6,000 Navajos live in Flagstaff, a small, thriving city located about twenty-five miles from the Navajo Nation. Obstacles to establishing the center were significant. The initial step was formation of a committee that explored need, feasibility, and financing.

Assessment demonstrated a need for such a center as a mechanism for helping children, uniting the Navajo community, and preserving the language and culture. Relocation of Navajo people displaced by division of land in areas claimed by both Navajos and Hopis is a significant factor in the burgeoning Navajo population in Flagstaff. Depression among Navajo people was found to be high. While the desire to retain the ancestral language was clearly evident, the Navajo community was not organized or well-equipped to take necessary action. Immense difficulties exist in maintaining Navajo in an urban, English-speaking environment.

Planning, effort, and determination made the day care center a reality — an important step toward unifying the Navajo community of Flagstaff. The center is currently in its first year of operation.

Navajo people refer to themselves as Diné, the People. The day care center was described as an expression of Diné philosophy and culture with a hogan-like atmosphere, the hogan being a traditional circular home that is itself a manifestation of the complex belief system of the Navajos. Elders were employed to teach Navajo language and help children begin to acquire the foundations of cultural life.

Denetsosie and Perkins indicated that language preservation efforts in Flagstaff have far to go. However, they described a significant achievement and an important initial step toward fulfilling a long-range community goal of maintaining Navajo language and culture.

Tohono O'odham Early Childhood Education

Phyllis Antone described her tribe's efforts. The land of the Tohono O'odham extends over a large area in southwestern Arizona and northern Mexico. Mexi-

¹The session was moderated by Dr. Gary D. McLean, and the discussant was Lorena Zah-Bahe.

can versus U.S. citizenship is still an issue. Some fifty-five percent of the some 17,000 residents of the Reservation continue to speak their traditional language. However, language shift is occurring. O'odham speakers tend to be older people, but many infants continue to acquire O'odham. It is used more frequently in more remote areas.

The Tribe has taken important steps toward maintaining their language. Emphasis is placed on young children using the language in the home, extended family, and in day care and preschool programs. The early childhood curriculum grew out of the community and is a systematic approach involving the elderly in instruction that makes use of stories, songs, and a full-range of cultural practices associated with inculturation.

For the Tohono O'odham, early childhood education is only a part of a far-reaching plan aimed at cultural and linguistic survival. A dictionary has been developed as have written texts and literature. The early childhood programs are only the beginning of an articulated curricular program extending into the higher grades and emphasizing history, values, music, art, outdoor education, cultural traditions, and, of course, language development.

The curriculum reflects a comprehensive educational plan developed in 1982 and is supported by tribal language policies, educational standards for students, and written responsibilities of teachers. The educational program is a well-integrated component of community life.

Pascua Yaqui Early Childhood Programs

Rosa Achondo reported on her tribe's programs. As with other programs presented thus far, the Pascua Yaqui program grew out of the needs of the people in terms of sociocultural survival. The traditional lands of the Pascua Yaqui extend across the international border between the U.S. and Mexico as do those of the Tohono O'odham. The Yaquis represent a trilingual community employing Yaqui, English, and Spanish. However, only approximately sixty percent of the children under eighteen years of age currently speak Yaqui. Most school-age children are bussed out to some thirty schools surrounding the Reservation. However, an early childhood immersion program, involving children and parents from some thirty families, is intended to eventually extend into the upper grades.

A four year grant ending in 1996 contributed significantly to the development of the early childhood education program. Stories, songs, art, and a range of linguistically and culturally rich experiences form the basis of the instructional program.

Efforts are underway to assist parents with the Yaqui language and assist them in using the language in the home. Regular meetings exclusively for fathers are an interesting aspect of the program. The aim of the fathers is to help each other in becoming better fathers, better leaders, and more effective users of Yaqui language and culture at home and in the community. At the present time, the Yaqui community is forging ahead in terms of identifying and responding to multiple issues fundamental to the survival of the speech community.

Hawaiian Pūnana Leo Program

Bill Wilson began with a cursory overview of factors that nearly led to the demise of the Hawaiian language and then turned his attention to language restoration efforts. The Hawaiian language enjoyed a rich literary and academic tradition throughout the 1800's and was the language of the territorial government into the first part of the this century. However, by 1920 language loss was apparent. This loss continued for several decades. In the 1960's culture and land rights restoration efforts began. The Pūnana Leo School in Hilo, Hawai'i, was a product of this revival movement.

The Pūnana Leo Schools are an immersion program in a very complete sense. Hawaiian is the exclusive language of the campus. For example, visitors who do not speak Hawaiian communicate through interpreters even when the message is being transmitted to people who comprehend and speak English perfectly.

The school is an outgrowth of the community and reflects a program model developed by the Maori people of New Zealand. The model relies heavily on language nests in which elders immerse young children in the traditional language. Parents of children enrolled in the Punana Leo School work to enhance their own language capabilities and restore the use of the language in the home. They also support the school financially by contributing considerable time to the school. Such work helps lower tuition costs.

The Hawaiian world view is transmitted via games, stories, songs, dance, and other forms of expression. Literacy is a significant part of the program. Bill Wilson effectively conveyed his passion and that of the community for preserving and enhancing the Hawaiian language. Success is judged nearly exclusively in terms of native language enhancement, not English academics. However, students immersed in Hawaiian perform better in terms of English academics than their counterparts in schools employing English as the sole language of instruction.

Immersion schools are expanding throughout the Hawaiian Islands. The schools are backed by legislation giving Hawaiian official status and granting the right to use Hawaiian as a language of instruction. Hawaiian is now a language of instruction through the university years. Linguists are working to develop Hawaiian terms needed for performing tasks in contemporary society and in technological domains.

Discussion

In conjunction with the discussion on Hawaiian language issues, William Demmert, of Western Washington University, raised the issue of social problems and their relationship to language loss. Presenters and members of the audience agreed and provided examples in various cultural contexts in which language loss was associated with multiple forms of cultural disintegration. Problems mentioned ranged from improper placement of children in special education and psychological depression to physical health problems and family violence.

Stabilizing Indigenous Languages

Despite the tremendous variety of participant backgrounds, all seemed to concur that language survival was critical to happiness, success, and the psychological and physical health of a community. The discussion, like the presentations, reflected the importance of local self-determination.

Where do we go from here? William Demmert emphasized the importance of building the infrastructure of a language vertically, not just horizontally, for example to develop leadership, policy, institutions, and the like. One participant emphasized that language restoration is a bottom-up process as opposed to being based on such things as legislative mandates. Demmert emphasized that language restoration is a family matter. He said, "Do not wait for agreement. Just go out and do something."

Some discussion of Goals 2000 occurred. Opinions were mixed as to whether new guidelines and current directions at the federal level would strengthen language restoration efforts or hasten deterioration and how best to promote policies that would be advantageous to indigenous speech communities. Little time remained at that point to explore such issues in depth.

As the session ended, one participant emphasized the importance of using endangered languages and developing contemporary vocabulary instead of giving up because of the absence of appropriate terminology. On that note the spirited discussion came to a halt.