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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an ethnographic study of school and community characteristics affecting the literacy development of Navajo children, and provides an overview of sociocultural factors in the literacy environment of one Navajo community. The researcher was a principal at Pinon Public School District #4 in Pinon, Arizona, in the heart of the Navajo Reservation. Data sources included 6 months of participant observations in two grade-6 classrooms; structured interviews with teachers, parents, and students; a parent survey about home literacy characteristics; school records; and the researcher/principal's daily journal entries. The findings suggest that sociocultural factors and cultural dissonance directly affect the literacy development of Pinon students. A summary of factors impacting educational outcomes at Pinon discusses: (1) the growth of employment opportunities on the reservation for professionals, particularly in government; (2) the influence of the extended family; (3) trends toward smaller families and declining use of the Navajo language; (4) increased contact with mainstream society, particularly through the mass media; (5) rural-urban differences in living conditions; (6) traditionalism and the continued importance of healing ceremonies; (7) changes in lifestyle and livelihood; (8) increased tribal involvement in the four types of reservation schools; (9) diminished influence of the Mormon placement program; and (10) increased opportunities for higher education. (SV)

The Effects of Sociocultural Factors on the Navajo Literacy Environment

by

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Introduction

The purpose of this enthnographic research was to begin the process of identifying the literacy characteristics of Navajo readers and writers. The study replicates aspects of the research project entitled Home Environmental Characteristics of Successful Navajo Readers conducted by Dr. David Hartle-Schutte in 1988.

A traditional, less acculturated setting was selected as recommended by Dr. Hartle-Schutte (1988) in his suggestions for further research. The suggestion was made to determine whether a more traditional environment affected the literacy development of Navajo students because of the discontinuities that exist between the home and the school (Cazden, Courtney, 1982).

Ethnographic data collection consisted of six months of participant observations in two six grade classrooms. Structured interviews were used to gather information from teachers, students and parents about the school and community characteristics that affect literacy development for Navajo children at Pinon Public School District #4. A researcher designed instrument was used to survey parents about home literacy characteristics. Field notes were taken and emerging themes were analyzed to triangulate the data collected from interviews and observations. Analysis of the data was inductive in that the recurring patterns emerged out of the data rather than being imposed on the data prior to data collection and procedure.

Two key informants who were Navajo provided assistance with the language and with community issues that were considered to be sensitive and ethnically volatile. School records were reviewed to determine tribal membership, socioeconomic levels of parents, attendance patterns, behavioral patterns and standardized test scores.

A journal was kept that was used to record impressions of the emic observer and to reflect on the day to day occurrences that were experienced both as a principal and an ethnographer. Photographs and videos were used as secondary sources for recording observations of the sample population.

This study was conducted at Pinon, Arizona on the Navajo reservation. The school was located in the heart of the community that served about six thousand people. The population was ninety-six percent Navajo, one percent Hopi, one percent Hispanic, and two percent Anglo. The two sixth grade classrooms in this study consisted of one Navajo female teacher, one Anglo male teacher and nineteen Navajo, Hopi and Anglo children ranging in age from eleven to thirteen years. There were eleven girls and nine boys in the sample population.

The findings of this study are unique because they apply to a culturally specific setting. First, this study offers an emic (within culture) view of how Navajo children in a traditional reservation community acquire literacy skills. The researcher lived and interacted daily with the children and teachers in the study. The researcher served as Principal of the school being investigated as well as fulfilling the role of participant observer.

Secondly, this study suggests that Navajo children in Pinon achieve literacy in unique and varying ways. No home environment was the same. However, those homes that fostered literate environments through valuing reading and writing activities produced more successful readers and writers as determined by traditional academic standards. Authentic assessment procedures were also used to verify and document students' writing performance.

Thirdly, the study suggests that sociocultural issues directly affect the literacy development of students at Pinon School. Cultural dissonance created home, school, and community tensions that increased student absenteeism, decreased parental involvement, decreased student effectiveness, and increased teacher anxiety and ineffectiveness.

Fourth, Navajo children in Pinon come to school speaking Navajo without formal oral language instruction. Primary language development through a strong bilingual program can ensure a more successful transition for these students to English as a second language in both oral and written participant structures.

Emerging Themes

This paper will summarize the effects of sociocultural factors on the Navajo literacy environment at Pinon Unified School District #4. These factors are by no means intended to be representative of all Navajo communities and schools. The Navajo reservation encompasses 25,000 miles and four states. Each community is unique and, therefore, deserves to be recognized and investigated in that context.

The factors that I will discuss in this paper, then, reflect the data gathered during my stay as a participant observer in the Pinon community from 1991-1992. They are: 1) the media; 2) traditional cultural beliefs; 3) stereotypes of Native Americans; 4) traditional Anglo teaching styles, 5) contemporary lifestyles, and cultural dissonance.

Social Factors

The development of literacy does not take identical paths for all individuals, nor for all groups of individuals. Numerous research reports (Au and Kawakami, 1985; Scollon and Scollon, 1980; Clark, 1984) document a variety of ways that literacy develops in different social and ethnic groups. Literacy development, like oral language development is a social and cultural phenomenon that cannot be explained in isolation from the sociocultural context. As Langer (1987) points out, many literacy researchers and practitioners tend to look at literacy as if reading and writing need to be learned in some pristine and decontextualized sense, detached from the social purposes they serve; rather than investigating literacy development within the various social contexts. "The issues have generally been taken separately, and the studies often focus on minority group students who are poor academic achievers in a traditional sense..." (Langer, 1987, p. 14).

In order to understand both the generally poor academic achievement (in a traditional sense) of Navajo students, as well as to understand the successes of individual students who become successful readers and writers, it is necessary to look at cultural, social and economic factors impacting on literacy development.

> As an alternative explanation I am suggesting that the problems experienced by minorities in acquiring literacy and in academic performance generally are a function of their adaptation to the limited opportunity open to them for jobs and other positions in adult life requiring literacy, where literacy pays off (ogbu, 1987a, p. 151).

Ogbu suggests three different classifications for minorities that he claims accounts for differential success rates in the United States contemporary society. Autonomous minorities such as Jews and Mormons are minority groups that have not been socially, economically, or politically subordinated. Immigrant minorities are those who moved more or less voluntarily to the United States for economic well being, better opportunities and political freedom.

The third type he labels caste-like or subordinate minorities consisting of people who were originally brought into United States society involuntarily through slavery, conquest or colonization. Included in this classification are Native Americans, Blacks, Mexican-Americans, and Native Hawaiians.

The first two groups he claims do not experience lingering or disproportionate school failure. The third group, which would include Navajos, usually experience the most difficulty in acquiring literacy. He attributes these difficulties to societal barriers, school barriers, and to the minorities' responses to these barriers.

Even if Ogbu's assertions were questionable, to understand the contemporary development of literacy in the Navajo nation requires a cultural and historical perspective, as well as an understanding of current social, educational, and economic factors. These factors gain even more significance if they are found to be there.

Contemporary Factors

Although unemployment is estimated in excess of 35% on the Navajo reservation (Costello, 1977), there is an interesting and important difference between Navajos living on the reservation and the other subordinated minorities mentioned by Ogbu (1987a). For other minorities to gain access to white collar jobs often means, in addition to getting the appropriate education, competing for work in the dominant society. Navajos, in contrast,

have a number of employment opportunities on the reservation for professionals, particularly in government. Thus, there has been a shift over time in literacy not only becoming more valued, but also with local employment and economic rewards becoming increasingly more available to those who become literate.

Navajo society is matrilineal and matrilocal, meaning that the extensive Navajo kinship system and property ownership are traced primarily through the mother's side of the family, and that the extended family often lives in maternal grandmother's camp. Cousins are considered the equivalent of brothers and sisters. Grandparents, and frequently aunts and uncles, are often highly responsible for rearing children, particularly the oldest. (The Navajo term for aunt, "shima' yazhe'," means "little mother".) Older brothers and sisters are given heavy responsibility at an early age in caring for their younger siblings, and in the rural areas protecting the family's wealth (herding sheep).

This extended family has tremendous importance for the Navajo people. Responsibility, car and rent payments, labor, housing, childcare, and property are all frequently shared by the extended family. In the more urban areas, there is a tendency towards more unclear families, but these strong family ties still remain, and can be important in literacy development for many youngsters.

The Navajo population was rapidly increasing in the early 1900's, but the rate of growth is now beginning to slow. A generation ago, it was not uncommon for Navajo families to have eight or more children. It is now more common to have three or four children. In the 1970's, the median age of the Navajo reservation was sixteen, and today it stands at about nineteen. These changes have an impact upon literacy development. In previous generations, the later born children tended to be more fluent in English, and more fluent readers than their older brothers and sisters at the same age, due to more contact with English. Young children often served as translators between their elders and the Anglo bureaucracies. Older children had a great deal of

responsibility for taking care of their younger siblings and the parents' attention was divided among their many children.

Today, with smaller families, parents theoretically have more time to spend with each of their children. In reality, with more employment outside of the home for both the mothers and fathers and the existence of many more distractions, the actual contact with individual children may be somewhat diminished. Older siblings tend to be much more fluent in English than their counterparts of even a decade ago. Parents of today's youngsters also have a higher level of formal education than their parents did. As recently as 1973, 80% of Navajos over 25 years of age did not have a high school diploma, and the majority of those over 50 years old had never been to school. Now, the high school completion rate approaches 70%, and is probably somewhat higher in the more urban areas, where education is more important for employment (Platero, et al., 1986).

Literacy in Navajo language has probably not been a significant factor for many students in achieving literacy in English. With the exception of schools such as Rock Point and Rough Rock and the efforts of some missionaries, there have not been sustained efforts to teach initial literacy in the vernacular. This is undoubtedly due to a number of factors, including: the lack of written materials in Navajo; a limited number of teachers literate in Navajo; the perception of limited usefulness of Navajo literacy or forums for its use; and that literacy in Navajo did not evolve from within the Navajo culture for specific purposes, but was introduced originally by missionaries for the purpose of reading the Bible and other religious material. Interestingly, some contemporary and personal uses of Navajo literacy have been documented in a community where both the school and the church had Navajo literacy programs (McLaughlin, 1987). While the absolute number of Navajos that speak the vernacular is reported to be rising, the percentage of the population that speaks Navajo is declining (Spicer, 1962). This is certain to have an impact upon literacy in both Navajo and English.

Contact with the Anglo society has definitely increased over the past few

decades, with mixed consequences. More roads are paved, more families travel off reservation, more Navajos go away to college and the service than ever before. And, the introduction of cable television, satellite dishes, video stores and a few local movie theaters have provided Navajos with a much wider variety of language and experiences than previously available. This has had the most dramatic impact upon the younger generations, as they seek to imitate their silver screen and video tube peers. As with off reservation youth, pop music is another acculturating force that tends to make Navajo children less like their parents and more like their peers.

These urban centers have less than 10,000 residents and do not have nearly the amount of commercial development of comparable towns off the reservation. However, through tourism, government employment, cable television, travel off the reservation, and the hiring of many non-Navajo professionals, there is probably more outside contact than in most small towns in the United States.

Another major difference in the urban and rural populations is the contrast in housing. In the urban areas houses have running water, electricity, sewers and gas. They are primarily mobile homes or frame houses of two or three bedrooms. The community or Navajo Tribal Authority rents these houses to the families on a first come first-serve basis. Many are located near paved roads, as is the case in Pinon. Along with these modern conveniences comes the monthly obligation of rent and utility payments which requires a steady income.

Rural homes, on the other hand, are generally hogans and one or two room cinder block and frame houses. These homes are generally owner-constructed, have no running water or electricity. They are generally heated with wood or coal. Most of these homes have outhouses. Often they are built in clusters providing separate, but close homes for extended families. All have livestock, mainly sheep, goats, and horses. Most have poultry and gardens. Most, except in the case of Low Mountain, are located near paved roads. These roads, however, become impassable during the fall and winter months. By

necessity the rural reservation dwellers are more economically self-sufficient. They do not rely on a wage economy for subsistence or pleasure.

In Pinon even the most educated of the community members choose to live in traditional hogans. Billy McCabe is the Chapter House President. In an interview with Mr. McCabe, his reasons for living as he did were described.

Researcher: You have kindly agreed to share with me your views on rural versus urban housing and why you live in a hogan. Would you begin by telling me why a hogan is shaped like it is?

McCabe: A hogan is built in the shape of a female's breast. It is round on all sides, but the top is pointed. The female is the giver of life. We call the Earth, Mother, because the Earth bears the plants and the water that sustains us. Without Her we would not exist as a people or a planet.

Researcher: So the female holds a place of honor and respect in Navajo culture?

McCabe: Most definitely. As you have already learned, this is a matriarchal society. Young men like Leroy Begay will not go to school in Farmington because he doesn't want to leave his mother alone with an alcoholic father. He will never leave the reservation.

Researcher: Is there any significance to the opening of the door to the east?

McCabe: Yes. Navajos pray to the East because it is in that direction that the sun rises. We get up before the sun rises and pray until He acknowledges us. The East is the direction of light where the sun continuously shines on the Sacred Mountains. It would be dishonorable to our Elders to begin the day in any other way.

Researcher: Did you have a choice about where you and your family would live in Pinon?

McCabe: Yes. I did. My number came up to live in the community housing by the County mart. We made a decision not to leave Blue Gap.

Researcher: Would you mind telling me why?

McCabe: Even though I have a college degree from Berkeley, I am still a traditional Navajo in spirit. To be true to my beliefs I must live like my forefathers. You White people have forgotten your values, your children disrespect the old. They curse and laugh at you. I do not want Priscilla and Anthony to grow up like this. If they live traditionally, I believe they will act traditionally.

Billy McCabe, like many others in Pinon, still contend that western

society has poisoned the Native American culture and values. A strict adherence to the Native American church and ceremonial ways is the only hope they feel they have to maintain their customs for the young people in Pinon.

Health care is another area that has had a significant impact upon the Navajo population. The Navajo traditional view of illness is that an individual has fallen out of harmony with the forces of nature, and this discord has allowed the sickness or injury to occur. In order for healing to occur, harmony must be restored. While a Navajo herbalist might be called upon to provide temporary relief from symptoms, an appropriate ceremony is the only means to restore harmony, and thus effect a cure.

The introductions of modern medicine by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1920 reduced infant mortality, tuberculosis and pneumonia, but behavioral problems associated with alcohol and drugs increased. Though western medicine continues to gain acceptance, traditional ceremonies are still widely used.

As principal of Pinon School I encountered numerous conflicts in regards to the ceremonial rituals of the Navajos. The sociocultural issues prevalent during my tenure precipitated a high absenteeism among my Navajo teachers. Ceremonial leave is a valid reason for taking sick leave on the reservation. Because there was a Hispanic Superintendent and an Anglo Principal all of my Navajo staff applied for this ceremonial leave.

During this seven day absence the participant fasted, prayed and took large doses of peyote. He would then enter into a sweat lodge for four days to "purify" himself for future contact with the Anglo and the Hispanic intruders. After four days a medicine man would pray for the protection and safety of the participants. On the fifth and sixth days a feast would be prepared by the young man or woman's clan.

On the seventh day the Navajo who was involved in the ceremony would rest. This ceremony was called an Enemy Way Ceremony and although Chinle Hospital was the sole health provider for my Navajo faculty and parents, when given a choice all opted for the traditional Enemy Way.

There have also been enormous changes in the typical means of livelihood

on the Navajo reservation in the last fifty years. Prior to World War II the traditional lifestyle was raising livestock, subsistence farming, and the production of arts and crafts. Today the Navajos are much more dependent upon the government for wages and assistance. This dependence has also created social and economic opportunities where the development of literacy is valued, useful and necessary.

Contemporary Education on the Navajo Reservation

The first public school on the Navajo reservation was established in Fort Defiance in 1936 (Hartle-Schutte, 1988), originally for the education of the children of non-Navajo employees in the area. Ironically, this school was established in the same community where the first Indian Service school established on the Navajo reservation failed, because of lack of interest on the part of the Navajos. However, once the public school was established in 1936, Navajo parents began demanding public schools for their own children. Whether this was in recognition of the benefits of education, or whether by comparison to the BIA boarding schools, the public schools appeared more attractive is not known. The benefits of local day schools were that the children could attend school, receive meals, and still not be removed from the families. By 1968, more Navajo students were attending local public schools than BIA boarding and day schools, throughout the reservation.

There are now more than a dozen different public school districts teaching Navajo students on the reservation. Most of these districts have governing boards that are totally Navajo. However, although there is this local control, the curricula and materials found in both the public schools and the BIA Schools (with a few notable exceptions) are very similar to what is common in schools throughout the United States. The exceptions would include the BIA contract schools such as Rough Rock and Rock Point, which are community controlled. It is not surprising that the educational system generally mirrors the schools of the dominant Anglo society, since the board members and the Navajo teachers are the relatively successful products of those types of schools in previous generations.

There are now four major types of elementary and secondary schools on the reservation: those run directly by the BIA; community-controlled schools funded through the BIA; private mission schools; and public schools. Historically, there has not been significant coordination between the various types of schools, and in fact there has been a certain degree of competition for student enrollment. The majority of off-reservation BIA boarding schools have closed within the last decade, and they now have little impact upon the local school population. The establishment of the Navajo Division of Education in 1973 has meant some increased tribal involvement in those four different school systems, but each still remains autonomous in most respects.

Another educational program that has had significant and highly controversial impact upon the Navajo people is the Mormon placement program. Through the Mormon church organization, thousands of Navajo children have been taken off the reservation, primarily to Utah, and placed in non-Navajo homes in what might be considered a voluntary foster care program. Joining the Mormon religion is a requirement for participation. The children are isolated from the Navajo language and culture throughout the school year, returning home only during summer, and sometimes Christmas vacations. Proponents of the program claim that children are given educational and other opportunities that are not available on the reservation. Critics claim that it encourages destruction of the Navajo culture and family life, and causes emotional and identity problems for the children that have gone on placement. Under pressure from the Navajo tribal government, the annual Mormon recruitment drives and the scope of the placement program have been greatly diminished in recent years.

Educational opportunities beyond the secondary level have been expanded, with the establishment in 1973 of Navajo Community College, and a tribal scholarship fund, which has grown from $30,000 in 1954 to over $30 million today. In spite of these developments, the Navajo high school completion rate lags significantly behind other minority groups and the United States national average. The problem is difficult to study, because the annual transfer rate

for Navajo students is estimated to be approximately 30%, but the most current, admittedly generous, estimate of high school completion rate for Navajos is 69%, compared with 79% for blacks, and a national average of 86% (Platero, et al., 1986).

At least in a historical sense, and an educational sense, the Navajo people definitely fit Ogbu's description of subordinated, exploited minorities. With the exception of the schools for a short period of time under John Collier, the major thrust of contact between the dominant Anglo society and the Navajos has been one of either benign neglect, outright hostility, or an attempt at "civilizing" or acculturating the Navajos. Even under Collier, social implications of the education advances were probably negated by the effects of the despised stock reduction program.

In short, the Navajo reservation is in the midst of great social, demographic, economic and cultural change that certainly affects literacy development. These effects are felt by different individuals in different families in many different ways. Any study of the successes or failures of literacy development must include the entire cultural ecology of the community and individuals studied.

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