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AUTHOR Cantoni, Gina P.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the need for systematic school-wide support of the use of indigenous languages among those who learn them at home and of approrpriate instruction in the same languages for those who do not. The school's role in keeping indigenous languages alive must go beyond native language instruction to encompass dissemination of information, attitudinal change, and sustained action. In the past, school practices and assimilationist policies contributed to the decline of home languages, while some Native families promoted English usage at home to ensure their children's academic success. A negative view of bilingualism persists among many educators and members of the public. Although bilingualism results in various cognitive advantages, these are seldom measured by standardized school tests. In addition to misconceptions about bilingualism, the maintenance of home languages suffers from the lower prestige and status of minority languages compared to English. To counter such negative attitudes, educators must show respect and appreciation for the cultures of their students' parents, avoid criticizing native language usage in school, and avoid transmitting perceptions that English is better than the local language. Educators should also try to learn the students' home language to convey a certain degree of interest and respect. Together, school personnel and community members can create opportunities for local language use in the school and community. Contains 17 references. (SV)

Keeping Minority Languages Alive: The School's Responsibility

Gina P. Cantoni

This paper discusses the need for systematic school-wide support of the use of indigenous languages among those who learn them at home and of appropriate instruction in the same languages for those who do not. The paper does not deal with native language teaching and learning per se, for that is best done by members of the group who own the language and advocate its maintenance; it focuses instead on the relationship of this instructional component with the entire school and its official and hidden curricula.

Many Native parents expect the schools, which in the past had contributed to the eradication of their tribal languages, to help maintain or restore these languages. Can the schools do it? It depends. Keeping minority languages alive requires more than the addition of a native language component to the existing curriculum; it requires a pervasive change in the entire school system.

Generally speaking, schools have been increasingly successful in meeting the official curricular goals established for Native students: English proficiency and academic competence. What should be faced now is the hidden assimilationist curriculum that brings to mind the days when children had their mouths washed out with soap for speaking their own language. It is the entire school's responsibility to identify the beliefs and attitudes that underlie the marginalization of the students' languages and cultures. These include the misconception that learning more than one language could retard a child's development and cause confusion and the perception that English is more valuable than an indigenous language.

American schools are not alone in having contributed to the decline of home languages. Remembering the frustration they had suffered in school because they could not understand the teacher's language, parents all over the world have tried to protect their children from a similar ordeal. Instead of teaching them the language of their home, they made the effort and sacrifice of using only the language of the school. The Native families who decided to speak only English around their children in hopes of facilitating their academic progress have succeeded, in most instances, in raising a generation of monolingual speakers of English. They have, unknowingly and unintentionally, deprived their children of the cognitive advantages of bilingualism. Moreover, they have become unable to transmit cultural knowledge that has no equivalent in the worldview and language of outsiders. The children of these families have been deprived of their rightful linguistic and cultural heritage.

The many parents who made this kind of decision had their children's well-being at heart and are not to blame for the societal attitudes of their time. These parents are now turning to the schools for help and leadership in keeping home languages alive. A school-wide initiative in support of Native language maintenance must include the following components: dissemination of information, attitudinal change, and sustained action.

Cognitive advantages of bilingualism

Mastery of more than one linguistic code results in a special kind of cognitive flexibility, such as the awareness that the same thought can be expressed in more than one way and some words and expressions have no exact equivalent in another language. These abilities relate to an early realization that a symbol is not the same as the item it refers to; for example, the words "dog," "chien," and "perro" all refer to the same kind of animal, but they are not the animal itself.

Unfortunately, the cognitive abilities related to the mastery of more than one language are not covered by most of the tests used to measure academic achievement or predict academic success. We know that language minority students have experienced difficulties in school and have performed less well than their monolingual peers on various oral and written tests. In the early part of this century researchers came to the conclusion that bilingualism caused cognitive problems and language handicaps. Many schools made serious efforts to repress the children's use of their home language, believing that it created academic difficulties and interfered with their learning of English.

The phenomenon is a familiar one in the United States. It is the story of countless American immigrant and native children and adults who have lost their ethnic languages in the process of becoming linguistically assimilated into the English-speaking world of school and society. Few American-born children of immigrant parents are fully proficient in their ethnic language, even if it was the only language they spoke when they first entered school. Once these children learn English, they tend not to maintain or develop the language spoken at home, even if it is the only one their parents know. This has been the story of past immigrant groups, and it is the story of the present ones, but the process is taking place much more rapidly today as indigenous communities become less physically isolated and more exposed to television and other mass media.

A negative view of bilingualism persists among many educators and members of the general public. Yet, as early as 1962, Peal and Lambert came to different conclusions. A rigorous comparison of monolingual and bilingual children showed that the bilinguals had a cognitive advantage. The bilinguals' experiences with two languages seemed to result in mental flexibility, greater skill at forming concepts, and a more diversified set of mental abilities. By contrast, the monolinguals appeared to have rather unitary cognitive structures, which restricted their problem-solving ability. Many subsequent studies with

bilingual children have substantiated Peal and Lambert's results (Bialystock & Ryan, 1985; Cummins, 1987; Hakuta, 1986; McLaughlin, 1984).

Hakuta and Diaz (1985) have reported that bilingualism may have a positive effect on general cognitive abilities as measured by nonverbal intelligence tests. The children in these later studies were adding a second language at no detriment to their first (Lambert, 1975). In conclusion, research on the academic, linguistic, and cognitive effects of bilingualism indicates that an additive development of oral and written second language has no adverse effects and actually seems to provide important metalinguistic, academic, and intellectual benefits. These conclusions are confirmed by rigorous and extensive studies by Cummins (1989), Ramirez (1991), Collier (1992), Lindholm and Aclan (1991) and many others.

For those who worry that teaching the home language may interfere with the development of English skills, there is abundant evidence that the opposite occurs (Cummins, 1987). Instruction that promotes proficiency in one's first language (L1) also promotes proficiency in the second language (L2), provided there is an adequate amount of exposure to L2 and motivation to learn it. Both languages are manifestations of a common underlying proficiency (CUP). The CUP model indicates that concepts and abilities acquired through L1 transfer to L2. For example, bilingual education for Spanish-speaking minorities learning English as a second language leads to higher abilities in both languages, even with limited direct instruction in English (Cummins & Swain, 1986). A student who has mastered a concept or skill in one language does not need to relearn it in his second language; all he needs is to learn new words and structures. These conclusions apply to the study of subjects such as algebra or history as well as to the acquisition of literacy.

According to Heath (1986, p. 144), "For all children, academic success depends less on the specific language they know than on the ways of using the language they know." The school can promote academic and vocational success for all children regardless of their first-language background by providing the greatest possible range of oral and written language uses. A wide range of possible language uses can be compared to a rich wardrobe to fit all occasions. One does not usually dress in the same kind of clothes for a wedding and for a football game, for winter and for summer. Instead of throwing away wool socks and fuzzy earmuffs because summer is here, one stores them for use when the weather turns cold again. Dressing appropriately for a variety of occasions and needs requires a certain amount of diversity in our wardrobe so that we can make suitable choices, just as a rich variety of linguistic tools allows us to select the language and style that is most likely to achieve the desired results in a given situation at a particular time.

Attitudinal change

Although minority children are no longer subjected to corporal punishment for using their home language, they are often the target of other, more subtle forms of rejection and ostracism on the part of teachers, administrators,

and peers. That the acquisition of more than one langauge is an asset and not a handicap is well known to scholars (Saunders, 1988); however, fears of confusion and other problems persist in many families, especially when one of the languages (e.g., English) has more prestige than the other (e.g., Navajo) within a community. When we talk about prestige, we are dealing with attitudes, and these are much harder to correct than misconceptions.

A study of language shift among language-minority children in the United States indicates that the loss of primary languages is a national phenomenon, which can be very costly not only to the families and communities that are directly involved, but to society as a whole (Fillmore, 1991). It is not easy to explain or understand why these children are dropping their home language as they learn English, since second-language learning does not necessarily result in the loss of the primary language. However, most language-minority children encounter powerful pressures for assimilation and conformity to the norms of the mainstream American youth culture even before they enter school. They begin to see themselves as different in language, appearance, and behavior, and they come to regard these differences as undesirable because they impede their easy participation in the society around them. If they want to be accepted, they have to learn English, because others are not going to learn their language. English is the high-status prestige language in the United States and Canada (as is Spanish in most of Latin America), and although young children do not yet care about prestige and status, they do need belonging and acceptance. As they learn the prestige language, they stop using their primary language. If the parents or grandparents have not yet mastered English, what is lost is the vehicle for imparting values to the next generation, enabling the children to become the kind of men and women their families want them to be.

Parsons Yazzie (1995) documented this kind of situation on the Navajo Reservation. She identified ten children from Rocky Ridge Boarding School whose scores on the Window Rock Oral Language Test (WROLT) indicated that their fluency in Navajo was very limited or nonexistent. The children were surrounded by an extended family that used Navajo routinely; some of the elders did not even know English. The adults considered Navajo a very important source of identity, strength, and sacredness, and they viewed the loss of their language as leading to social dysfunction, erosion of identity and beliefs, disappearance of sacred ceremonies, and abandonment of traditional teachings.

Being a native and longtime resident of the area, Parsons Yazzie was able to conduct a series of unobtrusive observations in settings such as trading posts, homes, chapter houses, and waiting rooms. She heard a lot of Navajo spoken all around her but noted that when family groups consisting of adults (parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles) initiated a conversation in Navajo with a child, the child responded in English. Sometimes this would mark the end of the exchange; sometimes the code-switching pattern would continue. Yazzie did not witness any attempt on the adults' part to ask or encourage the child to use Navajo. She states, "It appeared...that the child was the one in each case who dictated what language was spoken," and the language was English (1995, p.

38). This is a startling conclusion in view of the parents' overt assertions of their allegiance to Navajo and their awareness of the moral and social consequences of its neglect.

The tragic results of the intergenerational breakdown in communication have been documented not only in the case of Native American groups, but also in the case of Hispanic, Asian, and other minority groups where juvenile gang behavior and drug abuse are increasing. What should or can be done about it is still poorly understood, but there is no doubt that language minority children and their families are paying a very high price for admission into American society.

Children are sensitive to social approval or disapproval long before they enter school. They are surrounded by messages that promote the majority culture and its language and ignore all others, even if they do not explicitly downgrade them. Overt put-downs are most likely to come from older siblings who are ashamed of their own ethnicity. Having been ridiculed and called derogatory nicknames, they inflict the same treatment on others. If the school can develop better attitudes among its students, the benefits may filter down to the preschoolers and to children yet to be born.

The following recommendations were made at the Symposia on Stabilizing Indigenous Languages held at Northern Arizona University in 1994 and 1995 (Cantoni, 1996):

- All educators must show greater respect and appreciation for the cultures of their students' parents.
- All educators should not criticize those who use the native language in school.
- There should be no put-downs of people who use the tribal language on the part of anyone who does not know that language.
- Perceptions that English is better than the local language should not be accepted or transmitted.
- All educators (including the school principal) should try to learn the students' home language; even if they do not become very proficient, they will have indicated a certain degree of interest and respect.
- All educators must realize that, although they alone cannot be responsible for the intergenerational transmission of a language, they can do much to encourage positive attitudes towards it.

To counteract the extinction of home languages, school boards and school administrators need to do much more than develop native language programs and hire qualified, literate teachers to implement them, for these teachers are few in number and control only a small portion of each student's time. Native language and culture offerings tend to be isolated from the rest of the curriculum, from subjects taught in English, and from the majority of teachers and pupils. This amounts to a form of segregation. What the entire educational es-

tablishment must do, instead, is to actively and systematically promote linguistic diversity rather than conformity. This would be feasible if it was required that all English-speaking teachers become fluent in another language. If they do, they will gain very rewarding experiences and personal growth. However, let us be realistic; we are talking about attitudes, not about some unreasonable standard of proficiency.

Sustained action

Educators can play a significant role not only in promoting positive attitudes towards the local native language but in creating opportunities for people to use it. School personnel and community members together can create and support participation in such initiatives.

Many years ago I was invited to the traditional Crow Arrow Games by some friends from Lodge Grass, and it was an unforgettable experience. The spectators sat around the huge playing field, each family gathered under an awning or a big umbrella, enjoying refreshments and conversation. The announcements and the talk were all in Crow, but from time to time someone would take me aside and whisper a quick English summary of what was being said. This kind of event included adults as well as children, and this is where a lot of language learning and practice was taking place. The school provided additional instruction, including reading and writing from an impressive collection of Crow language materials. Many schools have similar programs for Native students, but the Arrow Games are a unique and exemplary model of community involvement.

It is important to keep in mind that if a language is learned as an academic subject, it may enjoy high prestige and yet never be used for meaningful communication in authentic social interactions. This is what happened when I was taught Latin in Italy, where I obtained most of my education. I began to study Latin in a public school when I was ten and continued until the end of college. In class we read the classics as well as later documents by medieval scholars, we did a lot of translation and grammar exercises, and eventually we wrote compositions. We hardly ever used the language orally in class, but outside of school we heard it in church, for this was before the Vatican allowed the use of modern languages in Catholic services. What we heard during Mass and other ceremonies was entirely formulaic and ritualistic, either read aloud or recited from memory. We learned what the holy texts meant during religious instruction classes, but the discussion was conducted in Italian, not in Latin. The only times I heard Latin used for communication were when priests from different countries used it with each other when they had no other common language.

For us students, the language was a reminder that we were descended from the Romans, who had once conquered the world. Our ability to decipher inscriptions in churches, monuments, and graveyards identified us as members of the educated class, so that the language had prestige and was greatly valued, but everyone knew that it was dead.

To keep native languages alive, it is not enough to value them; it is essential to use them. If their use is declining, it is necessary to identify special occasions and designate special times and places where it makes sense not to use English. The community must provide direction, but unless the school system participates in the effort, it may lack credibility in the eyes of today's sophisticated youth.

In addition, all teachers should develop an integrated approach to language across the curriculum, building on what the learners bring to the classroom from their out-of-school experiences and from other classes, especially those on Native language and culture. Teachers can also identify and collect supplementary materials that highlight diversity as a desirable worldwide phenomenon. This is particularly important in the case of schools located in isolated areas. Although technology and the media bring the outside world into their home, students may not pay attention to what does not relate directly to their own interests, and the teachers must act as mediators and interpreters. One source of such materials is the Curriculum Resource Program available from the editors of *Cultural Survival* (1997)[1]. The program covers a wide range of themes, from contemporary issues in Native North America to international case-specific studies of ethnic conflict. Resource packets for teachers include bibliographies, videos, lists of speakers and artisans, and suggestions for classroom activities and further learning.

Teachers need some guidance and administrative support about how to implement the changes they may be willing to try, but, as competent professionals, they should also assume responsibility for their own informed decisions. The enormous differences in contexts, cultures, backgrounds, ages, and achievement levels that exist in every classroom call for flexibility, adaptability, and creativity, rather than passive submission to a syllabus developed and imposed by someone else.

The higher principle one can invoke in support of this pedagogy is a humanistic respect for teachers as well as learners. To encourage these initiatives so that they become more than lip-service, school districts could engage in action research projects, possibly in collaboration with a college or university that would offer them academic credit. The goal of action research is the development of a better understanding of a local issue in order to bring about improvement. The participants research their own classroom, department, program, school system, or community, not someone else's, and can do so in a fairly informal, relaxed, and natural way. The projects are best conducted as cooperative efforts involving colleagues, students, staff, parents, and other appropriate collaborators. One possible project could be aimed at increasing the integration of traditional and academic knowledge into thematic units and should be a collaborative effort between Native instructors and other teachers. Another project could explore whether learning about the advantages of bilingual-

[1] *Cultural Survival*, 96 Mount Auburn Street, Cambridge, MA 02138. Telephone 617 441-5400; FAX 617 441-5417; e-mail csinc@cs.org

ism leads to increased native language use among the people who receive that information.

To begin an action research project, teachers could identify a component of their practice where the outcomes are somewhat unexpected or not in line with stated goals. After reflecting on the situation and deciding to focus on one item of manageable size, they should seek as much relevant information as possible from various sources such as professional literature, consultants, and community representatives. The next steps consist of collecting data such as reports, diaries, videotapes, and questionnaires and then analyzing them to identify what needs changing. Planning and implementing change leads to a new cycle of observation, reflection, and revision.

Motivated teachers have always tried to modify their mode of delivery as well as the content of their lessons to achieve better results, but they have not always done it systematically, reflectively, and with careful documentation. They have often been alone in their struggles to understand and alleviate problems, and when they have succeeded, they have seldom been given the opportunity to share their findings with others. Considering the importance of the changes involved in resolving the indigenous language issue and doing away with a harmful hidden curriculum, it seems appropriate to have the process implemented in a professional manner and to generate models that might be useful in other schools.

In conclusion, a school that downgrades home languages and encourages conformity instead of diversity emphasizes social differences and leads to elitism and intolerance for some and low self-esteem and inner conflict for others. Children can be pointed in either direction; the school must, therefore, be held accountable by parents and communities for making ethical and responsible choices in these matters. The school can and must become a strong promoter of minority language preservation and transmission instead of continuing to be one of the main agents of its endangerment.

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