

# **“My Students Are My Most Excellent Teachers”: Preparing Teachers for the Diné Dual Language Classroom**

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*We ask, “How do we build on socio-historical foundations to support culturally sustaining and revitalizing communities of practice for teachers of Diné language?” This question serves as a call to action to reverse oppressive language policy and to learn from our students who remain “our most excellent teachers”. This study combines data from teacher interviews with data from a structured survey. Teacher participants were invited to complete a survey that measures Attitudes Toward the value of bilingual education for their students and Culturally Responsive Teacher Self-Efficacy.*

*Keywords: dual language, Navajo education, Navajo language, indigenous education, Dine language*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Prior decades of U.S. government policy to suppress NA/AN language use in schools had devastating results for NA/AN students and continuing negative effects on parent and community engagement. (US Department of Education, 2018)

There are three main places of my knowledge source, which stems from students, professional, and personal experiences. My children and students are my most excellent teachers, and I am always learning something new from them every day. (Diné language teacher 2018)

We acknowledge the history of language suppression based on federal language policy in Navajo communities. (Reyhner, 1992; US Department of Education, 2018). From this perspective, we ask, “How do we build on this socio-historical foundation to support culturally sustaining and revitalizing communities of practice for teachers of Diné language?” This inquiry is based on a theoretical model of culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris, 2012; McCarty and Lee, 2014).

We know from previous studies that American Indian students learn best when they see their culture, language and experience reflected in the curriculum. (Balter & Grossman, 2009; Barnhardt, 2014; Haig-Brown & Dannenmann, 2008; Kana'iaupuni, Ledward & Jensen, 2010; Reyhner & Hurtado, 2008; Styres & Zinga, 2013, Brayboy & Castagno 2009). Native American children who learn their heritage language in the classroom in strong language revitalization programs learn English at about the same rate as their peers who are not enrolled in an indigenous language immersion program. (Reyhner, 2006; Rosier & Holm, 1980; Wilson & Kamana, 2011; Holm, 2006; May, Hill & Tiakiwai, 2004; McCarty, 2003, 2013; Tedlick, Christian & Fortune, 2011)

Johnson and Wilson (2005) describe lessons learned from their work with the Window Rock Immersion program and describe what makes a difference; the use of the Diné language as a medium of instruction, and consistent integration of Diné culture in instruction. McCarty (1995, 2013) discusses her research in Navajo dual language classrooms. She writes, "School power relations must be democratized such that bilingual teachers control their own pedagogy. The latter carries a heightened significance in American Indian and other minority communities, as it entails a basic reversal of historic role relations.... for it is only when teachers feel and are validated in their work that they can create the same conditions for their students."

Language suppression continues today in Arizona public schools as we reflect on 20 years of English only legislation (2000-2020). Three states; California, Massachusetts and Arizona enacted "English-only" legislation between 1998 and 2002. In 2016 California voters repealed Proposition 227 which mandated that "all children in California public schools shall be taught English by being taught in English." (Mitchell, 2016) In the same year the Massachusetts state senate voted repeal Question 2 which ended transitional bilingual education programs and implemented sheltered English Immersion. Today Arizona remains the state with the largest number of speakers of indigenous languages in the United States (McCarty & Nicholas, 2014) and English-only legislation: Proposition 203 (Arizona Revised Statutes 15-751-755); the English Language Education for Children in Public Schools Act which mandates: 1) All classroom instruction must be conducted in English 2) English should be taught as quickly and effectively as possible 3) English will be taught through sheltered English Immersion.

The Diné Dual Language Teachers Professional Development Project works with a consortium of tribal and public schools to provide professional development and a Master's degree in Bilingual Multicultural Education at Northern Arizona University to classroom teachers with proficiency in the Diné language. The project seeks to recruit and retain highly qualified and fully certified bilingual teachers in classrooms of consortium partners, to improve the ability of project participants to support skills in the Diné language in their students, and to improve the ability of the university teacher education program to prepare prospective teachers of Diné students. (Lockard & Hale 2013).

We build on a foundation of tribally and university led teacher education projects which certified Navajo teachers and administrators and supported teacher leadership. Specifically we build on on a foundation of three earlier projects; the Ford Foundation project, the Annenberg Rural Systemic Initiative, and the Title VII Learn in Beauty Project which worked with consortia of schools on the Navajo Nation to prepare Navajo teachers. From 1993-1997, as a member of a consortium of five institutions of teacher education sponsored by the Ford Foundation, Northern Arizona University offered courses leading to an undergraduate degree in Elementary Education to paraprofessionals in Kayenta, Chinle and Tuba City (Rude & Gorman, 1996). During the Ford Foundation project, a survey of 242 schools on the Navajo Nation was conducted, in which 1,222 Navajo classroom teachers and 2,474 paraprofessionals responded. The Diné Division of Education reported three key findings: 1) Navajo language and education courses are a legitimate part of a teacher education program; 2) students prefer courses delivered on-site; and 3) local schools need to retain and graduate teacher education candidates (Navajo Tribe Division of Diné Education, 2003). When funding for this consortium was phased out, Northern Arizona University continued to offer undergraduate courses to cohorts in these Reservation communities.

The Title III National Professional Development Learn in Beauty project was initiated in partnership with an Annenberg Rural Challenge Grant from 1998-2003. The project was based on the success of the Annenberg Rural Systemic Initiative that supports teacher leadership, promotes community engagement

and makes place-based learning the foundation of the curriculum. When the *Learn in Beauty* professional development project was completed in 2003, 100 Diné classroom teachers and curriculum specialists had achieved an M.Ed. in Bilingual Multicultural Education and a Bilingual or ESL endorsement (Hale & Lockard, 2018).

Teacher perceptions are important to consider as indicators of their effectiveness for serving students in Diné dual language classrooms. Research suggests that teachers with positive teacher efficacy are more effective (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). This mixed-methods study combines data from teacher interviews (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) with data from a structured survey (Creswell, 2011). We interviewed teachers and transcribed the interview data. A follow-up interview was conducted to continue the discussion of questions which arose from reading the transcripts of the first interview. To further measure teacher efficacy and attitudes toward ELLs, teacher participants from both cohorts of the Diné Dual Language Teachers Project were invited to complete a survey that measures Attitudes Toward the value of bilingual education for their students and Culturally Responsive Teacher Self-Efficacy.

We begin with the narratives from the interviews with the Diné teachers. We identified passages in which the teachers describe how they create culturally sustaining classrooms. A fifth grade teacher describes how she balances the Diné framework with common core standards.

I plan to be an advocate for my students in different capacities. I plan to push for the creation of a culturally relevant curriculum in my school system. I have already created different culturally relevant material concerning the common core standards. I plan to continue to develop and use the more culturally relevant content in my classroom. I am in the process of searching for different interactive technology that is Navajo language based so that my students will be exposed to their language daily.

A Diné language and culture teacher explores her role as teacher and learner in creating a culturally sustaining classroom:

For me to effectively carry out and live my philosophical views I need to learn continuously. There are three main places of my knowledge source, which stems from students, professional, and personal experiences. My children and students are my most excellent teachers, and I am always learning something new from them every day. My next source is learning from my personal experiences. Finally, I can continue to grow my knowledge by attending conferences and completing my academic studies. Conferences and attending classes are where I can also continue to learn from research, articles, books, oral histories, and listening to other educators and Diné traditional practitioners. There is still a lot for me to learn and to transfer down to the next generation. The deeper meaning behind my teaching and philosophy is to ensure that we do not lose our beautiful culture in the mist of western culture. With my knowledge, I want to continue on the teachings of our ancestors and their way of life and language. These are the teachings that made our people strong, passionate, humble, and resilient.

From the interviews we identified the themes of self-efficacy to include culturally sustaining practice in the classroom, the need to continue to gain new cultural knowledge, and aspirations to support the teaching of cultural knowledge to future generations. To further explore these themes teachers from the three cohorts of the Diné Dual Language Teachers Project were invited to complete a survey that measures Attitudes Toward Bilingual Education and Culturally Responsive Teacher Self-Efficacy most semesters they were enrolled in the program, resulting in four administrations of the survey to Cohort One, three administrations to Cohort Two, and one administration to Cohort Three. Attitudes toward bilingual education were measured with a seven item, five-point Likert scale, where 1= strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree, (e.g., *Higher levels of bilingualism can lead to practical, career related advantages*), adapted from Shin and Krashen (1994). Culturally responsive teacher self-efficacy was

measured with a twenty item on a five-point Likert scale, where participants were asked to rate their confidence on a number of teaching practices (e.g. *Obtain information about my students' strengths*), where 1 = no confidence at all, 5 = complete confidence. This scale was adapted from Siwatu (2007).

To measure change in attitudes and self-efficacy over time, average scores for each scale were calculated, and then three repeated measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) were conducted for each scale, one for the total sample (three time points, combining Cohorts One and Two), one for Cohort One (four time points) and one for Cohort Two (three time points). Results indicate that for Attitudes Toward Bilingual Education, mean scores over time, though the gain was approaching significance ( $p = .06$ ). At the cohort level, mean ratings generally increased for Cohort One and Cohort Two over time, but these changes were not statistically significant gains. Since Cohort One has just completed the survey one time, they were not included in the inferential tests. In terms of Culturally Responsive Teacher Self-Efficacy, we conducted similar analyses. For both Cohorts One and Two, mean ratings for the sample increased over time. Notably, Cohort One ratings demonstrated positive change across the four time points, and approaching a significant gain over time ( $p = .09$ ). A second repeated measures ANOVA test was therefore conducted for Cohort One, comparing baseline (time one) to the final (time four) scores. This test shows that Cohort One had statistically significant gains in culturally responsive teaching efficacy,  $F(1, 7) = 5.50, p = .05$ . These results indicate that this group had improved in terms of culturally responsive teaching efficacy from beginning to end of program, which demonstrates the success of our program on a key indicator. For Cohort Two, while there was not gain from time one to two, we did note a mean gain at time 3, though not as dramatic as that noted for Cohort One. Cohort Three, on the other hand, had a higher baseline score compared to the other groups. See Table One for means, standard deviations, and statistical analysis results across the time points for the groups.

**TABLE 1**  
**MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND DIFFERENCE SCORES IN COHORT ONE, TIMES ONE AND TWO ADMINISTRATIONS OF ATTITUDE AND EFFICACY MEASURES**

Measure		N	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Time 4	Repeated Measures ANOVA Results
			M, SD	M, SD	M, SD	M, SD	
Attitudes Toward Bilingual Education	Total	13	3.64, 0.33	3.77, 0.48	3.93, 0.38		F = 3.30, p = 0.06
	Cohort 1	6	3.74, 0.42	4.09, 0.40	4.17, 0.34	4.04,	F = 2.01, p = 0.18
	Cohort 2	7	3.59, 0.23	3.54, 0.36	3.73, 0.30	0.56	F = 1.28, p = 0.31
Culturally Responsive Teacher Self-Efficacy	Total	13	3.82, 0.47	3.75, 0.59	3.87, 0.53	4.02, 0.45	F = 2.18, p = 0.14
	Cohort 1	6	3.91, 0.66	4.20, 0.49	4.30, 0.46	4.80,	F = 3.73, p = 0.09
	Cohort 2	7	3.63, 0.50	3.59, 0.38	3.79, 0.28	0.75	F = 0.50, p = 0.57
	Cohort 3	21	4.05, 0.52				

*Note.* As only Cohort 1 has completed the surveys at Time 4, data for Time 4 is only reported for this group. Means and Standard Deviations reported here reflect only participants who completed all available administrations of the survey.

Next, to evaluate specific areas of improvement or need for improvement, we conducted descriptive item analysis. For each item, the mean score was calculated for each group at each time point. Examination of each item from the Attitudes Toward Bilingual Education scale demonstrates a general upward trend for Cohort One, where they have expressed more positive attitudes toward Bilingual Education practice, with some leveling by point four. The item level data for Cohort Two were relatively stagnant over the first two time points but improved by time three. These data suggest that as Cohort Two completes more coursework specific to theory and practice of bilingual education, they there have been gains in their ratings on this scale. Cohort Three stands out as different from the other two groups in terms of their baseline scores, with more positive ratings. See Table Two for means and standard deviations by group over time.

**TABLE 2**  
**ITEM LEVEL MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR COHORTS ONE AND TWO,**  
**ACROSS ADMINISTRATIONS OF ATTITUDES TOWARD**  
**BILINGUAL EDUCATION MEASURE**

Item	Group	N	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Time 4
			T1, T2, T3, T4	M, SD	M, SD	M, SD
1. If they are not proficient in English, students should be in a classroom with first language instruction as part of the school curriculum.	Total	42, 17, 22	3.71, 0.94	3.53, 0.80	3.95, 0.79	
	Cohort 1	10, 7, 12, 10	3.30, 0.82	3.43, 0.98	4.25, 0.75	4.00, 0.67
	Cohort 2	11, 10, 10	3.82, 0.60	3.60, 0.70	3.60, 0.70	
	Cohort 3	21	3.86, 1.11			
2. If they are not proficient in English, students should be in a classroom learning subject matter (e.g. math, science, etc.) in their first language.	Total	42, 17, 22	3.69, 0.84	3.53, 0.80	3.91, 0.75	
	Cohort 1	10, 7, 12, 10	3.60, 0.70	4.00, 0.82	4.17, 0.84	3.80, 0.79
	Cohort 2	11, 10, 10	3.55, 0.52	3.20, 0.63	3.60, 0.52	
	Cohort 3	21	3.81, 1.03			
3. Having ELL students learn subject matter in their first language helps them when they are instructed in that subject matter in English.	Total	42, 17, 22	3.93, 0.75	3.94, 0.56	4.36, 0.66	
	Cohort 1	10, 7, 12, 10	3.70, 0.68	4.14, 0.69	4.58, 0.67	4.20, 0.63
	Cohort 2	11, 10, 10	3.64, 0.67	3.80, 0.42	4.10, 0.57	
	Cohort 3	21	4.19, 0.75			
4. High levels of bilingualism can lead to practical, career related advantages.	Total	42, 17, 22	4.26, 0.73	4.35, 0.60	4.59, 0.67	
	Cohort 1	10, 7, 12, 10	4.20, 0.63	4.86, 0.38	4.67, 0.65	4.50, 0.71
	Cohort 2	11, 10, 10	4.18, 0.75	4.00, 0.47	4.50, 0.71	
	Cohort 3	21	4.33, 0.80			
5. High levels of bilingualism can result in higher development of knowledge or mental skills.	Total	42, 17, 22	4.29, 0.64	4.47, 0.62	4.55, 0.80	
	Cohort 1	10, 7, 12, 10	4.30, 0.48	5.00, 0.00	4.75, 0.62	4.60, 0.70
	Cohort 2	11, 10, 10	4.09, 0.83	4.10, 0.57	4.30, 0.95	
	Cohort 3	21	4.38, 0.59			
6. If they are not proficient in English, students will do better in school if they learn to write in their first language.	Total	42, 17, 22	3.10, 0.62	2.94, 0.56	3.05, 0.84	
	Cohort 1	10, 7, 12, 10	2.90, 0.32	3.00, 0.58	3.33, 0.99	3.00, 0.67
	Cohort 2	11, 10, 10	2.91, 0.54	2.90, 0.57	2.70, 0.48	
	Cohort 3	21	3.29, 0.72			
7. If an ELL is in an English-only class, they will learn English better. <sup>1</sup>	Total	42, 17, 22	2.98, 0.78	2.41, 0.80	2.45, 0.60	
	Cohort 1	10, 7, 12, 10	2.70, 0.82	2.14, 0.69	2.42, 0.67	2.60, 0.70
	Cohort 2	11, 10, 10	2.91, 0.54	2.60, 0.84	2.50, 0.53	
	Cohort 3	21	3.14, 0.85			

Note. Items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, were 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree, and, with the exception of item 7, higher scores indicate a more positive attitude toward ELLs.

<sup>1</sup> This item was reverse coded for scale level analysis, but the non-reverse coded raw data are reported here.

Similarly, we conducted descriptive item analysis for the Culturally Responsive Teacher Self-Efficacy scale. For both Cohorts One and Two, we observed a general upward trend on this scale, particularly for items related to classroom practice. In general, ratings were highest for Cohort Three at baseline, and for Cohort One compared to Cohort Two throughout, reflecting cohort differences in teaching experience and practice. Similar to the previous year, we noted that the items related home and school differences are rated as lower than other items (e.g. Items 4, 5, 9). We also noted that Cohort Two seems least confident in using their native language (Items 11, 15) and least confident overall. More focus on how to acknowledge and work with home and school cultural mismatch might be a greater focus of more advanced coursework in the program.

Overall, the results from the two surveys suggest that the program participants are developing more positive attitudes toward bilingual education and developing a greater sense of competence for culturally responsive teaching, both of which are important outcomes for the program.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results from the interviews and the two surveys suggest that the program participants are developing more positive attitudes toward the theory of bilingual education and developing a greater sense of competence for culturally sustaining pedagogy, both of which are important outcomes for the program. Language suppression over generations and the continued influence of English Only legislation in Arizona schools creates renewed urgency in supporting the efforts of classroom teachers to teach the Diné language. Although coursework, mentoring, and classroom observations support and strengthen this community of teachers, we continue to seek new resources to support the teachers and their students. Our research question, “How do we build on this socio-historical foundation to support culturally sustaining and revitalizing communities of practice for teachers of Diné language?” is a question which serves as a call to action to reverse oppressive language policy and to learn from our students who remain “our most excellent teachers”.

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