

"If They Want Navajo to Be Learned, Then They Should Require It in All Schools":

**Navajo Teenagers' Experiences, Choices,
and Demands Regarding Navajo Language**

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

When I was a middle school student in the interior region of the Navajo Nation in the early 1980s, all my peers' first language was Navajo. Their choice in school at that time was to speak Navajo among themselves and with Navajo teachers. When I became a high school teacher on the reservation some fifteen years later, my students mostly spoke English with one another. Even if they spoke Navajo well, their language of choice in school was English. Yet, from my conversations with them, I knew that they were proud of their heritage and strong in their conviction that the Navajo language is important to know and understand.

At a time when schools were eagerly trying to promote the Navajo language and federal programs supported these endeavors, Navajo teenagers were choosing not to speak Navajo, at least not publicly in school. Today more Navajo teenagers come to school with less Navajo fluency or with English as their only language. My personal and professional observations and experiences with language loss prompted my interest in what was going on in Navajo high schools and especially in what was influencing Navajo teenagers' choices in their language. The high school I attended greatly valued the Navajo language and provided for Navajo language learning in all facets of curriculum and school events. I knew a school could have a positive impact on language learning because it did for me and my peers. The purpose of this

research study is to contribute to efforts at language revitalization by understanding Navajo teenagers' language learning experiences and choices, and so better identify strategies for intervention at the high school level.

The student quoted in the title of this article suggested that Navajo be required in all schools. At the high school level, the question remains how and to what extent Navajo language can and should be taught. One hour a day in a separate Navajo language class is typical at the high school level.¹ Even with this limited level of contact, the schools in my study still had a positive impact on students' language levels and usage. This suggests that, with more thoughtful and comprehensive intervention strategies, schools can have a larger and more meaningful impact. The rapid language shift² that is occurring in the Navajo Nation makes such interventions vital.

Given these linguistic and cultural changes within the Navajo Nation, the research question addressed in this study is "What influences Navajo teenagers to learn and use Navajo language?" My interest in teenagers stems from the fact that we know the least about them. There are common perceptions, which research supports, that among Navajo children the language is vanishing.³ The Navajo tribal government, educators, and community people have been putting much time and effort into developing truly bilingual teaching and language revitalization programs over the years. For example, bilingual education has been interpreted as a means to maintain Navajo language.⁴ Navajo people and educators of Navajo children concerned with maintaining Navajo language have created schools that use Navajo as the medium of instruction in an effort to help Navajo children become literate in Navajo language.⁵ They have developed teacher-training programs for Navajo teachers' aides to become certified and endorsed in bilingual or English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) education.⁶ The tribal government has established an education policy that all schools must teach Navajo language and culture, but their power to enforce the policy is limited. Consequently, the tribe has recently established a more powerful Department of Diné Education in an attempt to gain more control over Navajo education and schools by shifting the responsibilities of the state to this department.⁷ These reinforcement and revitalization efforts demonstrate the attempts to address the problem that the tribal government and people see with language loss.

Personally, I am also concerned with language loss, and this was the position I brought to the study. My perspective is shaped by the fact that I am a Navajo woman, a parent of Navajo children, a former high school teacher, and a concerned Navajo citizen. My position in this research brings these attributes into my analysis and interpretation of the results. I intend this research to benefit the Navajo Nation,

and I believe my teaching experiences and my perspective as a Navajo person have shaped, enhanced, and strengthened the research process by allowing me to engage in the research as an insider. Insider perspectives are important in research involving Indigenous peoples because they offer unique insight and ensure more sensitivity and accuracy in the portrayal of the community of study.⁸ I intend to demonstrate through this study how Navajo teenagers understand the value of Navajo language to their culture and that they strongly desire, if not demand, to have more effective opportunities to learn their language. The problems they experience learning and using the language appear to be sociological. They experience tremendous peer pressure to conform to mainstream American values, including the use of English. They also acknowledge the economic reasons, such as attaining a job, to use English. In the end, learning and using Navajo language becomes a much more difficult task than simply the practice and mastery of language skills. To offer a better understanding of the situation of Navajo language today, the next section will give an overview of recent reports on Navajo language use and language shift.

NAVAJO LANGUAGE TODAY

The Navajo Nation has the largest land base of any Native American tribe in the United States, with approximately 25,000 square miles. According to the 2000 United States Census, the total number of Navajos living in the United States was 298,215, with 180,462 living within the boundaries of the reservation. The median age for members of the Navajo Nation was twenty-four years old, with 45 percent of the population on the reservation under the age nineteen. These statistics make language maintenance among adolescents a more pertinent issue since there is such a large number of Navajo youth.⁹

Specific data about the state of the Navajo language can be found among Navajo tribal studies. In the 1990s, Wayne Holm, a linguist and educator working in the Office of Diné Language, Culture, and Community Services for the Navajo Nation's Division of Education wrote a series of reports on the current status of Navajo language. He reported in his latest update that there has been a massive shift away from Navajo language in the preceding two decades. Bilingual parents are allowing English to become the language of the home, so the number of child speakers of Navajo is decreasing.¹⁰ The proportion of non-Navajo-speaking children is doubling roughly every ten years. Holm made a worrisome but crucial assertion that, without child speakers, Navajo language may be headed for extinction.

In a 1970 study, Bernard Spolsky found that, in 1969, approximately 96 percent of 2900 six-year-old Navajo students in both Bureau

of Indian Affairs (BIA) and public schools were considered by their teachers to be Navajo speakers.¹¹ Twenty years later, two-thirds of Navajo five-year-olds entering one public school were tested as English-only speakers,¹² and over half of a sample of 700 four-year-olds in Head Start centers across the reservation were considered by their teachers to be English-only speakers.¹³ Holm inferred from data sources available that most Navajos who were twenty-five years old or over at the time of the study at one time spoke and probably still understand Navajo. The majority of Navajos forty years and over at the time of the study could still speak Navajo. The biggest change is between the generation of Navajos that went to boarding schools up until the mid-1950s and their children. The older generation can speak Navajo, but a high proportion of their children and grandchildren do not, which suggests a profound influence of boarding schools.¹⁴

In a 1993 study of kindergarten-age children from all 110 Navajo majority schools, Holm found that 87 percent of the children could understand Navajo, but only 52 percent of those children could speak at least some Navajo. Only 31 percent of the children in the entire sample could speak Navajo at a 5-year-old level.¹⁵ In a more recent telephone survey conducted to determine the types of Navajo language programs in elementary schools on the reservation, Holm found that less than one-tenth of all beginning students receive instruction for Navajo content or language acquisition or for Navajo from those schools. These figures paint a dismal picture of the future of the Navajo language and show how rapid the shift is from Navajo to English among Navajo children.

Public domains such as the media and government are largely conducted in English, and youth are not active participants in the governance activities where Navajo language is dominant. The only other context where Navajo is dominant is in traditional or Native American Church (NAC) ceremonies.¹⁶ The proportion of Navajo youth that participates in these religious activities is unknown. Given that these characteristics seem to demonstrate the massive language shift and the cultural adaptation of Navajo people to an English-speaking society and that Navajo teens are not being greatly encouraged to use or learn Navajo, it is essential to learn about teens' current use of the language. With more understanding, we can try to find ways to keep Navajo language as an essential part of our youths' perceptions of what it is to be a Navajo person.

The next sections will summarize the literature on language use in various contexts to inform our understanding of Navajo teenagers' language learning and choices. Special attention is given to the school context to understand the impact schooling has had on language learning and use, and to determine if the school can play a more active role in fostering language revitalization.

LANGUAGE USE IN HOME AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS

Joshua Fishman, a renowned scholar of the sociology of language, discussed the significant influence of social situations on language use and choices.¹⁷ An abundance of research has confirmed Fishman's conclusion by showing that the language choice of bilingual speakers is determined by the nature of the interactional situation, such as when speakers interacted with peers as opposed to adults, or in school as opposed to at home.¹⁸ The situations in which Navajo teenagers use Navajo language are important to consider when defining their language learning needs.

Similar to the research showing associations between language use and social context, Fishman determined that the discontinuance of a language among a group is associated with profound culture change.¹⁹ A heritage language is used less when speakers increasingly leave the homeland, less frequently observe traditions, more frequently intermarry with other groups, and incorporate new customs. To capture social contexts of language use, my study attempted to determine where and with whom Navajo teenagers use Navajo language. Learning about the contexts in which Navajo is used among youth will help to reach an understanding of where it can be fostered in a time of cultural adaptation and language shift.

Many researchers have found that the religious and domestic contexts promote heritage language maintenance through more frequent use of the language in these settings.²⁰ Smolkin and Suina asserted that among some Pueblo communities of the Southwest, the Native language and Native religion are almost one and the same and thereby reinforce one another.²¹ Religion was also an important context for the Native American Ojibwe language. Treuer made the argument that the Ojibwe language is essential to maintaining Ojibwe religion and communicating with spirits.²² Navajo people make the same association. As previously mentioned, Holm reported that Navajo was the dominant language in traditional Navajo religious ceremonies. Songs and prayers are exclusively in Navajo.²³

Navajo language use in the home is the most important ingredient for language maintenance and revitalization, but it still competes with other societal influences.²⁴ Parsons-Yazzie conducted research on Navajo intergenerational language differences and found that the children acquired little Navajo even when raised by Navajo-speaking parents.²⁵ She conducted ethnographic profiles of several families with bilingual parents and concluded that the children of these parents could sense the lower utility and prestige of the Navajo language even before they entered school. She noted that, on several occasions when she observed parent and child interaction, the parent would speak Navajo

and the child would respond in English. The child was never asked to respond specifically in Navajo.²⁶ Thus, Navajo language maintenance and revitalization efforts cannot be located solely in the home.

LANGUAGE USE IN SCHOOL CONTEXTS

For much of the research on Indigenous languages, a main source of influence is the school context. Parsons-Yazzie noted that language loss among Navajos appears to result from many causes, but most important among these are the impact of the school and the lack of language transmittal from parent to child.²⁷ One factor is the overall Western influence that permeates the school's philosophy, goals, and curriculum. Scholars of critical theory discuss the notion of a hidden curriculum among schools, where, along with the overt and formal curriculum, there is another that reflects the values and beliefs of the institution and people that created them. Giroux explained these influences on a school's philosophy, goals, and curriculum: "The nature of school pedagogy was to be found not only in the stated purposes of school rationales and teacher-prepared objectives but also in the myriad beliefs and values transmitted tacitly through the social relations and routines that characterized day-to-day school experience."²⁸ A school's philosophy, goals, and curriculum (from here on called the "school setting") can have profound effects on students' achievement and future plans. The school's setting can shape the experiences students have with their heritage language as well, which in turn affects student language use.

Unfortunately, some school settings are apathetic about Native language and culture education. As a result of a study of Navajo and Ute students who left school, Deyhle advocated for better teacher training in the culture of their students.²⁹ Among the main reasons the Navajo students in her study left school were teacher insensitivity, ignorance, and indifference to students and their culture. Teacher response to cultural differences is bound to also impact language use. Deyhle found that the students felt the school did not teach the skills and knowledge that would be valuable to them in the future. She asserted that these attitudes stemmed from the fact that the schools had a "culturally non-responsive school curriculum." Similarly, Swisher and Tippeconnic reported that assimilation as a goal remains profoundly ingrained in schools that serve Native students and many continue to consider Native cultural heritage as a deficit to learning and achievement.³⁰ Fostering Native language use in such an environment is extremely difficult.

Fred E. Jones, a Navajo educator, explained the contradiction between Western schools and the purpose of Navajo education. He stated that, in traditional Navajo beliefs, education is the means to mastering life, not bodies or subjects of knowledge as in Western educational methods. Growing up and becoming an adult is a long and slow process,

and education should guide that growth. Western education, however, deals more with achieving personal control and making choices for oneself; it is the primary means for acquiring jobs.³¹

Navajo people's attitudes toward education have probably changed. In today's Navajo society, many Western goals for education have replaced Navajo goals because of the wage-earning economy of the Navajo Nation. Finding a job requires a Western education. Although traditional Navajo education retains its same purpose, youth are not learning these traditional goals in school. They see the purpose of education through the culture of their school, which is built on Western ideals.

In these school settings, Navajo language is compartmentalized as a separate topic of study, removed from other academic content areas. Compartmentalizing Navajo language is the most common approach for teaching Navajo language in schools today. Holm and Holm examined the approaches taken by schools on the reservation and found four common approaches for teaching Navajo language.³² The first approach, used by the first schools on the reservation and also in some schools today, is that no Navajo language is offered or used at all. A second approach is to use Navajo as a means to enable students to comprehend English. A third, which most schools use today, is to treat Navajo as supplemental to a student's education. Navajo is offered as a foreign-language elective. A fourth approach, which very few schools take, is to use Navajo as the medium of instruction in all classes, as an integral part of the curriculum. For example, students are taught to read and write in Navajo before English. Roessal, who studied Navajo schools in the 1970s, found that the difference between public schools, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) schools, and community-controlled schools on the reservation was in their Navajo curriculum.³³ Only 2 percent of BIA and public school students took Navajo language courses, and 29 percent and 26 percent, respectively, took "American Indian" culture-type courses not specific to Navajo culture. Of the community-controlled schools, 95 percent of the students took both Navajo language and culture courses.

The difference in approaches to Navajo language use in the schools can also affect the status of the language in that school. The status attributed to the language has been shown to affect students' perceptions of their language and culture. Picard-Canape studied the future of the Montagnais language, an Indigenous language of Quebec.³⁴ The local schools had developed language revitalization programs, including teacher training and preschool programs. She found that the young people who participated in these programs were more proud of speaking and using the language in public places than they were prior to participation in the programs. Parents were also more willing to cooperate with educators and use Montagnais with others in their community. Enthusiasm for the language flourished because the school treated the language as an integral and significant part of their education program.

However, schools can also have the opposite effect when a low status is attributed to Native languages and culture. The *Indian Nations At Risk Report*, which included schools nationwide, found that most schools that serve Native students discourage the use of Native languages in the classroom, thereby contributing to weakening retention and development of language and culture.³⁵

Holm and Holm noted the status differences of Navajo and English in schools on the reservation. They claimed that attitudinal problems are as important as purely language-acquisition problems because Navajo does not have an equal status to English. More rural, poor students are Navajo speakers and are placed in ESL programs, which have a lower status in the school and community. Navajo-language education is unfortunately often equated with rural lifestyles, poverty, and special education.³⁶

Language use in the social contexts of home, school, and religion were important considerations for this study. The next sections will explain the research methodology and how each context was included in the design to measure their impact on Navajo teenagers' language use. The school context was of most interest and will be focused on in the discussion of the results.

RESEARCH METHOD AND PROCEDURES

The study took place in the Navajo Nation, which encompasses a vast area of land about the size of West Virginia, and is very heterogeneous in terms of the people's lifestyles. People vary in their religious practices, their means of income, their age, their home location, their familial demographic characteristics, their language use, and their cultural practices. Heritage seems to be one of the few common characteristics among people on the reservation.

To learn about patterns of language use among Navajo teenagers, it was necessary to obtain a representative sample of this population. In addition, because of the sensitive nature of the topic, it was important to hear from the specific voices of these teenagers as well. This study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to more comprehensively and appropriately inform the study's aim to learn about influences on students' language use.

My perspective as a Navajo person and my ability to relate to the students in this study enhanced the quality of the research. I was able to connect with the students on a more personal level by sharing my own stories of attending high school on the reservation (particularly in two of the participating schools in this study). I also used to teach at another of the participating schools. I believe my background as a Navajo person and connection to the schools made my research more trustworthy for the students and staff and thus hopefully elicited more

candid remarks in the interviews and honesty in responding to questions on the survey instrument.

I designed the study to measure contextual influences on language use at both early and current periods of the participants' lives. For early life influences, I included measures for religious activities and language use in the home since these were predominant characteristics for language use based on the literature. For religious influences, I measured specifically for participation in traditional Navajo religious activities and Native American Church religious activities because these are the religious settings where Navajo language is commonly used.

For the period of adolescence, I measured the influences of the school context, since the literature had shown the school to be instrumental in shaping a teenager's life. In addition, I included measures of students' current religious practices and current language use to fill the gap where the literature was weak in determining the independent influence of these variables over time from early childhood to adolescence.

Quantitative Measures

To reach a large, representative sample of students, I created a questionnaire to measure students' language levels, language usage, and lifespan experiences at home, in religious contexts, and in school contexts. For the questionnaire I adapted questions from previous researchers who measured similar variables and created many of my own questions. Each question pertained to a particular influence, such as religious practices or language usage at home, and to the different social contexts in which language is used.

To measure the dependent variable (language use) students self-reported how much they speak Navajo and English. The questionnaire included situational contexts in which students might use the Navajo language to limit oversimplification of perceived language use. Those situations included school activities, home activities, and social activities outside of school.

Originally a control variable, students' language levels were assessed based on a self-report system. To reduce enhanced or diminished self-reporting of abilities, the questions to measure language level were based on real-life scenarios that asked students about their comfort level with speaking Navajo. For example, in one situation students were asked to speak to a Navajo-speaking grandmother. They were asked to rate their speaking ability according to five levels of comfort, three of which asked if they could speak "very easily and comfortably," "with some difficulty," or if they "cannot do it at all." In total, twelve questions with five levels of comfort listed in a Likert-type format were used to assess students' language levels. Given that students may not have been able to speak Navajo but could understand it well, seven of the questions

assessed speaking abilities and five assessed listening and comprehension abilities. This assessment of Navajo fluency level is not a perfect measure. It is highly subjective in that the students rated their own abilities and level of usage. Nevertheless, in reference to methods for measuring language use, Fishman has reported that "responses on self-report Likert-type instruments are significantly related to independently obtained daily behavioral records of a more precise type."³⁷ For purposes of this study, self-reporting was informative for learning about students' self-perceptions of their language levels and language usage.

The students' fluency was determined by categorizing their responses according to a scale developed for the Window Rock Oral Language Test (WROLT).³⁸ The scale rates students according to levels of speaking and understanding criteria. Table 1 shows the rating scale and assessment criteria.

Table 1.		
Assessment criteria for language level items		
<i>Criteria: Understanding</i>	<i>Criteria: Speaking</i>	<i>Rating:</i>
Does not understand anything	Cannot speak at all	1 = No fluency
Can understand somewhat when spoken slowly	Can say a few words	2 = Very limited fluency
Understands almost everything when spoken slower than normal	Can say phrases and basic sentences: poor grammar	3 = Limited fluency
Understands almost everything when spoken at normal speed	Can speak fluently	4 = Fluent
Understands everything without difficulty	Speaks exceptionally well	5 = Very fluent

This scale was selected because it was developed specifically for Navajo students, and it takes into account the dichotomous nature of language. Many Navajo students vary in their ability to either speak or understand the Navajo language. Thus, the language level questions asked students to rate themselves according to the same criteria.

Qualitative Measures

It was important to include a qualitative component to the study to allow students to express their opinions and feelings toward their language.

Interviews were conducted as a way for students to elaborate on their opinions and to identify issues that the survey could not capture. The interview questions were similar to the survey questions, but they were worded in an open-ended format. The questions encouraged students to tell stories and to elaborate on their opinions or language experiences in ways the survey did not permit. The students led the discussions, thus they did not necessarily address each question from the survey.

I took notes of their responses during the interviews, and I asked each student if I could make an audio recording of their responses. Most were comfortable with this but a few were not, thus some of the data comes from my handwritten notes and summaries of their responses.

School Sites and Participants

Five high schools across the reservation participated in the study. Schools were selected based on their differing locations, Navajo language programs, and funding types to ensure sample variation in the experiences of the students' lives. Table 2 below outlines the characteristics of each school according to their type of language program, school population, and other Navajo content courses. The school names are fictitious.

Table 2.			
High school by type of Navajo program, school population, and other Navajo content courses offered at the school.			
	<i>Type of Navajo Program</i>	<i>School population*</i>	<i>Other Navajo content courses</i>
Northeastern Academy	Requires 2 years	192	Requires Navajo culture, Navajo history
Central Valley	Integral	215	Many Navajo studies courses
Western Hills	Requires 2 years	474	Navajo government, history electives
Eastern Sky	Elective	778	Requires 1 semester Navajo culture and history
Southern Mountain	Elective**	720	Navajo studies elective

*based on telephone survey, 1997, grades 9–12 (Central Valley is grades 7–12)

**No Navajo offered at time of phone survey; they began their first Navajo class at the time of study

The "Type of Navajo Program" indicates the school's handling of Navajo language in its academic program. The school that had the integral program had Navajo language immersed into all their courses at the high school level. In their Navajo content courses, Navajo was the language of instruction. In all other courses, Navajo was the co-medium of instruction, along with English.

Two of the schools, Eastern Sky and Southern Mountain, are publicly funded schools. Western Hills was a state-chartered school at the time of the study. Central Valley is a community-controlled, federal contract school, and Northeastern Academy operates as a grant school. Each school is located in a different region of the Navajo Nation. Their fictitious names indicate their general location on the reservation.

A total of 215 students participated in the study. Their ages ranged from thirteen to nineteen, and grades ranged from ninth to twelfth. There were 110 females and 100 males. Five students did not report their gender. I interviewed twenty of the students who completed the survey, four from each school. The students volunteered to be interviewed, either individually, in pairs, or in a group.

ANALYSIS

I conducted a multivariate regression analysis on the questionnaire responses. This regression analysis narrowed down the most powerful predictors of language use and determined the statistical significance of the direct and indirect influence of each of my independent variables on language use. In other words, I determined how much the students' life experiences, defined by each variable, affected their language use as direct influences (holding other predictors constant) and as indirect influences when mediated by other experiences.

I compared the interview responses to the questionnaire results as a way to provide evidence for or to contradict the survey findings. The interviews provided insight into Navajo teenagers' use of the Navajo language and gave evidence and rich description of some of the survey findings. They also provided the sole evidence of the influence of a few variables that the survey could not capture.

RESULTS

The regression analysis showed that the current life experiences of the students were the most powerful predictors of their current language use. The language level of the students was the most powerful indicator of whether or not a student reported using the Navajo language ($p < .01$; $B = .335$). As a result, it was treated as an independent variable, instead of as a control variable. Most of the significant influences on lan-

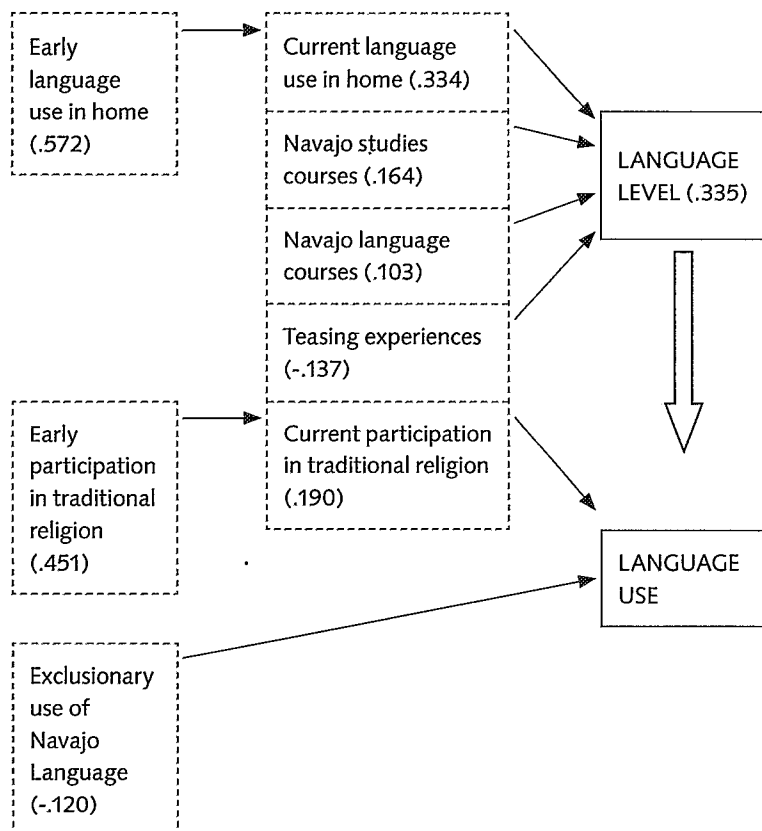


Figure 1. Significant socialization influences on Navajo language use

guage use were indirect, because they directly influenced language level first. Figure 1 gives a diagram of these results from the path analysis.

The home-based experiences, such as language use in the home, showed the most power in predicting language level ($p < .01$; $B = .334$ for current use in home; $.572$ for early use in home) and thus language use. School-based experiences also had a significantly positive effect on language level and language use ($p < .01$; $B = .164, .103$). These experiences maintained power as a predictor even when competing with the other variables, such as home and religion. The school-based language programs in their variety are having positive influence over students' fluency in speaking Navajo and consequently, their use of Navajo. The final significant direct effect on language level and indirect effect on language use was students' experiences with teasing or ridicule ($p < .01$; $B = -.137$). This effect was negative, meaning the more a student experienced teasing or ridicule with regard to their use of Navajo language, the less fluent they were in it and the less they used it.

Traditional religious practices had a direct and significantly positive

effect on language use ($p < .01$; $B = .190$). The more a student participated in traditional Navajo religion or the Native American Church, the more they used the language. The other direct influence on students' language use was the early life experience of Navajo being used as a secret language so that children would not understand (exclusionary use of Navajo language) ($p < .01$; $B = -.120$). This effect was negative, so the more a student's family used Navajo to exclude their child from conversation, the less the student used the language as a teenager.

Although the schools in this study varied in their philosophy or purpose, Navajo program, location, and funding, there were not many differences with regard to language use between the students in these schools. Students at any one school did not report using Navajo or English any more or less than students at any other school. In fact, of those students who are Navajo speakers at each school, their average score for how much Navajo and/or English they used in the various social settings fell between "half & half Navajo and English" and "mostly English." The fact that all students, regardless of the school they attended, were speaking equivalent amounts of English and Navajo suggests that, despite the ability to speak Navajo at any level, students today are choosing to speak more and more English in lieu of Navajo.

INTERVIEW RESULTS

The interviews provided evidence to support three conclusions about Navajo teenagers' language use. One is that, like in the survey, the students reported in the interviews having strongly negative recollections of being teased when trying to speak Navajo. The most elaborate stories shared in the interviews came from these types of experiences. Second, the school environment has a profound influence over language choices and use. The students associated school with English, and their primary language used in school was English, even if they could speak Navajo. In addition, students' peers within school affect their language choices. Students conform to one another in the English-speaking school environment. Third, Navajo teenagers tended to associate Navajo language with the elderly and with being outdated. They described it as a language of the past and not relevant to their everyday lives. Nevertheless, they hold tremendous value in the language; they just do not know how to incorporate it into their lives.

"KIND OF FUNNY": DETRIMENTS OF TEASING

Teasing experiences, for the most part, have not been easily dismissed by a number of the students interviewed. Particularly when the source of the teasing was an older relative or another adult, the experience

made the students feel demeaned, embarrassed, and defensive. The teasing that the students described provides evidence supporting an explanation for the survey result in which the experience of teasing predicts less fluency in the language. Many students felt they should not be blamed for their limited Navajo. A senior girl from Northeastern Academy asserted this belief in her conversations with me. She shared some expectations she held that the schools should help students learn the Navajo language. These expectations came as a result of times she had felt demeaned by teasing. For example, she said her father would talk to her in Navajo when he knew she could not understand or respond. When she did not understand or she responded incorrectly, he would get angry. She said her father's anger in turn made her angry and hesitant to ever risk trying to respond in Navajo again. She also described a similar experience that occurred at the tribal government level. She said she had two friends who went to the Navajo Tribal Council asking for scholarships. Some of the Council Delegates demeaned their efforts by telling them they needed to know Navajo in order to have a scholarship. She said:

I know a couple of students got downgraded because when they were talking to the Council Delegates, they were asking "Why aren't there more scholarships?" The Council Delegates really got down on them and said "we want you guys to know your language first." I mean it's not our fault, well, yeah, partially it is. But if they want Navajo to be learned, then they should require it in all schools.

She recognized that students need to take part in learning the Navajo language if they were not brought up speaking it. But she felt that Navajo adult leaders needed to be more supportive and provide more opportunities for students to learn the language.

Many more students I interviewed could instantly remember a time when they or their friends were ridiculed for trying to speak Navajo. A freshmen boy from Northeastern Academy who interviewed with his friend was particularly quiet during the interview. When asked about any experiences of ridicule, he spoke up because he had vivid memories and described an experience with his uncle, who one time started talking to him in Navajo. The student was expected to respond in Navajo, so he tried. He said he can understand Navajo well, but it is harder for him to speak it. When he tried, he said his uncle laughed and then scolded him for not being able to respond with fluent Navajo. I asked how this made him feel, and he responded "kind of funny," meaning embarrassed and hurt. He said he did not want to try talking in Navajo again after that experience.

The sources of teasing are not limited to adults. Students shared

their views on how it occurs between teenage peers as well. For example, a senior female student at Eastern Sky commented on a stereotype that students place on other students who are more fluent speakers of Navajo language. She noted that students who are English-only speakers call Navajo-speakers "johns." A "john" is a derogatory label among Navajo teenagers. It is a way of disparaging someone for coming from a more traditional, Navajo-speaking home. This term existed when I was in school on the reservation, and it persists today. As I understand it, it is often used to refer to families who live under poverty conditions in the more rural areas of the reservation. It is also equated with being uneducated and unpopular. My opinion is that it stems from the indoctrination of Western education, worldviews, and ways of life during colonization, carried through the boarding-school era, and continues now. The policies of boarding schools and the general attitude of mainstream America assigned an inferior status to Navajo people, culture, language, and worldview. The term "john" is a manifestation of this type of thinking and influence.

A couple of students reported observing their peers teasing Navajo-speaking students by calling them "johns." One junior girl from Central Valley noted that students are called "johns" because of their pronunciation of English words. They have a strong Navajo accent, which indicates they probably speak Navajo, which may have been their first language. One Eastern Sky student, who is an aspiring Navajo-language teacher, described how more traditional students, like himself, are associated with a lack of education and called "johns." He said, "People call us 'johns' or 'uneducated.' It's not true, there's lots of educated Navajos out there." He does not take the name-calling to heart, but he also said he had never experienced being teased. He said his relatives only help and encourage him with speaking Navajo, which may be one reason he is committed to teaching the language.

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES

The school setting has a tremendous influence on Navajo teenagers' lives. The interviews showed that the English-dominant atmosphere pervades teenagers' experiences for most of the school day, and it affects their perceptions of the accepted norms of school behavior. This in turn affects their own and their peers' language choices. The power of peers' influence on one another is tremendous as well. The interviews showed that teenagers are heavily influenced to conform to the behavior of their peers, including language-use choices.

As for the influence of the overall school environment, one claim made by many of the students was that Navajo is not the language of the school place. If any of the students did speak Navajo in school, they

used it to tell jokes or engage in small talk, or they spoke only with select people with whom the students were comfortable and shared a desire to converse in Navajo. A senior male student who came from a more traditional home and said that his first language was Navajo stated that Navajo is used at home and English at school, as though that were the accepted norm. He said he speaks Navajo sometimes in school, but mostly he speaks English, especially to girls. When probed further about this assertion, he said he speaks English when he is trying to impress girls. Perhaps he believed English has a higher status in the school. When he goes home, he said, he speaks mostly Navajo.

A senior male student from Eastern Sky who expressed a desire to become a Navajo language teacher made similar comments about his use of Navajo. He commented on the discrepancy between the language he used at home and the one he used at school. When asked where he used each language, he responded,

The only time I speak English is with my younger relatives or at school. I try to speak Navajo to them (his younger cousins), but . . . [shakes his head] . . . I use half English and half Navajo, that's when I get home I use Navajo. At school I use English, but sometimes I use Navajo, too.

When asked about the language Navajo students at other schools use, he said, "I say half and half. They use English when they go to school and, when they get home, probably Navajo." His statements show the trend of many of the students to associate Navajo with home and English with school.

The one place Navajo language has a place in school is in the Navajo-language courses. All of the schools in the study had at least one or two Navajo-language courses. When students participated in these courses, they desired to be challenged. A student from Central Valley, where Navajo language is integral to their curriculum, felt she was not learning new or more challenging topics in Navajo language and culture. She gave an example of the Navajo Creation Story and how it was taught in similar ways at each grade level. She explained it in this way:

One thing I did not like was they kept repeating it every year, like what we learned from the last year. They would teach it again and we would already know about it. I like learning new things about our culture, about things I don't know.

Only a small number of students commented on their desire for more of a challenge in Navajo language or content courses, but it may be important to learn from their comments with regard to the need for

improved teaching methodologies, access to resources, and the daily time allotted by schools for teaching Navajo language. Increasing our expectations and using creative methods for teaching Navajo language may be another strategy to improve learning of the language and students' perceptions of its place in school.

More influential than classroom pedagogy is the influence of students' peers when it comes to Navajo-language learning and use in schools. One female student from Eastern Sky explained why she thought students speak mostly English in school. I mentioned to her how some students said in previous interviews that they noticed Navajo speakers in school speak English instead of Navajo. I asked her if she thought this was true. She thought it was and claimed that those Navajo speakers who mostly talk in English do so because their friends speak English only, because it is cool to speak English, and because they all want to be like one another.

This perception that English is the language of the school as a result of student conformity may be a factor of the peer influence that was demonstrated in my group interviews. The students in these interviews did not disagree and seemed more guarded in their responses. Likewise, the students had asserted that, if students in social gatherings in school are speaking English, they will likely all speak mostly English because they want to be like one another.

One of the survey items measuring language use asked students how much they speak Navajo and/or English with friends at school events. In examining only those students who self-identified as Navajo speakers, 47 percent of these students said they use "only English" at school events. An additional 28 percent responded that they use "mostly English and some Navajo" with friends at school events. These percentages tabulated from responses on the survey correspond with the students' remarks about predominant English-language use in school.

Those students who desire to speak Navajo must seek out other students who share similar feelings. They must find secret, safe places to speak Navajo. One senior student from Eastern Sky shared how he and a friend would go to a rarely populated courtyard on the school grounds to tell jokes and practice learning Navajo. When explaining what he and his friends did in the courtyard, he said:

When I talk Navajo, I only talk to certain people, like one of my friends in cross-country. We're trying to learn Navajo. I know some jokes in Navajo. But it's kind of hard for me to tell it but I know the punch line. We get a kick out of those sometimes.

This student was committed to helping his sister learn Navajo for the Miss Navajo competition. It appears in his case that he is committed

enough to learning and using Navajo that even the school place, with all its negative peer influence with regard to speaking Navajo, could not stop him from finding ways to continue learning and speaking.

In general, the interviews have shown that students speak mostly English in school with friends and adults. If they are Navajo speakers, they speak Navajo at home and a few will seek out friends to speak Navajo in school. But it was the accepted norm that English is the language of the school, regardless of which school interviewees attended. The survey results also showed that the school context did not have a direct or significant influence over language use, but the school context did influence the language abilities of the students. The issue here, however, is that, despite their ability to speak Navajo, students do not speak Navajo in school settings because they want to conform to other teenagers who are mostly speaking English.

Despite this trend, there were a few potential language activists among the students I interviewed. One finds secret, safe places to practice Navajo and is committed to helping his sister learn Navajo. Another felt Navajo leaders should be more responsible for assuring Navajo teenagers have opportunities to learn Navajo. A third showed his activist potential in how he interacts with his friends. He said:

Beginning of freshmen year, I had more Navajo-speaking friends. That's when I started communicating with kids that were more fluent. Then down the road, I felt out of place not using my own language. So I pretty much started talking Navajo and got better at it. I have more English-speaking friends now, and I try to get them to speak Navajo, too. I don't know if they get it. I talk in Navajo but they respond back in English. Every once in awhile they respond in Navajo, like in "yes" or "no," they say "aoo" or "dooda" or they say "I know" in Navajo if they agree with me.

These students provide evidence of Navajo teenagers' desire to learn their language in spite of the obstacles at the high school level. The fact that students respect their language and are vocal in their desire to learn it and that a few find ways to practice it with one another are hopeful signs that we can draw from in finding new and creative methods for teaching Navajo to teenagers.

RESPECT FOR NAVAJO VERSUS PRESSURES TO SPEAK ENGLISH

At the same time that students used the "john" label in name-calling, they still inherently seemed to value their heritage language. The students I interviewed explained that they understand its importance to

Navajo culture, and they hold great respect for the language. For example, one student felt it was important for Navajo teenagers to learn the language out of respect for older Navajos and to prevent language loss. He said:

I'm not saying students should have to take Navajo, but they should at least know some of it. [Why?] Because that's who we are, so they can talk with elderly; they were here before us and they know more than us. Some of them have passed on and that's why we're losing our language.

Although the students value the Navajo language, most associated it with the elderly. When asked to describe a typical Navajo speaker, each student described an elderly, traditional Navajo person. Their association of Navajo with the elderly does not seem to be a disrespectful association but more an observance of their reality. When asked how they think other Navajo youth feel about the language, they say younger people respect the language but consider it out of date. In their desire to be like their peers, the students claim Navajo youth want to go along with what is "modern" and "trendy," meaning what reflects mainstream America's popular culture trends. They felt there was not a place for Navajo language in their lives because they related it more to the past and older Navajo people. Consequently, feelings of embarrassment arose when they tried to speak the language among friends, particularly if they were just learning the language.

Several students during the interviews explained this perception to me. A pair of freshmen boys who attended Northeastern Academy noted that Navajo youth felt that Navajo language is important, but that youth are too scared to speak it. When I asked what makes the youth scared, one of the boys responded, "That's how teens are these days, they get embarrassed because they are trying to fit in with the crowd." The crowd, most likely, communicates in English. A junior girl from Eastern Sky responded to the same question by saying, "Because most students around here speak English. They would be the only ones speaking Navajo." A senior male student from Southern Mountain made similar remarks. He said that students at school speak English and not Navajo because they are embarrassed since they cannot speak Navajo well. Similarly, a group of three boys from Southern Mountain said that youth do not really think about the language so they do not try to speak it. When asked why they do not try to speak it, they responded that students are embarrassed and that they do not need to use it as much.

Another influence on how the students viewed the prestige of Navajo language was religion. A few students explained the conflict they have experienced as a result of messages they hear and learn from

both traditional Navajo and Christian religious sources. One senior male student from Eastern Sky felt caught in the disparity between his maternal family's and his father's beliefs. He explained this situation and how he resolved it for himself:

I was caught right in the middle. My dad is very traditional, and he taught me a lot of things. But my mom's side of the family, which I lived on most of my life, are very Christian. They always taught me that it [Navajo traditions] was wrong and that you're not supposed to do that. Therefore, I didn't care to learn it. That's where a lot of my Navajo was lost . . . My dad kept me alert about everything. He's the one that used to talk to me in Navajo . . . I eventually made the conclusion that we all worship the same God under different terms. The question I always have is—and my uncle still gets mad at me about it—is why am I Navajo if it's wrong? Why didn't God just make me white if being Navajo is wrong?

His experience provides an example of pressures from family and religious sources to speak English. These sources can affect students' perception of the status and necessity of Navajo language.

Yet, when Navajo language is associated with events that the students are interested in, they become more committed to learning and speaking the language. For example, a student from Eastern Sky acknowledged how very few Navajo teenagers speak Navajo, but when the language is associated with a highly prestigious and exciting event, he became committed to speaking Navajo. He said:

Very few [students] talk in Navajo. Nowadays, it is considered out of date or "john" . . . Most people don't talk that and they're embarrassed about it. For me, every chance I get I try to talk Navajo, especially to my younger sister. For the past month, I really got involved in this Navajo competition . . . The competition was about to go on when we were doing this fashion show, my sister really got exposed to what they do. Now one of her goals is to become Miss Navajo and right now she's learning how to talk, and every time I get a chance, I talk to her in Navajo.

This suggests one strategy for schools and families to promote Navajo language: if events like these make teenagers feel the language has a purpose in their life and is a way to improve their own self-image and accomplishments, we ought to provide similar creative opportunities that demonstrate the utility of Navajo language.

The Navajo Nation is homeland for Navajo people and a place where Navajo language can thrive given the right efforts. Fishman has stated that intergenerational transmission of a heritage language is crucial for maintaining the language.³⁹ This study confirmed his conclusion in that Navajo-language use in the home was the strongest influence over students' current Navajo-language level and Navajo-language use. If the language is being spoken in the home, the children are more likely to have better abilities in Navajo and to use the language.

Additionally, it is a positive sign that participation in traditional Navajo religion showed a significant effect on language use. These ceremonies primarily use Navajo in the prayers and conversations between the medicine man, patient, and other participants. Navajo language has high status in these settings, which may further promote the use of Navajo language among teenagers who participate in them.

But many youth do not stay on the reservation, where there is a Navajo-language environment; they seek higher education or employment in English-language environments with more job opportunities. Thus, the need to develop strong Navajo skills among Navajo youth is all the more important. Such efforts are further complicated by the sensitivity of today's teenagers to criticism and ridicule when speaking Navajo. This study showed that the more a student experienced being teased or the more the language was used as a way to keep children from understanding older relatives, the less fluent the students were in the Navajo language and the less they used it. As the interviews showed, the experience of being ridiculed for trying to speak Navajo is very detrimental to today's teenagers. Teenagers are at an age when they are very self-conscious and sensitive to criticism. That Navajo students are very sensitive to teasing may be a function of their disconnection with understanding the utility of teasing. Navajo people, like many Native communities, have used teasing to teach the norms and morals of their society. But this was typically done through the Navajo language. In today's Navajo society, Navajo youth with limited Navajo language abilities and self-consciousness about speaking Navajo may not understand the cultural nuances of teasing, especially when it is done in English. Perhaps those nuances that make the teasing less severe when done in the Navajo language do not come across the same way in English. In any case, today's Navajo teenagers are much more sensitive to any teasing, and especially scolding, that they experience.

The most important finding from this study is that families, traditional religious activities, and schools have been influential in promoting Navajo-language learning and use among Navajo teenagers. Of most interest is that schools are having some positive influence

on Navajo students' language use and thus can be more proactive in their language revitalization efforts. Dick and McCarty also found the school setting to have a positive influence in Navajo language learning. They argued that "schools can become the sites for strengthening indigenous languages when the school and the local community work together toward this goal."⁴⁰

Schools need to become more proactive in language revitalization because the Navajo language is weakening. The majority of the Navajo teenagers in this study rated their Navajo-language ability at only limited fluency, with the exception of Central Valley students, who were fluent. The strong reinforcement Central Valley students receive for learning Navajo is unique. Students at Central Valley speak, listen, read, and write the Navajo language from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Most students on the reservation attend schools where Navajo is not integral to the curriculum, and the students perceive English to be the language of the school.

To effectively engage in language revitalization, schools must be address the pedagogical approaches and resource needs of their language teachers and programs. Based on the qualitative data gathered through interviews and observation, the Navajo-language programs of most schools in this study were modest. The language was mostly taught as though all the students were monolingual English speakers, and those students with more abilities in Navajo were most often used as tutors. Teachers did not have many material resources, and they expressed need for more administrative support. They had to rely on their own ingenuity and creativity.

Another important consideration for developing effective programs aimed at increasing language ability and use is the strong influence of peers that the results have demonstrated. This peer influence was shown in the comments students made about their desire to conform to one another and in how the students never disagreed with one another in the group interviews. This influence can be used to promote Navajo-language learning and use.

At this point, Navajo teenagers perceive English as the language for school. They shared stories and opinions about how they and their friends speak English at school because they want to conform to their friends. English seems to have a higher social status than Navajo among teenagers when in school. Navajo, on the other hand, is associated with the elderly and the past by the students. There does not appear to be a place for Navajo language among teenagers, because they want to live in a "modern" world and do not consider Navajo modern. If Navajo is to attain status equal to English in school contexts, it needs to be related to the world of today's teenagers.

I interpret students' embarrassment to speak Navajo among their peers at school as more to do with their fear of judgment (for example,

being called a "john") by their peers than with shame or indifference about their language. The students actually greatly respect their language, but the sociological influences surrounding their use of the language in school impede their efforts to speak it.

A combination of improved teaching pedagogy and the development of students' critical-thinking skills and critical consciousness⁴¹ may be another strategy for enhancing language learning. First, improved teaching pedagogy would help teachers and students to find ways to more effectively learn and speak Navajo. Holm, Silentman, and Wallace have created a method for teaching Navajo called "Situational Navajo,"⁴² which has been used in Head Start centers and other elementary school language programs such as the Window Rock Diné Language Immersion School.⁴³ However, it has not been widely introduced or adapted at the high school level. Situational Navajo teaches Navajo through conversational methods that focus on the Navajo verb system and engages students in oral speech involving everyday situational contexts. This approach could be adapted to Navajo teenagers' interests and to combat the sociological influences that make speaking Navajo difficult in the high school setting. For example, involving students in a service-learning project while learning, using, and practicing Navajo may be one way to include Navajo in a relevant, stimulating, and meaningful educational project. Service learning and other community-based projects have been shown to highly engage Native students in their learning and personal development.⁴⁴ These types of projects would provide for several situational contexts to practice Navajo while also allowing students to contribute to the betterment of their community.

Second, I suggest developing students' critical-thinking skills and critical consciousness with regard to the problems of Navajo language shift so that they may understand at a more philosophical and conceptual level the history of colonization and culture change and can place language shift into this historical context. Stimulating their critical consciousness can ignite their commitment to their community and to their language. This approach has been shown in other educational programs to influence Native students' life goals toward service to their Native communities.⁴⁵ It now needs to be applied to language programs. Through critical pedagogy, teachers and schools can debunk the "john" stigma, and the students may become more committed to learning their language as an act of resistance to assimilation, as an act of defense for their homeland, and as an act of pride in their heritage.

Whatever approach schools take, it is imperative they learn more specifically about their students' perceptions, attitudes, and language usage in order to most effectively address students' particular needs. Schools can and should find creative ways to link Navajo language to Navajo teenagers' worlds and to relevant aspects of their lives. Those

creative approaches will provide the necessary link to maintain a connection between Navajo language and ethnicity for Navajo teenagers in the twenty-first century.

NOTES

- 1 Irene Silentman, "Situational Navajo: Teaching Diné Oral Language Development Verbfully," presentation at the National Association for Bilingual Education Annual Conference, January 19, 2006. Ms. Silentman refers to findings from the Navajo Language Project of the Office of Diné Culture, Language, and Community Services; I also found this typical of high schools' Navajo language programs when I conducted a phone survey of sixteen high schools on the Navajo Nation for my dissertation proposal.
- 2 Language shift refers to the first language of children shifting from a heritage language to a dominant language of the larger society, in this case English. Joshua Fishman written extensively about it; see, for example, *Language and Ethnicity in Minority Sociolinguistic Perspective* (Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters, 1989), 212; or *Reversing Language Shift* (Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters, 1991), 40–45.
- 3 Paul Platero et al., *Navajo Students at Risk: The Navajo Student Dropout Study*, report to the Navajo Division of Education (Window Rock, Ariz.: Navajo Division of Education, Navajo Nation, 1988); Wayne Holm, *Navajo Language Use Today by Domain*, Native American Languages Act Proposal (Window Rock, Ariz.: Office of Diné Language, Culture, and Community Services, Navajo Nation, 1995); Evangeline Parsons-Yazzie, "A Study of Reasons for Navajo Language Attrition as Perceived by Navajo-Speaking Parents" (PhD Diss., Northern Arizona University, 1995), 17; Tiffany S. Lee and Daniel McLaughlin, "Reversing Navajo Language Shift, Revisited," in *Can Threatened Languages Be Saved? Reversing Language Shift, Revisited: A 21st Century Perspective*, ed. Joshua A. Fishman, 23–43 (Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2001).
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- 14 Wayne Holm, *Current Status of Navajo Language* (Window Rock, Ariz.: Office of Diné Culture, Language, and Community Services, Navajo Nation, 1994).
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- 16 Holm, *Current Status of Navajo Language—Update*.
- 17 Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*, 85.
- 18 A. Aguirre, "Language Use Patterns of Adolescent Chicanos in a California Border Town," in *Bilingualism and Language Contact: Spanish, English, and Native American Languages*, ed. J. Barkin, E. Brandt, and J. Ornstein-Galicia, 278–89 (New York: Teachers College Press, 1982); Guadalupe Valdes, *Role of Foreign Language Teaching Profession in Maintaining Non-English Languages in the U.S.* (Language for a Multicultural World in Transition, Northeast Conference Reports, 1992), 29–71; L. Galindo, "Language Attitudes toward Spanish and English Varieties: A Chicano Perspective," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 17 (1995): 77–99.
- 19 Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*, 187–229.
- 20 R. Bourhis and I. Sachdev, "Vitality Perceptions and Language Attitudes: Some Canadian Data," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 3 (1984): 97–126; A. Ramirez, "The Sociolinguistics of Spanish–English Contact among Hispanic Adolescents in the U.S.," *Hispania* 74 (1991): 1057–67; S. Watson, "Scottish and Irish Gaelic: The Giant's Bed Fellows," in *Investigating Obsolescence: Studies in Language Contraction and Death*, ed. N. Dorian (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 41–59; M. Hidalgo, "The Dialectics of Spanish Language Loyalty and Maintenance on the U.S.–Mexico Border: A Two Generation Study," in *Spanish in the U.S.: Linguistic Contact and Diversity*, ed. A. Roca and J. M. Lipski, 47–73 (Germany: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993); I. Kreindler et al., "Circassian Israelis: Multilingualism as a Way of Life," *Language, Culture, Curriculum* 8 (1995): 149–62; P. Ninnes, "Language Maintenance among Vietnamese Australian Students," *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics* 19 (1996): 115–38.
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- 24 Fishman, *Language and Ethnicity*, 224–32.
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- 37 Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*, 52.
- 38 Taken from Parsons-Yazzie, "A Study of Reasons for Navajo Language Attrition," 36-37.
- 39 Fishman, *Language and Ethnicity*, 224-26.
- 40 Galena Sells Dick and Teresa L. McCarty, "Navajo Language Maintenance and Development: Possibilities for Community-Controlled Schools," *Journal of Navajo Education* 11 (1994): 15.
- 41 This phrase comes from Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, thirtieth anniversary edition (New York: Continuum, 1993). Critical consciousness is an awareness and knowledge of one's self within the realm of a critical understanding of the nature and causes of surrounding social and political conditions. Freire asserted that critical consciousness is important for gaining self-control and direction in one's education as a means to empower and activate one's sense of learning.
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