

**Discussion:**  
**THE POWER OF AMERICAN INDIAN PARENTS AND  
COMMUNITIES**

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Gam yu je? Hank va yu:m kyubay vak digawv'k baj hmany  
ga va wik ba dinyudk ba u:jo gwaw vim hankyu. Haygu  
i:l, Ba i:l danyudk ba u:jo wi. Ga yum yi dop yid Ba  
hmany ch gwe spok han jay me. Dadaja:dk ha:n yo:k, gwe  
ga ha:n nyu jivdad jay'm nyu va wi:j wi.

*Greetings. We are here to discuss bilingual education,  
literacy and biliteracy, and how various Indian schools and  
communities are implementing bilingual education  
programs. The purpose of these programs is to help  
children "learn both worlds" and to strive for education to  
improve the quality of life for Indian people.*

A few generations ago—before federal HUD housing transformed residence patterns in American Indian communities—families built their homes around the grandparents. Grandparents transmitted the culture through stories, songs, and the oral traditions that told of historical events, the people and the times.

In both the United States and Canada, federal education policies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also shattered that form of cultural transmission. Children were taken away from their parents and grandparents, often for years at a time, and subjected to a school experience that sought to strip them of their unique

tribal identities, and replace their language and culture with that of the dominant society. Today, our children are deprived of the traditional form of cultural transmission. Like others whose accounts appear in this volume, in my community of Peach Springs, children have been deprived of their Hualapai heritage. Each of the articles in this volume suggests that schools can become *one* vehicle for changing this situation by making the local language and culture meaningful parts of children's socialization. But for schools to fulfill this role, they must have the support of—and connect directly with—American Indian parents and community members who are the speakers of the languages and the carriers of the culture. What do parents and grandparents want for their their children?

Nearly two decades ago, we raised this question in our community. We had just received a Title VII bilingual education grant. What we proposed to do with the grant—having our children write in Hualapai and English, and developing bilingual textbooks—departed radically from past educational practices. With few Indian educators of our own at the time, we encountered resistance from teachers at the school and met with distrust from our administration. Parents and grandparents were upset because they had been brainwashed for over 100 years that the native language and culture were to be forgotten.

In the first years of our program, we held many public meetings. One of the issues discussed repeatedly was why had the schools failed to educate our people? At the time, only three enrolled tribal members had graduated from college; why weren't our students going on for further education? How could we account for the high dropout rates of Hualapai students, reflected in national statistics as well as in generalized negative attitudes toward the schools? As Indian nations, we must raise these questions and ask why the schools have failed to nurture the intellectual and social-affective development of our children.

In our case, the reason was that education had been imposed on the Hualapai people. We had no community values in formal schooling; we did not value the educational system.

We now have a school of choice, with a curriculum that integrates Hualapai language, culture and biliteracy throughout the grades and content areas. The curriculum and teaching strategies reinforce concepts developed at home and in the community, while still meeting state requirements. As has been described for Navajo students (see Part III of this volume), we read and write about locally relevant experiences; we put this on the computer; we go outside the classroom to videotape aspects of the natural science and social life of the local environment. As a high technology school, we have children involved in writing story boards, and in scripting, videotaping and editing in the video studio. As Zepeda observes in the introductory article of this issue, these literacy experiences validate students' lives and their experience.

The real power of this bilingual program, however, is less the specifics of its curriculum than the support of parents and community members. Gaining that support required some "reverse brainwashing." We have had to re-educate our parents on the importance and priority of the values and knowledge embodied in our culture. This local knowledge, in fact, is just as important as, and much more relevant than anything written in commercial texts. We also have sought to "grow our own" Hualapai teaching staff, much as was done at Rock Point, Rough Rock, and in the Canadian situation (see articles, this volume). While only one of the school's teachers was Hualapai when the program began in 1975, 50 percent of the Hualapai staff are now certified, and many others are working toward teaching degrees (Watahomigie & McCarty, 1994).

As the school truly became the *community's* school, grandparents came to us saying, "We want you to teach the culture. We don't tell our grandchildren about the culture any more." They passed on a great deal of their cultural knowledge to us. For instance, they asked us to teach Hualapai ethnobotany—the medicinal and other plant utilizations—so our children would know.

They told about this in Hualapai. "You know English," they said; "You went to school and know the scientific ways," so they asked us to write parallel texts using their knowledge of botany. Now, the elders participate in research on many topics with students, using archival and local materials. Students write up their research in Hualapai and English.

These are a few examples of our work in building native language literacy through bilingual/bicultural education. For this to continue in other communities—for us to perpetuate, rejuvenate and maintain our tribal languages and cultures—the support and much of the content must come from parents and grandparents. As has been said in each of the preceding articles in this volume, genuine two-language education requires local initiative and control, and the realization that local educators have the power to change the school curriculum.

At Peach Springs, this has led to a revaluing of education at all levels of the system. Children see their teachers and teacher aides learning new technologies and teaching strategies. When asked what they'll do when they grow up, students say, "We'll be in school, *like you*." We demonstrate that we value education. The impacts are evident in more positive educational statistics than those of a few years ago: Since the bilingual program began in 1975, only two students have dropped out from eighth grade, the highest grade at the school. In recent years, 100 percent of the students who graduated from Peach Springs' K-B program went on to graduate from high school. About 50 percent of our graduates have gone on to college or post-secondary education.

Peach Springs is not alone in these efforts. In recent years, indigenous people from throughout the United States came together to testify before the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, and then to draft resolutions to improve Indian education at the 1992 White House Conference on Indian Education (13.5. Department of Education, 1991; White House Conference on Indian Education, 1992)). The purpose of this conference was to provide local input to the President and U.S. lawmakers. Crawford (this volume) points

out that the administration failed to respond to the conference as legislatively mandated. Nevertheless, this was one time that local people—parents, grandparents and community members—met and said, "This is how we want federal education policy to be." Their work at this conference has led to more education initiatives at the local level generated by tribal leaders. We are heartened by more recent Executive Branch responses to indigenous concerns since the 1992 election.

Local control begins with this: the commitment of indigenous educators and community members. We cannot wait for new federal initiatives; we must seek them ourselves, along with the resources to implement them. Just as important, we must be willing to follow up in our own communities to help tailor such initiatives toward local needs and interests.

I believe we are going to fulfill our educational goals. The programs and practices described in this volume illustrate the challenges as well as the models for achieving those goals. This poem, written by the coordinator of the Hualapai Bilingual Program, reflects those challenges, and the commitment needed to effectively address them:

BA:J

*INDIANS*

haygu gwegawij

*whiteman's ways*

bay yibadjayyu

*we are going to learn*

gwe si:dk

*how to hear*

yibadjayyu

*we are going to learn*

gwe danyu:dk

*how to write*

yibadjayyu

*we are going to learn*

gwe yovk

*how to make things*

yibadjayyu

*we are going to learn*

du-awi:k

*some of us may become doctors*

haygu-githye:vjka

*some of us may become officials*

duwe:kj

*but indians we will remain.*

mu:lvka

haygu gwegawij  
bay yibadjayyu  
yu:yid  
ba:j yu:jk gwadvayyu.

—Philbert Watahomigie, Sr.

### References

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