

Schooling, resistance, and American Indian languages

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Abstract

Only 20 of the 175 extant indigenous languages in the USA are being transmitted to children. What can be done to turn this situation around? Some suggest that schools can rescue imperiled indigenous languages; others charge that reliance on schools only transfers responsibility for mother-tongue transmission from the necessary domain of the family to secondary or tertiary institutions. Here it is argued that while schools cannot "save" threatened indigenous languages, recent developments have positioned schools at the center of the arena in which the politics of language are negotiated. This has had profound impacts on local, tribal, and national initiatives in support of indigenous language rights. These issues are examined in light of the history that has shaped the present reality, and in the context of the Navajo community of Rough Rock, Arizona. Rough Rock illustrates more widespread processes in which schools have come to form a key social structural and organizational nexus for promoting indigenous languages and cultures. If these school-based resources are not used, the remaining negative forces at work will speed the rate of language loss. The implications of this situation for language planning are considered.

Introduction

Indigenous languages in the United States are under siege. As Krauss (1996; this issue) reports, of the 175 indigenous languages still extant in the USA, only 20 are being transmitted as child languages. The remainder are spoken by the parental or grandparental generations, and over a third are spoken only by the most elderly members of the community, often fewer than ten individuals.

The question is, what can be done to turn this situation around? Some suggest that schools may be used to rescue imperiled languages (see, e.g.,

Dick and McCarty 1997; Zepeda this issue). But school-based language renewal and maintenance programs have been criticized because they transfer responsibility for mother-tongue transmission from its natural and necessary domain — the home and family — to a secondary or tertiary institution (Krauss this issue; Fishman 1991).

In this article I argue that while school-based action alone will not “save” threatened indigenous languages, schools and their personnel must be prominent in efforts to maintain and revitalize those languages. To dismiss schools as insignificant underrates the destructive effects on indigenous languages of past schooling and of current educational practices that neglect those languages; ignores the singular social, economic, and political importance of schools in many American Indian communities; and tosses aside the enormous language-maintenance resources produced by school-based native-language programs. Those resources, both human and material, have been successfully applied to the reclamation of indigenous language rights — that is, to the creation of an institutional infrastructure capable of challenging linguistic assimilation.

Language rights implicate but have not in practice ensured language maintenance in indigenous US communities. This disjuncture between legal policy and social practice is at the heart of the debate over what schools can and cannot be expected to do. Here I attempt to sort out the relationship between indigenous language rights and language maintenance in the US and to examine the role of schools in both. I begin by placing these issues in the context of the power relations and related national policies that have shaped the present reality. I then focus on how these policies have played out in one American Indian community central to the issues at hand: the Navajo community of Rough Rock, Arizona. Rough Rock was the first American Indian community to achieve control of the school and to employ it in the service of the local language and culture. In the process, school leaders literally reshaped federal policies toward indigenous languages and education. Rough Rock also represents a community within the largest and most populous Indian reservation (the Navajo Nation stretches over three southwestern states and has a population of 250,000), and it exemplifies the situation for “class A” languages (Krauss this issue) — those with a substantial though fading number of child speakers. Finally, Rough Rock illustrates more widespread social processes in which schools have come to form the organizational nexus of a constituency for maintaining indigenous languages and language rights — issues to which I return in the conclusion of this paper.

I became involved with Rough Rock in the early 1980s, when I worked in the school’s Navajo Curriculum Center. I subsequently completed a

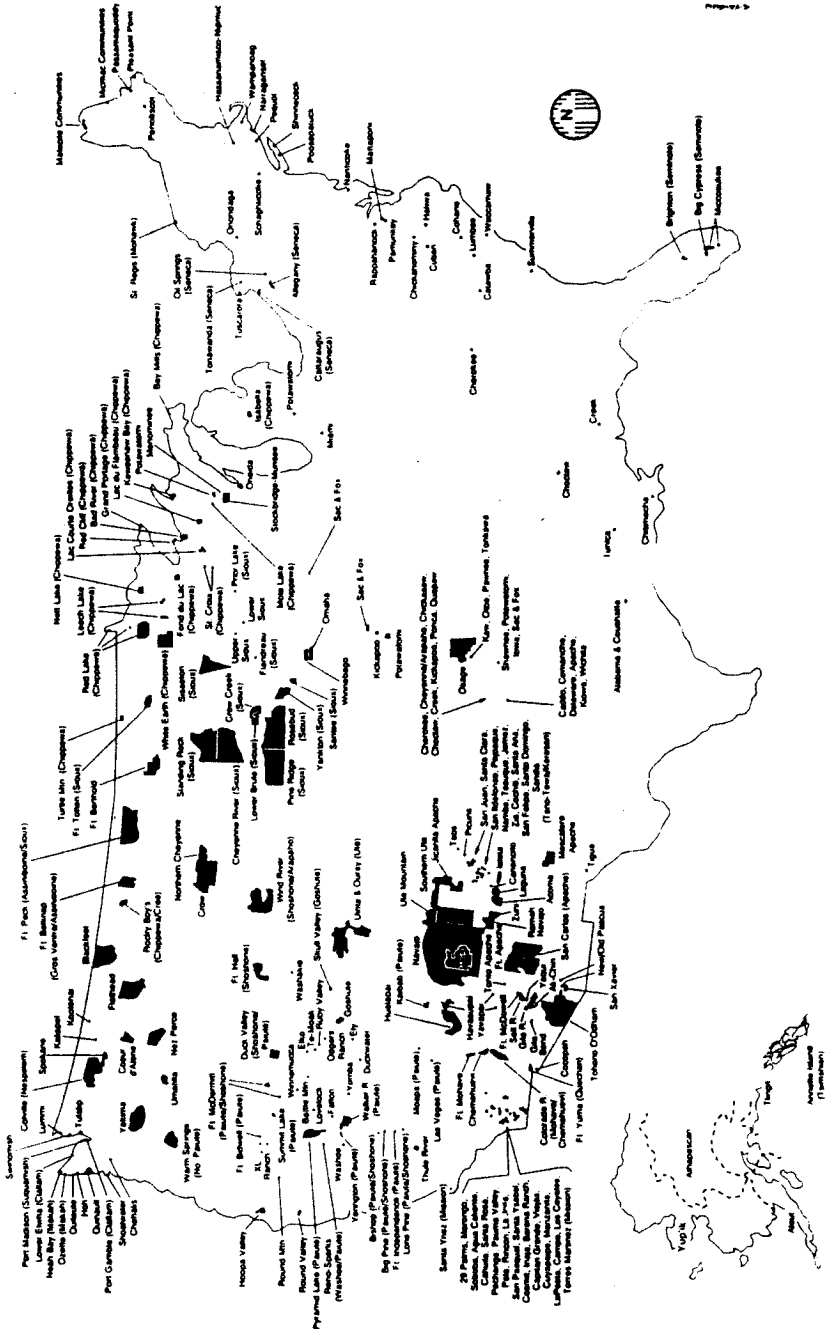
three-year ethnographic study of Rough Rock's bilingual/bicultural education program (McCarty 1984, 1989). Since 1987, I have participated with Galena Dick (Dick this issue) and other bilingual teachers at Rough Rock in action research designed to inform an evolving developmental and language immersion bilingual program. The analysis here grows out of this long-term ethnographic and collaborative work, and my involvement as a faculty member in a larger program, the American Indian Language Development Institute, discussed later in this article. I turn now to the national context of which Rough Rock is part.

Federal policies and indigenous language education

There are today over two million American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians in the United States, representing 510 federally recognized tribes (see Map 1). This diversity is compounded by inter- and intragroup differences in native-language fluencies and literacy histories, and by the fact that language education for indigenous students is carried out in federal, state, parochial, private, and Indian-controlled schools. The uniqueness of individual tribes and communities notwithstanding, all indigenous groups in the US share an unparalleled status as sovereign but dependent domestic nations — a status that distinguishes them in a real and permanent way from other US ethnolinguistic minorities. The US Constitution recognizes a special government-to-government relationship between tribes and the Congress that includes broad federal authority and trust responsibilities on the part of the US government. While this relationship constitutes the cornerstone of tribal sovereignty, it has also positioned tribes as the targets of federal policies intended to eradicate their languages and lifeways. Initially those policies were implemented militarily and through the forced relocation of tribes on reservations. Simultaneously, the US government supported missionary efforts to transform indigenous familial and community structures through religious conversion and schooling. By the late 1800s, however, the federal government had assumed primary responsibility for the cultural transformation of American Indian tribes, under an ideology explicit in the name of the authorizing legislation: The Civilization Act. Over much of the next century, schools became the battleground for “civilization” and the extermination of indigenous languages, cultures, and ethnic identities.

Education and language repression

Education, Ricento and Hornberger (1996: 414) observe, is an ideal tool for the reinforcement of state hegemony because the structures are already



Map 1. American Indian and Alaska Native land and communities in the contemporary United States

in place to disseminate policy in support of state interests. In the case of American Indians in the emerging United States, those structures took the form of off- and on-reservation boarding schools, many located at the forts that had served as military staging areas for government campaigns against the tribes only a few years before. Compulsory education at the boarding schools became the instrument of a federal policy guided by an ideology of racial superiority and planned cultural transformation (Spring 1996). Key to this was the extirpation of indigenous languages. "The objective," wrote Commissioner of Indian Affairs J.D. Atkins in 1887, was "to blot out the boundary lines which divide [tribes] into distinct nations, and fuse them into one homogenous mass. *Uniformity in language will do this — nothing else will*" (cited in Crawford 1992: 48, emphasis added).

These policies moderated in the 1930s under the liberal-minded administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier, whose reforms included establishing community day schools, recruiting indigenous teachers, and initiating some bilingual programs (Spolsky 1974; Medicine 1982). But the Collier-era gains atrophied under a subsequent federal policy to terminate the tribal-federal trust relationship which disenfranchised 109 tribes and 11,000 individuals and resulted in the loss of over a million (more) acres of Indian-held lands.

It was not until the mid-1960s that this situation began to change. In 1969, the US Senate released a sweeping condemnation of Indian education, citing "low levels of educational attainment, the general absence of Indians in the field of education, and the need for supplemental services" (Ryan 1982: 427). Along with the Civil Rights reforms of the 1960s, tribal activism, and the struggle for sovereignty and local control, these developments ushered in a new era of tribal self-determination. In 1972 the Indian Education Act was passed, repealing the termination policy and authorizing funds for indigenous teacher preparation, parent involvement in local schools, and the development of native language and culture teaching materials. This was followed in 1975 by the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act (Public Law 93-638), which enabled direct control by tribes and indigenous communities over federally funded education, health, and other social services. In concert with the 1968 Bilingual Education Act, this legislation established the legal and financial framework for new, school-based efforts to reassert indigenous linguistic and cultural rights. For centuries the sites of cultural and linguistic repression, schools emerged as potential sites of indigenous resistance. This was especially true where schools were under indigenous control.

The case of Rough Rock

Rough Rock can rightfully claim to be a primary catalyst for these reforms. Situated on a high plateau in the center of the Navajo Nation, this community of approximately 1,300 captured national attention in 1966 with the founding of the Rough Rock Demonstration School, the first school to have an all-Indian governing board and to teach in and through the native language. An outgrowth of federal War on Poverty programs, the demonstration project involved an unprecedented contract between the local community and the federal government that empowered community members to run their own school (for a full description of the school's founding, see Johnson 1968; Roessel 1977; and McCarty 1989). Fundamental to Rough Rock's demonstration, writes school cofounder Robert A. Roessel, Jr., was the belief "that Navajo people have the right and the ability to direct and provide leadership in the education of their children" (Roessel 1966: 1-2).

Rough Rock is named for the springs in a canyon at the northern base of sprawling, pine-studded Black Mesa, where a few families settled in the late 1800s following the Navajos' military defeat by the US cavalry and their subsequent incarceration at Fort Sumner, New Mexico. A trader built a store near Rough Rock Springs in the 1930s, and Quakers established a mission there in the 1950s. When the school began in 1966, Rough Rock was among the most geographically isolated and economically impoverished areas on the Navajo reservation. Paved roads had not yet penetrated this area, and, with annual per capita cash incomes of \$85.00, families subsisted as they had prior to their imprisonment at Fort Sumner, on sheep herding and small-scale agriculture. No one at the time had running water or electricity; one bilingual teacher recalls that only a few people had radios. Dispersed across the land, households were relatively isolated, though extended families were and are bound together in a close network of matrilineal kin. This account, by a long-time resident and grandmother, paints a picture of the community prior to the coming of the school:

When we were small children, the camps were far apart. There were no close neighbors. ... Women wove rugs to buy food, and they used the sheep for food. When spring came, everybody sheared their sheep and sold the wool to buy fabric and other things. In the fall, people sold their lambs. There was a lot of farming and we preserved the harvested food for the winter. ... This place where the school is now, there were some families living there. A lot of cactus grew there, and the fruits ripened like strawberries. ... Oh, this place used to look so beautiful!

Ringed by dormitories and modern employee housing, the K-8 (later, K-12) demonstration school added a tremendous new presence to this social and physical landscape. The school's mission was like no other: to forge a community around the school. Key to this were school-sponsored economic-development projects based on community-identified needs. These included an adult education program, a furniture factory staffed by community members, a program to train medicine men, and an adult arts and crafts enterprise to revive Navajo handicrafts and generate income for local artisans (Conklin 1967: 6). "The school was open to the community," a bilingual teacher remembers; "A lot of the people hired didn't have formal education, but they had jobs [at the school]. I think that broadened community interest in the school."

Classroom instruction emphasized initial literacy in Navajo and cultural identification and Navajo social-living classes. Along with conventional curricula, students studied weaving, silversmithing, and leather crafts. This instruction and the school's many community-development projects were carried out in Navajo. A journalist who visited the school shortly after it opened describes the school program this way:

No opportunities are missed at the school to help the children understand themselves as Indians. ... The library has a Navajo corner. Recordings of Navajo music and rituals are played during the school day. In the evening old men, the historians and medicine men of the tribe, come to the dormitories to tell Navajo ... legends. The staff is preparing biographies of successful Navajos to give the students something on which to pattern their own lives (Conklin 1967: 6).

As this account suggests, Rough Rock also established the first curriculum center dedicated to the production of bilingual literature on Navajo history, culture, and life. "We had all these [local] people who told stories," a Navajo teacher at the school says, "and we had people transcribing and people illustrating books that were published. That was one of the best highlights of the school." Robert Roessel states,

It was *all* a Navajo program. We brought the entire community into the school. Many projects were developed to do this — [a] greenhouse, ... poultry farm, a furniture factory. This was the Navajo emphasis program, and Navajos were involved in all aspects of it. This was what the school was all about (McCarty 1984: 101).

The school thus provided the basis for economic development at Rough Rock, becoming the largest single local employer. The school's emphasis on local control and Navajo language and culture facilitated this, both in giving community members an advantage over non-Navajo outsiders

in hiring, and in creating an atmosphere where the language of the workplace, the classroom, the office, the dormitories, and school support services was Navajo.

Rough Rock's innovations in the classroom and the community brought legislators, film crews, and other visitors by the hundreds to the school. As one example of the national attention directed toward the school, US Senator Edward Kennedy gave the first eighth-grade graduation address. To the credit of its leadership, Rough Rock capitalized on this public visibility to lead the movement for Indian self-determination. Following Congressional testimony by school leaders in 1967, Robert Kennedy, then chairman of the Senate Special Subcommittee on Indian education, declared that Rough Rock "has proven its point" and "should serve as a model for all Indian schools to ... emulate" (Senate Subcommittee on Indian Education 1969: 1057). The upshot, in Kennedy's words, was a "bold new statement" of federal policy crystallized in 1972 and 1975 with the passage, respectively, of the Indian Education Act and the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act. Ten years after Rough Rock's founding, a dozen other American Indian communities had signed contracts with the Bureau of Indian Affairs to operate their own schools. A major paradigm shift was under way; what was unthinkable a generation before had, in the words of one prominent Navajo educator, become "doable" (Pfeiffer 1993).

Yet as Rough Rock's leaders fought for these national-level reforms, they struggled to sustain their own school programs. The causes for this are detailed elsewhere (see, e.g., McCarty 1989; 1993a), but they rest on fundamental contradictions in the tribal-federal trust relationship and the self-determination policy itself. Because Indian community-controlled schools depend for their livelihood on federal funding, they are not, as Fishman (1991: 208) notes, entirely masters of their own fate. At Rough Rock, inconsistencies in funding caused the Navajo program to atrophy. Nonetheless, even during years when few funds for bilingual education were available, the school board kept its sights on the promise of local control. One of the most important aspects of this was "growing their own" bilingual faculty. "The school put us through [college]," a bilingual teacher remembers, "so we went for that." She continues, "That's when we learned to pick up some Navajo writing and Navajo reading ... that's where all the bilingual inspiration came from."

Rebuilding a bilingual/bicultural school

The Rough Rock elementary school is now entirely staffed by Navajo teachers. The creation of a cadre of local teachers trained in bilingual

and bicultural education, who are ideologically committed to and who benefit instrumentally from a bilingual/bicultural school program, has helped reinstate bilingual education at Rough Rock and reinforce the Navajo language in the community as well. Most of Rough Rock's bilingual teachers grew up in the community and are related by marriage, blood, and clan ties. They share the punitive experience of federal schooling. "What the boarding schools taught us," one teacher recently remarked, "was that our language is second best." These teachers' current work challenges that educational history. Galena Dick (this issue) puts it this way: "We are trying to reverse what we went through."

Here I provide a brief summary of the bilingual/bicultural program. (For further details, see McCarty 1993b, Lipka and McCarty 1994; Begay et al. 1995). To ensure that students receive sufficient high-quality exposure to Navajo, specific classrooms and teachers have been designated solely for Navajo language instruction. In these classrooms, content organized around locally relevant themes, as well as formal language instruction, are carried out in Navajo. To facilitate children's acquisition of Navajo literacy, the bilingual staff has augmented existing written materials with their own attractively produced children's books in Navajo. This has not only opened new possibilities for native-language literacy development but has also allowed children to see adult community members as published authors — *in Navajo*. In addition, the program has sponsored summer literature camps in which community elders provide instruction in Navajo on such topics as harvesting, traditional storytelling, livestock management, drama, and basket and rug weaving. Elders also serve as school counselors, conducting traditional teaching sessions in a *hooghan* (a traditional dwelling) adjacent to the school.

Before considering the wider impacts of this program and the school in general, we should note the program's effects on students. Evaluations over a six-year period document consistent improvements on both local and national achievement measures, including qualitative assessments of students' Navajo and English writing (McCarty 1993b; Dick and McCarty 1997). Further, these gains have been cumulative. Students in the program for a full five years (from kindergarten through grade 4) performed consistently better on local tests of Navajo and English oracy and literacy than did similar cohorts with little or no time in the program (McCarty 1995). These data reinforce other long-term studies of maintenance-bilingual programs: students appear to be developing Navajo competency "without cost" to their English ability (cf. Holm and Holm 1995).

Achievement data are frequently cited as indicators of program effectiveness. But they are important in a more salient way for the issues at

hand. It is precisely *because* of this program's effectiveness in promoting children's academic achievement, including their *English* development, that bilingual teachers and, through their influence, community members have come to revalue their own language — to resist and recast images of Navajo as “second best.” This is a necessary reassertion of indigenous language rights.

Summary

The story of Rough Rock is one of an extraordinary community and school. Rough Rock returned education to the community, saying, in effect, that every Navajo child should be able to identify positively with her or his mother tongue. Moreover, Rough Rock developed the local infrastructure in which this became possible and helped establish a national policy framework in which other indigenous communities could do the same. Rough Rock, in short, has been *about* language and education rights. It set an “invisible yardstick,” one prominent bilingual educator notes: “If the community is not really running the school, ... if you're not really using the language in the school, ... well then, you are somehow falling short of what it should be” (Wayne Holm, personal communication, 1996).

Within the community, the school became the preeminent economic resource and the social and political center for the negotiation of resources. That negotiation has occurred within the parameters of a policy that explicitly values Navajo language and culture; individuals are hired and fired and programs and curricula are adopted and rejected on the basis of how they relate to the school's mission as well as on the usual personal pursuit of economic and political goals. In short, life is played out in a context dominated by an institution that overtly values Navajo language and culture. It is the growing cadre of Navajo professionals committed to and benefiting from bilingual/bicultural education who (1) are primarily responsible for promoting these values, and (2) have the intellectual resources to realize them in the community and school.

Education, language maintenance, and language rights

The initial successes at Rough Rock, their publicity, and the availability of federal funds for similar programs have encouraged other Indian tribes and communities to also take charge of their local schools, introducing

curricula that incorporate local languages and cultures. In support of these efforts, university-based programs have grown up to prepare and certify American Indian and Alaska Native teachers. In particular, the American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI), founded in 1978 by Hualapai educator Lucille Watahomigie (Watahomigie this issue), has widened the network of indigenous educators working on behalf of their languages. The AILDI is an intensive summer training program in American Indian linguistics and bilingual/bicultural curriculum development housed at the University of Arizona, which annually enrolls over 100 indigenous and nonindigenous educators from throughout the US, Canada, and Latin America (for information on the history, development, and impacts of the Institute, see Hinton et al. 1982; McCarty et al. 1997). The AILDI's overarching goal is to provide knowledge, skills, and support to these educators so that they can strengthen the use of indigenous languages within their schools and communities. AILDI seeks to raise consciousness about the stakes at risk: "It really exposed us," one Rough Rock teacher said, "to where we are very aware about ... the other native languages and cultures. It really broadened our understanding that our language and culture are very important."

Through AILDI, previously unwritten languages have been committed to writing and standardized. A small but growing indigenous literature has been developed. Most important, AILDI has facilitated the credentialing of hundreds of indigenous educators, many of whom have assumed administrative and other leadership positions in their local schools. These local-level transformations have had tribal- and national-level ramifications: AILDI participants have been instrumental in creating tribal language policies proclaiming indigenous languages as official within their respective communities (see Zepeda 1990), and AILDI participants and faculty drafted the resolution that was signed into law as the 1990/1992 Native American Languages Act. The only federal legislation specifically addressing the endangered state of indigenous US languages, this Act declares the US government's policy to "preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages" (P.L. 101-477, Section 104[1]). Though meagerly funded, the Native American Languages Act has supported some of the boldest new initiatives in indigenous language revitalization, including language-immersion camps and master-apprentice programs in which elderly speakers team with younger tribal members over months and years in natural language-learning activities (Hinton 1993, this issue; Sims this issue).

AILDI has been adapted and replicated in language-specific, credit-bearing institutes throughout the US (see, e.g., Swisher and Ledlow 1986;

McCarty et al. 1997). The point is that all of this represents a widespread social and political process that has, first, built an institutional infrastructure for indigenous language and education rights, and, second, cultivated the human and material resources necessary for indigenous language maintenance. Those resources reside in a class of indigenous educators who are prepared and ideologically committed to promote their languages. The nexes for these transformations are local schools, which, like the school at Rough Rock, are centrally positioned in the political economy of indigenous communities.

Schools and bottom-up language planning

In their recent examination of language planning and policy, Ricento and Hornberger (1996) claim that educational and social change and institutional transformation begin with the grass roots. These researchers place the “classroom practitioner at the heart of language policy” (Ricento and Hornberger 1996: 417). In this article I have tried to show how this is especially true within the context of American Indian schools and communities. The unique social history of indigenous communities has turned many schools from sites of linguistic and cultural assimilation to points of resistance, placing them at the center of the arena in which the politics of language are worked out. This has created a new force for local or “bottom-up” language planning (Hornberger 1997), in which a great deal has already been accomplished.

Yet it would be naive and inaccurate to leave my analysis at this. Promising though many school-based efforts are, they cannot substitute for mother-tongue transmission in the family and home. Even in reservation-interior communities such as Rough Rock, a shift toward English is under way.

This situation exposes the gap between language rights and language maintenance. In situations of language shift as perilous as those in Native North American communities, language rights must be exercised, in concrete and everyday ways, beyond the walls of the school. Speakers must consciously resist the intrusion of English in their homes and communities in much the same way as certain classrooms and activities have been designated for Navajo-only instruction at Rough Rock Elementary School. At the same time, every opportunity must be seized to use and to elevate the native language in the public sphere as well.

And this is the dilemma: the dislocation of indigenous communities has been so extreme — the reforms described here so costly in terms of the wrongs they seek to redress — that the crisis of language loss cannot

be resolved if it is left to individuals or families working alone. But neither can extrafamilial institutions assume the language-implanting and language-expanding functions of parents, other caretakers, and communities. Some consensual, collective, and coordinating agency is needed to heighten awareness about the stakes at risk, and to organize individual, family, and community action on behalf of threatened indigenous languages.

Because schools are such dominating economic and therefore political institutions in many indigenous communities, the politics, language, and culture of the school are key resources available to spearhead such collective action. By their positions and their presence, bilingual education program personnel demonstrate the instrumental value of the native language. They can, as we have seen at Rough Rock (Dick this issue), Peach Springs (Watahomigie this issue), and elsewhere, be opinion leaders; they can act politically on behalf of the language. Schools and their personnel can not only assert the primacy of the native language in the public domain of the school, they can enlist the support of and assist community stakeholders in reinforcing the native language at home.

If these resources for language maintenance and the preservation of language rights are not used, the remaining, largely negative forces at work will only speed the rate of language loss. Moreover, schools and their participants will be complicit in that loss.

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