

STATE OF THE FIELD

The Role of Native Languages and Cultures in American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Student Achievement

By

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July 2011¹

¹ This is a revised version of a policy brief prepared for the Promising Practices and Partnerships in Indian Education (P3IE) Program Evaluation Group, under a contract from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Indian Education Programs to Kauffman & Associates Inc. of Spokane, WA, (McCarty, 2009a).

Role of the Native Language and Culture When a Primary Goal Is Revitalization

Nāwahīokalani‘ōpu‘u Laboratory School. Native Hawaiians face many of the same educational challenges as American Indians and Alaska Natives. The Hawaiian language is also severely endangered, being spoken as a first language primarily by those born before 1920. In this context, Nāwahīokalani‘ōpu‘u Laboratory School (called Nāwahī for short), is making a difference for this population of Native Americans (Native Hawaiians) while serving as a fully developed model of Indigenous-language immersion in the U.S (Hinton, 2001; Wilson & Kamanā, 2006).

Nāwahī is a Hawaiian-medium, early childhood through high school affiliation of programs featuring a college preparatory curriculum rooted in Native Hawaiian language and culture. Named for a major 19th century figure in Hawaiian-medium education, the school grows out of the ‘Aha Pūnana Leo (Hawaiian “language nest”) movement that began in the 1980s. In 1983, a small group of parents and language educators established the Pūnana Leo non-profit organization and then its preschools, which enable children to interact with fluent speakers entirely in Hawaiian. The goal is to cultivate children’s fluency and knowledge of Hawaiian language and culture much as occurred in the home in earlier generations (Wilson & Kamanā, 2001; see also Warner, 2001). The movement entered the public schools and added a grade a year, reaching intermediate school in 1994, when Nāwahī was founded.

The school teaches all subjects through Hawaiian language and values. According to William H. Wilson, cofounder of the Pūnana Leo and Nāwahī School, English instruction begins in fifth grade with a standard English language arts course; students enroll in such a course every semester through grade 12. Elementary students also study Japanese, and intermediate students study Latin – opportunities for contrastive linguistic analysis with Hawaiian and for building students’ multilingual-multicultural skills. Students also study Hawaiian grammar, focusing on forms and usages that might be influenced by English. “At Nāwahī,” Wilson states, “we seek to give our immersion students the same, and even higher, metalinguistic knowledge of Hawaiian, as that of students who study Hawaiian as a second language in a strong high school program” (personal communication, September 8, 2008).

Some 2,000 Native Hawaiian students now attend a coordinated set of schools, beginning with Pūnana Leo preschools and moving through Hawaiian immersion elementary and secondary programs. To continue teaching through Hawaiian at the tertiary level, the state of Hawai‘i has established the Ka Haka ‘Ula O Ke‘elikōlani College of Hawaiian Language at the University of Hawai‘i-Hilo, which offers an immersion teacher education certification program, two MAs, and a PhD in Hawaiian and Indigenous language and culture revitalization (<http://hilo.hawaii.edu/academics/hawn>); at the University of Hawai‘i-Mānoa, the Kawaihuelani Center for Hawaiian Language offers bachelor and master’s degrees in Hawaiian and a undergraduate certificate (<http://www.catalog.hawaii.edu/schoolscolleges/hawaiian/kawaihuelani.htm>). This educational system is further supported by widespread teaching of Hawaiian courses in English-medium high schools and colleges throughout the state (Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin, 2007; Wilson & Kawaiac, 2007).

Although it has emphasized Hawaiian language and culture revitalization over (English-based) academic achievement, Hawaiian-medium schooling has yielded impressive academic results.

Nāwahī students, 60 percent of whom come from reduced and free lunch backgrounds, typically live on or have close ties to Hawaiian Home Lands that require at least one parent to be of at least 50 percent Hawaiian ancestry. Children of these backgrounds tend to face the most severe academic disparities in Hawai'i schools, yet Nāwahī students not only surpass their non-immersion peers on English standardized tests, they outperform the state average for all ethnic groups on high school graduation, college attendance, and academic honors. The school has a 100 percent high school graduation rate and a college attendance rate of 80 percent. Two students recently were selected to attend a Harvard summer school program. School leaders Kauanoe Kamanā and William Wilson attribute these outcomes to an academically challenging curriculum that applies knowledge to daily life and is rooted in Hawaiian identity and culture. According to Wilson, the school has succeeded through its strong emphasis on achievement in Hawaiian language and culture “and holding Hawaiian language and culture high through the hard work so highly valued by Hawaiian elders.” He adds: “In today’s world, that hard work means applying oneself in academics to outperform those in mainstream schools to move the Hawaiian people forward” (William H. Wilson, personal communication, July 23, 2008; see also Warner, 2001; Wilson & Kamanā, 2001; Wong, 2011).

Tséhootsooi Diné Bi’ólta’. One of the better-documented American Indian immersion programs operates on the eastern border of the Navajo Nation, in the small town of Fort Defiance within the Window Rock Unified School District (WRUSD). When the program began in 1986, fewer than one in 20 of all kindergarten and first grade students were considered “reasonably fluent” speakers of Navajo; a third were judged to have passive knowledge of the language. At the same time, many Fort Defiance students were identified as “limited English proficient”; they possessed conversational proficiency in English but struggled with the decontextualized academic English required by standardized tests (Arviso & Holm, 2001).

In light of these circumstances, WRUSD opted for a voluntary Navajo immersion program similar to that developed for Hawaiian students and for the Māori in New Zealand. Starting with a kindergarten through fifth grade Navajo immersion track in an otherwise all-English public school, the program expanded into a full-immersion K-8 school, *Tséhootsooi Diné Bi’ólta’* (TDB, The Navajo School at the Meadow Between the Rocks or the Fort Defiance Navajo Immersion School), with plans under way for an early college program and expansion through grade 12. In the lower grades, all instruction, including initial literacy, occurs in Navajo. English is introduced in second grade and gradually increased until a 50-50 distribution is attained by grade 6.

TDB’s program is organized to afford maximum exposure to Navajo, incorporating tribal standards for Navajo language and culture and state content standards. According to the school’s early leaders, Florian Tom Johnson and Jennifer Legatz, TDB also emphasizes a “Diné [Navajo] language and culture rich environment . . . including lunch room, playground, hallways and the bus” (Johnson & Legatz, 2006, p. 30). Like Hawaiian immersion, a key program component is the involvement of parents and elders, who commit to spending time interacting with their children in Navajo after school.

Longitudinal data from TDB show that the benefits to Native-language revitalization have not come at the cost of children’s acquisition of English or their academic achievement. Navajo immersion students consistently outperform their peers in English-only classrooms on local and state assessments of English reading, writing, and mathematics while also developing strong Navajo oral

language and literacy skills. According to program cofounder Wayne Holm, there is another, less quantifiable but equally important benefit to this approach: “What the children and their parents taught us was that Navajo immersion gave students Navajo pride” (Holm, 2006, p. 33).

Puente de Hózhó Trilingual Public Magnet School. A final example in this section comes from a trilingual K-5 public magnet school in Flagstaff, Arizona. Called Puente de Hózhó (*Puente de* for the Spanish words “bridge of,” and *Hózhó* for the Navajo “beauty” or “harmony”), the school’s name means, literally, Bridge of Beauty. As school cofounder Michael Fillerup describes it, the name mirrors the school’s vision: “to create an educational environment where students of different language and cultural backgrounds could learn harmoniously together while pursuing the goals of academic excellence, bilingualism, and cultural enrichment” (2005, p. 14). In a school district in which 25 percent of students are American Indians and 20 percent are Latino, “local educators were searching for innovative ways to bridge the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the academic achievement of language-minority and language-majority children” Fillerup states (2005, p. 15).

To do this, the school offers two parallel bilingual programs: a conventional dual immersion model in which native Spanish-speaking and native English-speaking students are taught jointly for a half-day in each language, and one-way Navajo immersion in which English-dominant Navajo students are taught in Navajo. In the latter program, kindergartners receive 80 percent of their instruction in Navajo, with English instructional time gradually increased until a 50/50 balance is attained in grades 4 and 5. All state standards are taught in Navajo and English or Spanish and English.

Many promising practices are evident at this school, but three are especially noteworthy. First, the school explicitly rejects the remedial labels historically associated with bilingual and American Indian education in the U.S. Rather than “problems to be solved,” Fillerup notes, students are considered “an educational elite – the ones who are learning Navajo, that most difficult language” used by the famous Code Talkers that defied translation and speeded the Allied victory in World War II. Second, bilingual-bicultural-multicultural education is central, not auxiliary, to the curriculum: “it is a matter of heart and soul,” Fillerup points out, adding, “That is why indigenous language programs are not nice but essential” (2005, p. 18). Third, like Nāwahī and TDB, Puente de Hózhó has exceptionally high levels of parent involvement – a practice widely associated with enhanced student achievement but rarely ascribed to Native families.

Puente de Hózhó has consistently met state standards, with its students outperforming comparable peers in monolingual English programs by as much as 7 points in English language arts, 10 points in mathematics, and 21 points in English reading. Equally important, Fillerup states, are less quantifiable but equally consequential program effects: enhanced student motivation and the “smiles on the faces of parents, grandparents, and students as they communicate in the language of their ancestors” (2005, p. 16; see also Fillerup, 2008, 2011).

Culturally Based Education/Culturally Responsive Schooling

Premised on the theory that the most influential factor in students’ school performance is “how we teach and arrange social activity in schools” (Beaulieu, 2006, p. 52), culturally based education (CBE, also called culturally responsive schooling or CRS) incorporates many of the promising practices described for the cases above. In an exhaustive review of the CRS literature, Castagno and Brayboy (2008), citing the Assembly of Alaska Native Educators (1998, p. 2), state that CRS “assumes that a firm grounding in the heritage language and culture indigenous to a particular tribe is a fundamental