
NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGE IMMERSION

*INNOVATIVE NATIVE EDUCATION
FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES*

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Native American Language Immersion:

Innovative Native Education for Children & Families

i. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Native American¹ language immersion schools and projects are the focus of this study. The W. K. Kellogg Foundation supported this analysis, to describe and analyze this innovative Native Education for children and families. A people's initiative, Native American language immersion encompasses educational practices and social development that lie outside the mainstream language teaching, education and socialization methods of American children. Native American language immersion programs are characterized by Native ways of knowing, learning and indigenous knowledge. Native American organizers demonstrate a profound faith in the traditional Native grandparents' role and their methods in language development, teaching and learning. Curriculum content and context rely on the rich Native American knowledge bases and their eminent scholars --- tribal elders and tribal land, resources. Language immersions activists and educators share two characteristics in common: fluency in the tribal language and an unstoppable commitment and devotion to language preservation among children and youth.

Native language immersion schools have remarkable benefits: students show impressive educational achievement, participants demonstrate considerable language knowledge gains in relatively short periods of time, programs contribute significantly to family strength, and college students---adult learners are retained as a positive correlate with language and culture learning. Each of these potentials have importance for tribes, agencies and organizers (both Native and non-Native) who interact or hope to interact positively and significantly with Native Americans in areas of educational and community development. Creativity and unique qualities characterize the language immersion approaches, and are especially reflective of the tribes and their language.

ii. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Native American Language Immersion, Recent Development. Native American Language Immersion is a recent phenomenon in Indigenous tribal communities in the United States. Fifty Native groups are currently engaged in language immersion; planning and operation. These Native language teaching and learning efforts include year-round schools, summer and seasonal camps, and weekend retreats and seminars. The schools, camps and programs rely exclusively on the tribal language as the teaching and learning medium. The Navajo community school of Rough Rock, Arizona, has successfully provided

¹Author Janine Pease-Pretty On Top uses the term Native American and American Indian interchangeably, to refer to the Indigenous people of North America (The United States and Canada). The term Indigenous is used to refer to the Native populations of countries around the world. The Maori of New Zealand and the Native Hawaiians of the State of Hawaii are examples of Indigenous peoples.

their children language immersion for over twenty years. Native family groups and elders have organized Native American language immersion schools among the Blackfeet, Ojibway and the Assiniboine/Sioux people. Summer and seasonal camps and training seminars have built language understanding for participants of all ages for Northern Cheyenne, Ojibway and Crow children. Language immersion pre-schools currently serve several hundred children from the Ojibway, Cree, Assiniboine and Ute nations. Tribal language commissions and cultural authorities have mandated cultural and language learning, that includes leadership training, language teaching and certification. Master/apprenticeship relationships have developed for culture and language learning among the Salish Kootenai of Montana Northern Cheyenne of Montana, and the Three Affiliated Tribes of North Dakota, the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara. For indigenous people, these Native American language immersion activities hold great promise in the areas of education, community, family, and youth development.

Compelling Reasons for Language Immersion. Native language educators and activists have taken up the difficult and urgent work of Native language preservation with devotion and commitment. **First**, there are those who recognize the serious rate of language loss and have made a lifetime commitment to tribal language restoration, for the vitality of the tribal nation and its future. **Second**, Native American children and youth have exhibited stagnant educational achievement (among the poorest achievement of all American ethnic groups). Native language immersion has demonstrated remarkable promise in participants' educational achievement. A **third** source of motivation to Native language immersion is the greater cultural and language preservation or revitalization effort that strengthens and rebuilds the Native community. **Fourth**, culture and language teaching and participation positively correlate with Native student retention rates. **Fifth**, Native leaders foresee a world in urgent need of Native perspectives or world-view in areas including child-rearing, natural resources management and family and community development. **Finally**, there are a few activists who are motivated to this work by its political potential to allay the centuries old history of injury and subjugation of Native people. This report analyzes these factors from literature and data. Special emphasis has been given to interviews with language immersion practitioners.

Key Factors Motivating Native language immersion

1. *Severe losses in Native language fluency: 155 of the indigenous languages are still being spoken in the United States, in North America and 135 of these are spoken only by elders; many of the 20 remaining languages, while still viable, will soon be fighting to survive.*²

²Crawford, James. "Endangered Native American Languages: What Is to Be Done, and Why?" National Clearinghouse on Bilingual Education: Washington, D.C. 1994. Pp 1.

2. *Language immersion positively impacts educational achievement.*³ *Nationally, students who took foreign languages (for four years) scored statistically higher on standardized tests including the SAT.*⁴

3. *The greater preservation and revitalization of culture and language is connected to the greater Native community: language loss happens to the dispossessed and disempowered, people who most need their cultural resources to literally survive.*⁵

4. *Native culture and language teaching and learning positively affects tribal college student retention: five tribal colleges studied student retention rates with various factors measured for retention impact, and culture and language teaching and experiences positively correlate with student retention toward graduation.*⁶

5. *Native leaders identify language immersion as a strategic counter to the devastating effects of American colonization of Native people: learning the tribal language is a part of the "tough struggle to maintain the integrity of our way of life."*⁷

Native Language for Communication. Native language immersion is a practice or methodology of language learning that concentrates on communication, exclusively in the Native language. Total Physical Response, TPR, is the primary methodology for the Native language immersion classrooms, camps and projects. **Virtually all of the Native language immersion activities are carried out in the context of the tribal or indigenous culture.** Many immersion schools are built and furnished after "gramma's home" and pattern their methods from Native grandparents ways of knowing and learning. **The teachers, educators and activists have diverse backgrounds; by profession/vocation, they are teachers, bus drivers, retired BIA administrators, Head Start teachers, ranchers and more.** What these educators and activists have in common is a driving, even compelling commitment to language learning and a well-spring of enthusiasm for their students' and participants' potential for speaking....

³McCarty, Teresa L. "Language, Literacy and the Image of the Child in American Indian Classrooms." Language Arts 70. 1993. Pp. 187.

⁴Marcos, Kathleen. Parent Brochure. Why, How, and When Should My Child Learn a Second Language. ERIC Educational Resources Center: Rockville, MD. May 2001.

⁵Op cit. Crawford. 1994. Pp. 7.

⁶Heavyrunner, Iris. Family Based Education Model: A Report of the Native American Higher Education Initiative of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. W. K. Kellogg Foundation: Battlecreek, MI. March 2001. Pp. 5.

⁷Mistaken Chief, Duane, Sr. "Using Blackfoot Language to Rediscover Who We Are." Tribal College Journal of American Indian Higher Education. Vol. XI, No. 3. 1999. Pp 26-28.

just speaking ...communicating in the tribal language. The students are toddlers and children, middle and high school students, young adults, parents of young children, adults and elders. Where immersion is happening, all ages of Native people are pursuing the goal of speaking their Native language.

Tribal Colleges and Universities. The tribal colleges and universities of this country play a strong, leading role in Native language immersion. These tribal colleges engage their entire community, through college student development, community based projects, school-aged educational services and early childhood education opportunities. The language immersion approaches are especially experiential, and have placed the tribal elders, scholars, at the very center of these activities. Through the leadership of the tribal colleges, and in some cases, tribal schools and Indian owned non-profit organizations, the cultural experts and Native language speakers provide a Native learning experience. Tribal college students hold a strategic place among the generations of Native people. They are parents of young children, children of elder parents and grandparents, and persons of influence in their communities. Language and culture are at the heart of the TCU's mission, and now, the language immersion activities are moving this mission forward.⁸

Language Immersion, A Challenge. The Native language immersion activities have become a significant part of Native life in over **fifty locations across the nation**. For these communities, educators and activists have built language learning experiences that are unprecedented in their positive impact on education, individual and family strengthening, intergenerational partnerships and tribal health and wellbeing. As a relatively new educational phenomenon, it is understood and supported directly by many tribes and their governments, the tribal colleges and universities, and Native-based non-profit organizations. While the Native language immersion is young and part of a new genre of culture, language and educational activity in Indian country, it is not yet a movement. The educators and activists have developed custom designed strategies to deliver Native language immersion. The work of language immersion is demanding and long-term, therefore not "trendy." It's just too hard to do. Activists collaborate locally and occasionally between projects. The commitment required of organizers is immense and time-consuming. The implementation demands creativity, expertise, courage and fortitude. These conditions preclude a "get on the band wagon" potential. Native language immersion is difficult work; work fit only for those few whose devotion to the tribal language (for whatever reason) is unstoppable. This work requires knowing the tribal language and perseverance beyond all measure.

Funding Issues. The **support** for language immersion is problematic. Language immersion costs money, money that most tribal groups can hardly spare in the face of demanding issues in education, health, housing and natural resources management. Federal funds support language preservation through multiple executive branch based initiatives. Most visible is the Department of Health and Human Services, Native language preservation

⁸ Stein, Wayne. "Developmental Action for an Indigenous College." Benham and Stein (Ed.). The Renaissance of American Indian Higher Education: Capturing the Dream. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: London. 2003. Pp. 29.

projects. Bilingual education projects in Native languages have only incidentally supported language immersion due to the 'language transition' focus. Private sector support has assisted the development of language immersion and some language immersion schools accept only private funding to avoid the regulations of public funds. Public school funding is highly regulated and therefore nearly inaccessible. The exception, the Diné and Ojibway people have managed to establish language immersion schools with public school funds. Language immersion funding is a formidable challenge, and a factor that keeps many tribes from this area of education.

Successful Indigenous Models. Native American language immersion can benefit from the models of the language resurgence among **Native Hawaiians and the Maori of New Zealand.** During the past two decades, both Native Hawaiian and Maori communities have created and implemented language immersion pre-schools, schools and colleges. Indigenous language immersion has made astounding records of educational achievement among the children and youth who participate in language immersion education. The Hawaiian and Maori populations have languished far behind the mainstream educational achievement measures of attendance and completion, until the language immersion schools. Language immersion clearly has a role in educational development for Indigenous people.

iii. PRINCIPLES OF NATIVE LANGUAGE IMMERSION

Native language immersion principles are apparent. The principles are derived from **interviews with Native American language educators/activists and observations of language immersion schools and camps.** Literature has been reviewed, authored by practitioners, Indian education scholars, and linguists. These are particularly instructive in the delineation of Native language immersion principles. The practitioner interviews have detailed the methods, strategies, planning and community support. Teacher qualities and teacher training, parental and elder involvement are delineated. All of these are critical to a Native language immersion school, camp or project that results in effective language learning and education of Native children and families. **Generally, language immersion programs "allow the child or participant to spend part or all of the day learning in the second language. Partial immersion programs operate on the same principle, but only a portion of the curriculum is presented in the second language."**⁹ Here are the principles of Native American language immersion

- **Tribal nations' language authorities or commissions officially recognize the urgent and critical nature of their tribal language,** its preservation/revitalization, and its relationship to their culture and social wellbeing of the tribe. These tribes have formulated language policies that make

⁹Op cit. Marcos. 2001. Pp.2.

2. Native Language Immersion Experience and Educational Achievement

Native language immersion schools and classrooms have existed in several locations for over a decade. **Solid data from the Navajo, Blackfeet and Assiniboine immersion schools experience indicates that the language immersion students experience greater success** in school, measured by consistent improvement on local and national measures of achievement.²⁴ Critical educational achievement data exists from the Native Hawaiian language immersion schools in the State of Hawaii. **Twenty-two Hawaiian public schools have "Ke Kula Kaiapuni" immersion streams and/or entire schools. In these schools, 1700 students are enrolled, and outperform the average for Native Hawaiian children in Hawaii public schools.**²⁵ **Maori Language Immersion Schools** demonstrate astounding educational achievement. Maori student pass rates out of grade 13 (high school equivalent) have hovered between 5% and 15% for decades. Now, with Maori language immersion schools, Maori students' pass rates have soared to 75%.²⁶

The language learning carries with it significant forms of **satisfaction, to the participants** themselves, their families and the elders in the Native communities whose opportunities to communicate in the Native language are expanding.²⁷ **Youthful language speakers participate in tribal ceremonies and public events, thereby contributing vitality to their communities.** **Family participation and intergenerational connections** are built for a lifetime and create positive networks that build Native communities.²⁸ Native American communities now have operational and meaningful language immersion programs and classrooms, even schools. With varied sources of motivation, language immersion leaders recognize the potentials and benefits of the language immersion experience.

3. Benefits of Native Language Knowledge to Native Children

The knowledge of a Native language by Native children, youth and adults has multiple and important benefits. On an individual basis, Native students develop stronger identities, knowledge of their tribal cultures and their individual role in and deep appreciation for that

²⁴Op cit. McCarty. 1996. Pp. 5-6.

²⁵Aha Punana Leo. "Our Language: *e ola ka olelo* Hawaii - the Hawaiian language shall live." Web site. www.ahapunana.org/HTML/OL.htm. Pp. 6-7.

²⁶Pease-Pretty On Top, Janine. "Bringing Thunder." Tribal College Journal of American Indian Higher Education. Vol 14, No.1, Fall 2002. Pp. 13.

²⁷Op cit. Littlebear. 2001. Pp. 2.

²⁸Op cit. Kipp. 2000. Pp. 14.

culture.²⁹ **Language immersion pre-school children have developed intense language acquisition, a lifetime benefit in communication.**³⁰ For families, the tribal language knowledge holds much of what tribal members need to know about them, for it **reveals and teaches tribal philosophies.**³¹ For the tribal nations, the knowledge of the tribal language is crucial to the combination of factors that **build nations**, "land, lineage, language, cultures, ... a bond born out of respect, the bond links to ancestors as well as to future generations."³² Darrell Kipp of the Piegan Institute says "language relearning is a **journey back home**," and details the new and precious bond created between the Piegan Institute pre-school children and Blackfeet elders. The Native language clearly embodies a **way of seeing, or constructing reality**, from a perspective that evolved over many generations. Knowledge of the Native language gives tribal members a unique tool for analyzing and synthesizing the world, and incorporating the knowledge and values of the tribal nation into the world at large.³³

4. Rates of Native Language Loss

Languages across the world are in crisis. Half of the world's languages are "moribund, spoken only by adults who no longer teach them to the next generation."³⁴ The **language loss among North American indigenous people is "especially acute,"** where an estimated 155 languages are still spoken, 210 if you add in the Alaskan Native languages. Of these 135 are moribund; and the U.S. Census of 1990 indicated that one-third of these have fewer than 100 speakers.³⁵

Clearly, the Native American **language usage is declining rapidly** in social gatherings, ceremonies, cultural observances, and in the home. Parents are not teaching their children the Native language. "The inability of American Indians and Alaska Natives to speak their language caused many to lose understanding of who they were and what their place was in

²⁹Peacock, Thomas D. and Day, Donald R. "Teaching American Indian and Alaska Native Languages in the Schools: What Has Been Learned." ERIC Digest of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools: Charleston, WV. December 1999. Pp. 3.

³⁰Op cit. Kipp. Encouragement, Guidance, Insights and Lessons for Native Language Activists Developing Their Own Language Programs. 2000. Pp. 28.

³¹Op cit. Mistaken Chief. 1999. Pp. 27.

³²Silva, Kalena. "Revitalizing Culture and Language: Returning to the Land." Indigenous Educational Models for Contemporary Practice: In Our Mother's Voice. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: London. 2000. Pp. 73.

³³Op cit. Crawford. 1994. Pp. 6-7.

³⁴Ibid. Pp. 1.

³⁵Ibid. Pp. 1.