

The Importance of Language and Culture in American Indian Education

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Something is wrong in American Indian education in the United States. Despite spending millions upon millions of dollars under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and subsequent federal legislation, American Indian students continue to have below average test scores and graduation rates (Maxwell, 2013).

Conservative critics like Naomi Schaefer Riley in her 2016 book, *The New Trail of Tears: How Washington is Destroying American Indians*, point to government welfare policies as leading to family disintegration and a culture of dependency. Similar conservative criticism that led to the termination policy of the 1950s when some Indian reservations were terminated and the residents “set free” by the U.S. Congress only for many to sink further into poverty.

Critics like Riley tend to ignore the long ethnocentric history of colonizing education (see, e.g., Reyhner & Eder, 2017) that denigrated American Indian languages and cultures and sought to replace them with English and a Euro-American culture. For example, in her 1999 autobiography Dr. Lori Arviso Alvord, the first Navajo woman surgeon, wrote how her father and grandmother were punished for speaking Navajo in school and were told by white educators that to be successful, they had to forget their language and culture and adopt American ways. She concluded, “two or three generations of our tribe

had been taught to feel shame about our culture, and parents had often not taught their children traditional Navajo beliefs—the very thing that would have shown them how to live, the very thing that could keep them strong” (Alvord & Van Pelt 1999, 88). Alvord’s conclusion is supported by Hallett, Chandler and LaLone’s 2007 study of 152 First Nations bands in British Columbia. Their study found that “those bands in which a majority of members reported a conversational knowledge of an Aboriginal language also experienced low to absent youth suicide rates. By contrast, those bands in which less than half of the members reported conversational knowledge suicide rates were six times greater” (p. 396). Joy Harjo (Muscogee Creek) declares, “colonization teaches us to hate ourselves. We are told that we are nothing until we adopt the ways of the colonizer, till we become the colonizer” (as quoted in Mankiller 2004, p. 62).

For both immigrants and American Indians there is a downside to assimilation into dominant cultures. The National

Research Council reported in 1998 that the longer immigrant youth are exposed to American culture the poorer their overall physical and psychological health becomes. They are more likely they were to engage in risky behaviors such as substance abuse, unprotected sex, and delinquency (Hernandez & Charney, 1998). A Navajo elder noted at the beginning of the twenty-first century:

T.V. has ruined us. A long time ago, they used to say, don’t do anything negative or say anything negative in front of children. It doesn’t take that long for a child to catch onto things like this. Therefore, a mother and a father shouldn’t use harsh words in front of the children... In these movies they shoot each other... Movies are being watched every day, but there is nothing good in it. (as quoted in McCauley, 2001, p. 242)

Interviewing Hopi elders, Hopi scholar Dr. Sheilah Nicholas (2010, 2013) found that they view the recent decline in youth speaking Hopi to be associated with their “unHopi” behavior leading to gang activity and disrespect of elders whereas the Hopi language is associated with traditional values of hard work, reciprocity and humility. American Indian and other youth need to develop a strong sense of identity that focuses on respect for oneself and others to make them less susceptible to peer group pressure and Madison Avenue advertising.

One of the most successful efforts at language and cultural revitalization is the establishment of language immersion schools (see e.g., Reyhner, 2010; Reyhner & Johnson, 2015). Studies show that language immersion schools can have far reaching effects on their students. In a case study of a new Hawaiian immersion teacher, a parent,

asserted that part of the success of the school was that the teachers, staff and teachers show much “aloha.” Aloha is a Hawaiian word that is profound and complex, but above all it is wholeness of mind, body and soul and connectedness to the universe. In the school, aloha was shown by hugs by teachers, staff and students, opinion is sought and valued from all, and the realization that the school’s success is dependent on family, the unit working together. The children learned to respect one another, respect the space of others, and to work quietly and diligently on class activities. Teachers and staff are role models... (Kawai’ae’a, Kawagley & Masaoka, 2017, p. 92)

Luning and Yamauchi (2010, p. 53) in a study of Hawaiian families with children enrolled in a Hawaiian language immersion school noted how,

The Kaiapuni [Hawaiian language] curriculum was designed to incorporate the Hawaiian culture. Families reported that they valued the program’s emphasis on Hawaiian culture as much as its focus on the language. Several of the families placed a higher value on their children’s cultural education than on their academic achievement.

Supporters of Indigenous language immersion schools tend to see the “goal of Western education is to gain knowledge and skills in preparation for the work force, not to create good human beings who live a balanced life” (White, 2015, p. 167). Guadalupe Valdés (1996) reports a similar perspective in Mexican American immigrant families who think their children’s behavior is more important than their school grades, with respect for others central to the desired ideal. While not denying the importance of their children’s academic progress, their

primary concern is the behavior of their children. Considering that the United States has more of its population in prison than any other country in the world, it is hard to fault these parents’ priorities. In regard to academics, immersion schools advantage students even on English language tests (McCarty, 2013; Johnson & Legatz, 2006; Wilson, Kamanā & Rawlins, 2006).

Language and cultural revitalization efforts across Indian country are working to not just revitalize tribal languages; they are working to revitalize and heal Indian communities by restoring traditional cultural values. It is one-size-fits-all, assimilationist English-only educational efforts, not government welfare policies as Riley (2016) and other conservatives contend, that produce the family disintegration today faced by many Indigenous and other people.

Note: Parts of this article are adapted from my contribution to the 2nd edition of *American Indian Education: A History* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2017) and my 2017 article *Affirming Identity: The Role of Language and Culture in American Indian Education in Cogent Education* available at: <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/AIE/Affirming%20Identity.pdf>

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