

# Sustaining Indigenous Languages in Our Modern World

*Jon Reyhner, Northern Arizona University*

Northern Arizona University hosted the 20<sup>th</sup> annual Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium (SILS) on June 2-4, 2013. One hundred fifty educators and language activists from the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Bangladesh gathered in Flagstaff, Arizona to share ideas for improving the lives and education of Indigenous children through culture-based education and Indigenous language immersion programs.

Joseph Martin and W. Sakiestewa Gilbert, who have been long involved in working to improve American Indian education, co-chaired the symposium, which sought to:

- Bring together American Indian and other Indigenous language educators and activists to share ideas and experiences on how to teach and revitalize effectively American Indian and other Indigenous languages in homes, communities and schools.
- Provide a forum for exchange of scholarly research on maintaining, revitalizing and teaching American Indian and other Indigenous languages.
- Disseminate through the Internet and monographs recent research and thinking on best practices to promote, preserve, and protect American Indian and other Indigenous languages in the spirit of the 1990 Native American Languages Act in the United States and the United Nations 2007 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Keynote speakers included Keiki Kawai'ae'a who spoke on "Preparing Culturally Sensitive and Knowledgeable Teachers for Indigenous Language Immersion and Other Schools" and Mary Hermes who spoke on "Researching Indigenous Language Revitalization." Dr. Kawai'ae'a directs the Ka Haka 'Ula o Ke elikolani College of Hawaiian Language at the University of Hawai'i Hilo campus. She is one of the pioneering families of the Hawaiian immersion education movement and maui ola education P-20, which has been instrumental in the development of the Na Honua Maui Ola Hawaiian guidelines and cultural pathways and the Moenaha culture-based curriculum design and instructional method. She emphasized in her speech how Hawaiian immersion schools are part of a "movement to heal our nation" and are part of a larger extended family.

Dr. Hermes has worked on language and culture based curriculum for the past 15 years. She teaches in the Culture & Teaching program at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities and is Principle Investigator on the "Ojibwe Movies" grant project and the National Science Foundation's Endangered Language Project, "Documenting Ojibwe Conversation." In her spare time she directs the non-profit Grassroots Indigenous Multimedia, which provides pedagogy and technology for language revitalization. She is one of the co-founders of the Waadokodaading Ojibwe



immersion school in Hayward, Wisconsin and is a second language learner and speaker of Ojibwemowin. She declared that we need to change our narrative from language extinction to a discussion of how Indigenous languages are living through parents and grandparents making the choice to speak them in their homes with their children and grandchildren and sending them to immersion schools.

The 48 breakout presentations at the symposium covered a variety of language and education topics, many which focused on teaching through culture rather than just teaching culture so that traditional values, such as respect, humility, generosity, and reciprocity, are embedded in both classroom curriculum and instructional practices. Language revitalization efforts help fight the negative effects of our modern television and film culture on both Indigenous and immigrant children. The National Research Council (Hernandez & Charney, 1998) found that immigrant youth tend to be healthier than their counterparts from nonimmigrant families. It found that the longer immigrant youth are in the U.S., the poorer their overall physical and psychological health. Furthermore, the more Americanized they become the more likely they are to engage in risky behaviors such as substance abuse, unprotected sex, and delinquency. Another study by Hallett, Chandler and LaLonde (2007) examining data from 150 First Nations communities in British Columbia found that those with less conversational knowledge of their Native language had suicide rates six times greater than those with more knowledge.

Kana'iaupuni, Ledward & Jensen (2010) in a study of 600 teachers, 2,969 students, and 2,264 parents at 62 participating schools, including conventional public schools, charter schools, schools with Hawaiian immersion programs, and several private school campuses found,

First, culture-based education (CBE) positively impacts student socioemotional well-being (e.g., identity, self-efficacy, social relationships). Second, enhanced socioemotional well-being, in turn, positively affects math and reading test scores. Third, CBE is positively related to math and reading test scores for all students, and particularly for those with low socio-emotional development, most notably when supported by overall CBE use within the school. (Kana'iaupuni et al., 2010, p. 1)

Romero Little and McCarty (2006) reviewing language immersion programs found:

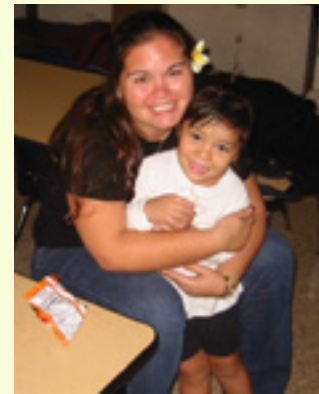
- Time spent learning an American Indian language is *not* time lost in developing English.
- It takes approximately 5 to 7 years to acquire age-appropriate proficiency in a American Indian language when consistent and comprehensive opportunities in it are provided.
- American Indian language immersion contributes to positive child-adult interaction and helps restore and strengthen Native languages, familial relationships, and cultural traditions within the community.
- Literacy skills first developed in an American Indian language can be effectively transferred to English.
- Language and culture revitalization efforts are fundamental to tribal sovereignty and local education choice.

For more information about the Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposiums, visit the Teaching Indigenous Languages web site at <http://NAU.EDU/TIL> ★



# Ka Ho‘oulu Kanaka: Raising a Child, Raising a Man, Raising a Family, Raising a Nation

- Education and family are not separate.
- Education is about “raising” the child, the individual as a member of the larger family/community.
- Well-being of the whole child.
- Education is a lifelong process, from the womb to the tomb.



Kawai‘ae‘a & Iokepa-Guerrero

## References

- Hallett, D., Chandler, M.J., & Lalonde, C.E. (2007). Aboriginal language knowledge and youth suicide. *Cognitive Development*, 22, 392-399.
- Hernandez, D.J., & Charney, E. (eds.) (1998). *From generation to generation: The health and well-being of children in immigrant families* (Committee on the Health and Adjustment of Immigrant Children and Families, Board on Children, Youth, and Families, National Research Council and Institute of Medicine). Washington, DC: National Academy.
- Kana‘iaupuni, S., Ledward, B., & Jensen, U. (2010). Culture-based education and its relationship to student outcomes. Honolulu: Kamehameha Schools, Research & Evaluation. Retrieved June 6, 2013 at [http://www.ksbe.edu/spl/PDFS/CBE\\_relationship\\_to\\_student\\_outcomes.pdf](http://www.ksbe.edu/spl/PDFS/CBE_relationship_to_student_outcomes.pdf)

- Reyhner, J. (2010). Indigenous language immersion schools for strong Indigenous identities. *Heritage Language Journal*, 7(2), 138-152. Retrieved June 6, 2013 at <http://www.international.ucla.edu/media/files/reyhner-hlj.pdf>
- Romero-Little, M.E., & T.L. McCarty. 2006. *Language planning challenges and prospects in Native American communities and schools*. Tempe, AZ: Education Policy Studies Laboratory, Division of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, College of Education, Arizona State University. Retrieved June 7, 2013 at <http://epsl.asu.edu/epru/documents/EPSSL-0602-105-LPRU.pdf>

Dr. Keiki Kawai‘ae‘a in her SILS keynote speech described the educational philosophy underling the University of Hawai‘i College of Hawaiian Language’s teacher preparation program.