

Journeying Home: Creating Our Future From Our Past

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On March 8-10, 2004, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Office of Indian Education Programs (OIEP) held its third Language and Culture Preservation Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico. OIEP Director Ed Parisian welcomed the large gathering of Bureau educators to this meeting, emphasizing the BIA's goal that "students will demonstrate knowledge of language and culture to improve academic achievement." He went on to say that "we know from research and experience that individuals who are strongly rooted in their past—who know where they come from—are often best equipped to face the future."

Parisian's words are in sharp contrast to the ideas of the English-only advocates and the anti-multiculturalists such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr's *Disuniting of America* (1991) where he wrote:

"Bilingualism shuts doors. It nourishes self-ghettoization, and ghettoization nourishes racial antagonism.... Using some language other than English dooms people to second-class citizenship in American society.... Monolingual education opens doors to the larger world.... Institutionalized bilingualism remains another source of the fragmentation of America, another threat to the dream of 'one people.'" (pp. 108-109)

The Conference's opening keynote speaker, former actor and Menominee Tribal Chairperson Apesanahkwat, noted that "we have tasted cherry pie and we like it" and that some assimilation cannot be stopped. However, he also said: "Let's give our people back their voice." He noted that "language involves our relationship with life" and that "we need to journey home to who we

are." That home includes listening to traditional stories that leave it to the listener to draw conclusions. The assimilation policies that Schlesinger advocates continue the dominant theme of the past four hundred years (Reyhner & Eder, 2004). In effect, Apesanahkwat said the mission school nuns told him to "throw stones at the elders," but "we don't have to hurt anyone to be successful in this new world of no buffalo." In contrast to Schlesinger's intolerance, Apesanahkwat noted that everything and everybody is related, and that "non-Indians are relatives as well."

I could only attend a few of the many concurrent sessions. One of the sessions I chose to attend was on the Acoma Language Retention Program. The session leader Christine Sims noted that "it is easy to shut off language learning" by correcting students' efforts right away and over and over. Pronunciation should not be made the main thing right away, and students should not get drill, drill, drill on their mistakes. She suggested using nursery rhymes that used to be taught in the home. Sims felt that it was important to have two speakers in the classroom so students could observe two fluent speakers in a conversation. She concluded that language learners need to be "bathed" in a rich language environment and that students need at the very least one hour a day of language class for any chance of success at getting students to be fluent speakers.

Another session I attended was led by Namaka Rawlins, Director of the Hawaiian Aha Punana Leo program. She was making her third appearance at the OIEP language conferences. Rawlins noted that in

Hawaii they are working now to get a Hawaiian Ph.D. degree program approved. While they started with preschool language nests, they have moved on to elementary, secondary, and now university Hawaiian language medium (immersion) classes. The Hawaiian language medium school movement has been parent driven. Rather than ghettoization, she noted that "our traditions are relevant for all students' education," and some non-Hawaiians are in the immersion programs.

Students in the Hawaiian immersion classes are doing equal to or better than English students, but it takes about two years to fully transition to an all-English program if they drop out of the Hawaiian program. The success of the program is tied to the commitment of parents and teachers. For teachers, "this is a way of life; it's not just a job."

It was not until 1986 that the 1896 law against using the Hawaiian language in schools was repealed. There are now 22 immersion or Hawaiian medium schools with about 2,000 children enrolled. Only four schools can teach algebra and biology in Hawaiian because of the lack of qualified teachers. As Hawaiian medium instruction matures, teachers are moving from translating curriculum from English to Hawaiianizing it.

The second day keynote speaker, Jack Jackson, spent nineteen and a half years in the Arizona state legislature. He now works at Diné College where they are "in a search to create our future based on our past." Jackson emphasized the importance of teaching Navajos the Navajo philosophy of "Ké," being a balanced person. This involves examining "beauty before

me” (where am I going?), “beauty behind me” (where did I come from?), beauty underneath” (my relation to mother earth), beauty above, and beauty around; with beauty I speak with the outcome of becoming a “balanced person.”

Another speaker emphasized how today, with assimilation, kids go from the baby bottle to the coke bottle to the beer bottle, but “if we bring resentment, we learn how to hate.” This reminded me of a quote Metis historian David T. McNab recalls hearing at the Toronto International Pow-wow in 2000: “The Elders tell us that it is alright to feel angry about stuff like this [e.g., the Sand Creek Massacre] and it is good. However, in the end you must go down to the river, offer a gift of tobacco to the Creator and simply let the anger go.... Otherwise the anger will poison your spirit....” Living with anger either bottled up or expressed is unhealthy, and a process of healing

needs to take place. This does not mean that as part of the educational process students do not need to remember the past and learn how to fight for their rights and learn their responsibilities.

The final session I attended, before having to leave early to teach my classes at Northern Arizona University, was sponsored by the Indigenous Languages Institute (ILI) headquartered in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which is in the process of publishing a series of *Awakening Our Languages* “How-to” booklets. They also sponsor an annual youth language fair. The ILI has been doing a field research project where they have visited indigenous language programs across the United States and Canada. Some preliminary results are published in *Indigenous Languages Across the Community* (Linn, et al., 2002) and *Nurturing Native Languages* (see Peters, 2003), which are available on-line at jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/TIL.html. **NN**

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available positions, as counted by an impartial agent that is independent of the NABE Executive Board and the NABE staff.

ARTICLE VII. DELEGATE ASSEMBLY

The Association shall have a Delegate Assembly composed of the presidents of affiliate organizations. The functions of the Delegate Assembly are: (1) to serve as an advisory body to the Executive Board; (2) to provide liaison between affiliates and the Executive Board; and (3) to make recommendations regarding amendments to the Association's bylaws.

ARTICLE VIII. AMENDMENTS

Section A. Procedure. Proposed amendments to these bylaws shall be transmitted in writing to the NABE President at least sixty (60) days prior to any meeting at which they could be considered. Upon receipt, the President shall transmit forthwith to each Executive Board member a copy of the proposed amendment, but in no case less than thirty (30) days prior to the date on which the amendment is to be considered. Should the President or his/her designee fail or refuse to transmit a proposed amendment, any three Board members may call up an amendment sent to the President in accordance with the provisions of this subsection.

Section B. Majority Vote Required. Approval of any proposed amendment to these bylaws may be accomplished by a simple majority of the membership of the Executive Board.