

Language Activist Panel Summary¹

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The language activist panel that presented on May 6, 1995, had a number of concerns. Rosemary Christensen (Ojibwe), member of the National Advisory Council on Indian Education (NACIE) and chair of its Native Tribal Languages Subcommittee, noted that we need to change the ways Indian conferences are done and emphasized the importance of communicating in traditional ways such as the Talking Circle where everyone gets to speak as a discussion works its way around the circle. She stated that if we want to keep our languages and cultures we need to demonstrate the old ways and if native languages are important we need to use them. "If our language is to live our children must speak it." She suggested simultaneous translation at conferences to help demonstrate that some ideas cannot be voiced in English.

She thought elders need to be more involved in our lives and need to come to conferences such as this. She emphasized commitment and stated that she started a language program by cashing out her teacher retirement. She also emphasized the importance of fighting "English-Only" laws. Tribal codes were not enough; tribal languages must be spoken in the marketplace. Tribal councils should use their language in their meetings, and it should be used in the media.

Lorena Zah-Bahe (Navajo), president of the National Indian Education Association, gave her personal perspective on activism and shared information from the American Indian/Alaska Native Summit held on March 20-22, 1995. She was the lone minority teacher when in 1974 she started teaching fifth grade at Winslow, Arizona, on the border of the Navajo Nation. As a teacher she started a Native American Parent Action Committee that met at her house. The committee drafted proposals for Indian programs that got funded under the Indian Education Act and the Bilingual Education Act. She also became involved in teaching General Equivalency Diploma (GED) classes at the Indian Center. Later she served as an elected local government (chapter) official in the Navajo tribal government. Her mother is monolingual Navajo and is proud to be a native speaker of her language. She is teaching Navajo to her grandchildren. She noted how children who speak Navajo act differently when their grandmother is in the house. These actions reflect Indian family values that are passed on through the family's first language.

The American Indian/Alaska Native Summit represented the first time that the National Advisory Council on Indian Education, the National Congress of

¹The language activist panel consisted of Lorena Zah-Bahe, President of the National Indian Education Association; Rosemary Christensen, Member of the National Advisory Council on Indian Education; Marjorie Thomas, Associate Superintendent Chinle Public Schools; Radford Quamahongnewa, Hopi Traditional Leader; Kauano'e Kamana and William Wilson, Punana Leo Schools, Hawaii; and Ofelia Zepeda, University of Arizona.

American Indians, and the National Indian Education Association had come together. These organizations were frustrated with results of the White House Summit on Indian Education that was held in January, 1992, and wanted to have a conference that would follow an Indian agenda rather than the federal government's. The conference focused on native languages and cultures and concentrated on four areas:

1. recommendations to tribes
2. a tribal perspective on Goals 2000
3. sovereignty and the trust relationship between tribes and the federal government
4. the need for a comprehensive policy statement on Indian education

She saw education as part of self determination, and she described a study session that was held in Boulder, Colorado, to work on a policy statement for the federal government that affirmed commitment to preserve tribal nationhood, including cultures and language, and to provide a challenging school curriculum.

President Zah-Bahe said that while the federal Goals 2000 plan has many admirable components, it is a state-oriented plan that ignores both Indian nations and the government-to-government relationship between these nations and the federal government.

In the past tribal leaders have put tribal economics in front of education. When Zah-Bahe spoke to the tribal leaders from 180 tribes represented by the National Congress of American Indians at their 1994 national conference, she called on them to put education on tribal agendas. She wants tribes exempted from state educational mandates, and she wants tribal languages to be "first," not "foreign," languages in schools. She called for more parent involvement, teacher training with tribal language fluency requirements, scope and sequence for Native education, technology, certification requirements waived for elders, immersion language programs, and community-centered and family-based education. The new federal educational super-centers need Indian support departments and there needs to be one major Indian education support center for the country. She decried the fact that 47 Indian education programs were being eliminated despite the efforts of Senators Kennedy and Dashale.

While the federal Goals 2000 program is flawed in terms of its emphasis on states to the exclusion of tribes, it has positive points Indian people need to look at. The program has a strong local "leave it up to the community, leave it up to the parents" focus. In the past Indians have seen the Bureau of Indian Affairs as their parents, bringing them up in boarding schools. Indian people need to let go of the federal government and assert local control. Indian people also need to become more active in lobbying and dealing with Congress and get more involved in national elections.

In conclusion, she asked where was the next generation of native language and culture advocates. They need to come out of their classrooms and become involved in the political and educational fight for tribal sovereignty. They need to be involved in organizations such as the National Association for Bilingual Education that support native languages and cultures.

Kauanoë Kamana (Hawaiian) called on everyone to be actively involved. She noted that the Punana Leo schools were all in Hawaiian because of the tremendous pressures and ubiquitous presence of English. It was important to have boundaries within which the Hawaiian language can serve as the sole language of use. In the case of their school it was the fence around their school that indicates to both students and adults that only Hawaiian is to be used in certain environments. Such boundaries provide an excuse to parents who can say "They said I have to speak Hawaiian in the school." Almost all students in their Hawaiian immersion school speak English before they start school, and those who do not learn it fast enough from television and the general community. She told how they had to change the law in Hawai'i in order to have their all-Hawaiian schools. In fact, both English and Hawaiian are official languages of the state.

Ms. Kamana noted how reservations also have boundaries and that these boundaries could be used as language boundaries. She said that we cannot just depend on elders. She noted the importance of getting young people involved in language preservation who have the stamina and courage to persevere in restoring native languages. Their native language teachers are also students, and they need to encourage each other in their efforts to preserve the Hawaiian language. It is important to put aside worries about whether the students will be handicapped in science, algebra, and other such academic subjects and to teach those in the indigenous language too.

There is a difference between knowing the language and speaking it. At their school all English-only speakers are required to have Hawaiian-language translators. If a Navajo or someone else visits, they translate for the students directly from Navajo to Hawaiian by having the speaker explain ahead of time what they plan to say. It is important to make the Hawaiian language the proper language to use for all situations primarily involving Native Hawaiian people. Relatives need to be encouraged to speak Hawaiian in the home. Bill Wilson noted how the Native American Languages Act can be used to force Bureau of Indian Affairs schools to teach native languages. If a school uses any federal money, it can use non-certified teachers to teach native languages.

Radford Quamahongnewa (Hopi) noted that his interest in language is for the preservation of his culture, The Hopi Way. The language is needed to pass on traditional culture. The Hopi culture is still strong, and his Hopi village is sovereign, self-supporting, and self-sufficient. The Hopi have no treaty with the federal government. His village does not support the Hopi Tribal Council and Court System. The place to preserve the language is at home and work and in cultural and religious activities. The role of the school is secondary.

The Hopi elders went to Washington, D.C., and came home saying that Hopi must learn English to protect their land. Mr. Quamahongnewa is suspi-

scious of federal funding as he sees it as a way to get Hopi land. There is a problem in teaching Hopi in schools because the different villages have different dialects and there is no consensus among villages on which dialect to teach at the high school that serves all the villages. Television and other modern technology is getting in the way of teaching Hopi in the home. The "Indian way of life is Indian education, cultural ways, how to take care of yourself, spirituality, and self-governance." The traditional village council should take care of village government, including criminal and civil matters. The Hopi villages need to be recognized as sovereign nations, and the local people, not the federal government, should set their goals. They "need to become owners of their goals" and finance the achievement of those goals themselves. "All the native people are trying to do is to fight for their survival."

Ofelia Zepeda (Tohono O'odham) stated that "tribal people need to take back control and implement what they want themselves." She felt Arizona tribes were better off than those in many other states as they had suffered neither allotment nor termination. One problem was the lack of interest of their own population in language. "Tribal members were quite ignorant of the status of their language." She described how she had lobbied national organizations such as the Modern Language Association and the American Anthropological Association for support of native languages and been gratified by the support of both the leadership and rank and file of those organizations.

Marjorie Thomas (Navajo) noted how "it is really great to speak our own language." Navajo jokes lose their flavor in translation. To teach high school Navajo she would write a joke on the board and then go over the sounds and read and translate the joke. "Our language is powerful, it is good, and we can have a lot of fun with it." She noted how adults get interested in the language and use the Navajo language page from the tribal newspaper, the *Navajo Times*. Both white and Navajo students get involved. On the community level they labeled some food with their Navajo names for Basha's supermarket and offered to write labels for offices. Teaching culture involved teaching about plants, stars, and games, such as string games. She tries "to keep our culture alive by making it interesting for kids."

There was only a brief time for comments and questions. Gloria Emerson noted how some Christians are antagonistic to Indian languages and cultures while Marie Reyhner responded that not all Christian churches take that attitude and Wycliffe missionaries are involved in creating written versions of tribal languages. Another member of the audience noted that some youth with no beliefs in traditional culture are also hostile to Christianity, and that one "must have a belief in a higher power."