

Why I Became an Advocate for Indigenous Language Revitalization

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I got involved in Indigenous language education, like a lot of things in life, by chance. I was looking for a teaching job in 1971, and all I could find at the time was one teaching sixth grade math in the middle of the Navajo Nation in Chinle. I was a history major, but Chinle was desperate for math teachers. I had taken all the math courses to be an engineer before I failed two engineering courses and change my major and those were enough for the principal to hire me.

Looking back, I can see that because I had no preparation in Indian education that I perpetuated there a certain amount of educational malpractice, but I did attempt to learn something about the uniqueness of the Navajo junior high students I suddenly found myself teaching. Lucky for me the first tribal college, Navajo Community College (now Diné College), had recently opened up 15 miles down the road from Chinle in Many Farms High School (this was before their Tsaile campus was built). The first semester I took a Navajo language class, as most of my students spoke Navajo as well as English, and the second semester I took Navajo history and culture. In that second class I got more than I bargained for. I had read some books about the Navajo, good books written by non-Navajos, and as is the custom in my culture, I felt I was now knowledgeable about the Navajo. However, in the Navajo history and culture class was a Navajo teacher from Rough Rock Demonstration School, the first Indian controlled school in the United States since the closing of the Indian Territory (now the state of Oklahoma) schools at the turn of the century. As is the custom of my culture, I readily spoke up in class with my newfound expertise, but this Navajo teacher kept correcting my book knowledge from her lifetime experiences with Navajo culture. We got married that summer, and she has been correcting me ever since.

As a new teacher at Chinle I was concerned about the low academic achievement of my students, but I enjoyed the good behavior in the classroom that their traditional Navajo upbringing had taught them. I had taught for a short time previous to coming to Chinle and had all kinds of problems with student discipline. I could not get “Anglo” students, as the Navajos termed non-Indians, to be quiet and listen to me. My problems with the Navajo students was just the opposite, I could not get them to speak up. However, outside of class my students were very talkative in Navajo. That difference helped me to start thinking about the appropriateness of bilingual education, and I along with a small group of teachers actually proposed to the Chinle School Board that the school implement bilingual education.

When we got married, my wife got a job teaching kindergarten at Chinle, and some of her students did not speak English. However, when she used Navajo with the students, her school administrator wrote her up for violating Arizona State law, which at the time mandated English as the language of instruction in the first three grades—a similar law is still in effect in Arizona today (Heineke 2017). My wife was not actually trying to teach the students Navajo as they already knew how to speak it. She was just trying to explain to her students what the English words she was teaching them meant.

I don't want to write an autobiography here, so I will skip over my further experiences as first a reservation teacher and then a reservation school administrator to 1982 when I became a principal and Title VII bilingual program director at Heart Butte Elementary School on the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana. Title VII refers to the Bilingual Education Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1968

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but essentially repealed in 2001 by the No Child Left Behind Act. At Heart Butte and in a similar position on the Havasupai Indian Reservation in Arizona, I was disappointed in the meager success of the bilingual programs that I inherited. Furthermore, I found that Indian students who no longer spoke their tribal language did no better academically, if not worse, in school than students who still spoke their Indigenous language.

In 1986 I entered higher education as a coordinator of a Title VII funded Indian bilingual teacher training program at what is now Montana State University-Billings. In my interview for that job, I was asked what I would use as a textbook in one of the introductory Indian education classes. I was stumped—never a good position to be in at an interview—and said there wasn't really anything available that was up to date. I got the job anyway and set out to help remedy the textbook situation by compiling and editing a book entitled *Teaching the Indian Child: A Bilingual/Multicultural Approach* (Reyhner 1986; 1988) that included a chapter on Indian bilingual education during my first year in Billings. It certainly was not the perfect book, but it was a start.

In 1994 I was invited to attend and help facilitate the first Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium at Northern Arizona University (NAU), organized by Gina Cantoni and Dick Heiser. The following year I was hired to teach at NAU, which allowed my wife to be close to her family and allowed me to become involved in making the Indigenous Languages Symposiums the annual event that led up to the Lethbridge Symposium in 2018. I chronicled some of the history of the Symposiums in a contribution to the 2011 monograph entitled *Indigenous Languages Across the Generations: Strengthening Families and Communities* (Romero-Little, Ortiz, and McCarty 2011).

Over the years I have more and more come to realize how closely language and culture are markers of identity that inform who we are as human beings (Reyhner 2017). The importance of language can be seen in a 2007 study of 150 First Nations Indigenous villages in British Columbia, Canada, that found that villages with greater Indigenous language loss had a six times higher suicide rate than those villages that had managed—against the forces of assimilationist, English-only schooling—to hang onto their Native languages and thus their Native cultures more (Hallett, Chandler, and Lalonde 2007). University of Arizona and Hopi professor Dr. Sheilah Nicholas (2010; 2014; this volume) examined how Hopi children are speaking more English and less Hopi. She found that Hopi elders linked this to “un-Hopi” behavior, such as “substance abuse, gang membership, and domestic violence” and a decline in the tribe’s traditional Hopi values, including hard work and humility (Nicholas 2014, 74). Overall, assimilationist education has left many Indigenous people behind worldwide, less educated than their non-Indigenous peers, and more likely to live in poverty.

Efforts to suppress American Indian and First Nation languages in North America date back to colonial times when Indigenous people were seen as “savages.” In late nineteenth century the United States government started funding boarding schools for American Indian children. These schools took the children away from their families and provided limited English-only academic programs that placed no value on their tribal languages and cultures. This effort to assimilate American Indians continued with little interruption well into the twentieth century. In contrast, the Cherokee and some other tribes in Indian Territory (the present-day state of Oklahoma) successful ran their own schools until 1907 when, despite their protests, their tribal governments were dissolved by the federal government and their schools taken over by the new state of Oklahoma. In Canada, the government funded at a very inadequate level various church groups that in often oppressive schools promoted an assimilationist agenda similar to that of the U.S. schools (Reyhner and Eder 2017; Reyhner 2018).

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In the United States and Canada, the reaction to the racism of Nazi Germany and an increased concern for human rights after World War II, especially in the newly formed United Nations, brought a questioning of the treatment of ethnic and racial minorities. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s that helped end the existence of legally segregated schools and other facilities for African Americans in the United States, also brought attention to the treatment of American Indians, who as a group tended to live in poverty, largely because of the loss of their land base, and had below average educational success, even though most Native children today learn English as their first language at home.

In the 1980s, Native Hawaiians became increasingly concerned about the fact that almost no children were speaking the Hawaiian language. Seeing what the Māori of New Zealand in a similar situation had done in establishing language nests to teach their young children the Māori language, a few parents set up their own Hawaiian language nests and then lobbied their state government to establish Hawaiian language immersion schools with the result that today one can even write their doctoral dissertation in the Hawaiian language at the University of Hawaii. Some tribal governments in the United States started passing language policies to encourage parents and schools to teach their youth tribal languages. Partly in reaction to efforts to make English the official language of the United States, Indigenous groups lobbied the U.S. Congress to pass the Native American Languages Act that in 1990 made it U.S. policy to preserve and protect American Indian languages (Reyhner and Johnson 2015; Reyhner 2010; Reyhner and Singh 2010).

The importance of supporting Indigenous languages and cultures can be seen in the work of Terry Huffman (2008; 2010; 2013; 2018), whose research and interviews with American Indian college students, teachers, and school administrators bring out the importance of having a strong sense of tribal identity for Indigenous students to be successful both academically and in life. His conclusions are in line with the findings of Donna Deyhle (1995; 2009; 2013) and other researchers (see e.g. Whitbeck et al. 2001).

After much lobbying by Indigenous people worldwide, in 2007 the United Nations passed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which includes the right to maintain and promote their Indigenous languages in and out of schools. The United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia were the only countries to vote against this declaration; however, since then they have reversed their position. Today, tribal and First Nation self-government has been restored—to a degree. This move towards self-government is producing growing movement to establish language immersion schools where children are taught in their tribal languages. For example, at Window Rock, the capital of the Navajo Nation, some 200 Navajo students are immersed in their Navajo language for their first years of schooling, and in Flagstaff, Arizona, just outside the Navajo Nation boundary, there is a small Navajo immersion public school where students are successfully being taught to read and write the Navajo language as well as being taught mathematics, science, and other subjects through the medium of Navajo (Reyhner and Johnson 2015; Reyhner 2010). Parents and others comment on the positive healthy learning environment found in immersion schools that along with language teach and demonstrate traditional Indigenous values, such as respect, humility and generosity (Luning and Yamauchi 2010; Manuelito 2015; White 2015; Kawai‘ae‘a, Kawagley, and Masaoka 2017).

At the beginning of this essay, I remarked on the differences I saw between non-Indian students and Navajo students who still spoke their Native language and exhibited traditional values, including respect for elders. Currently in the United States, there is a great emphasis on students' standardized test scores with great pressure put on teachers to raise their students' scores or face losing their

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jobs. However, a study by J. Kirabo Jackson (2018; 2019) of all 9th grade public school students in North Carolina found that:

(t)est scores are often the best available measure of student progress, but they do not capture every skill needed in adulthood. A growing research base shows that non-cognitive (or socio-emotional) skills like adaptability, motivation, and self-restraint are key determinants of adult outcomes. Therefore, if we want to identify good teachers, we ought to look at how teachers affect their students' development across a range of skills—both academic and non-cognitive. (Jackson 2019, 1)

Jackson's study found that improvements in students' behavior as measured by absences, suspensions, grade point averages, and whether students enrolled in 10th grade on time were a much stronger predictor of future success than improvements in students' standardized test scores, and that "the impact of teachers on behavior is about 10 times more predictive of whether they increase students' high-school completion than their impacts on test scores. This basic pattern holds true for all of the longer run outcomes examined, including plans to attend college" (Jackson 2019, 1-2). In addition, the test scores of the teachers were not related to the impact they had on student behavior.

Interestingly, Jackson's emphasis on the importance of student behavior can be found in Indigenous language immersion schools. For example, Luning and Yamauchi (2010) in a study of Hawaiian families with children enrolled in a Hawaiian language immersion school noted how parents valued the emphasis on Hawaiian culture and Hawaiian traditional values. As one student's mother noted, "Academics—that's what people send their kids to school for, academics. And that's what we started off thinking ... academics in Hawaiian. And that was great, but we've also seen more than that" (Luning and Yamauchi 2010, 53).

The families believed that the emphasis on traditional Hawaiian culture promoted more well-rounded children, and they felt that the immersion curriculum created positive images of being Hawaiian and could affect the community in positive ways. The Hawaiian traditional values their children acquired were felt by the families to be a major benefit of the school. Both the parents and students appreciated how the program modeled Hawaiian values. A parent noted how students learned "the values that [are] taught through the language." Another parent declared "I just think that some of the things that they learn in that school, they'll never learn in an English school. The culture, the respect I think it's gonna have some kind of impact with them as they grow up." When asked what it meant to be Hawaiian, many students referred to Hawaiian values. One 12-year-old student responded: "It means to have respect, love for the land, the ocean, and the people." Another student, when asked the same question, replied: "I guess it's ... mostly family life, ... you have to respect your elders, and you have to take care of your land, your 'āina, and you know, just basic facts that if any, if everybody would follow, would help this place, would help Hawaii" (quotes from Luning and Yamauchi 2010, 54-55).

A lack of respect for teachers in the United States by both adults and students can lead to demoralization and aggravates a currently high teacher turnover. This lack of respect includes top down mandates by lawmakers that de-skill teachers and can be unrelated to the needs of students. As Doris Santoro writes, "[f]or teachers experiencing demoralization, the moral dilemma is not what they should do to be a good teacher, but that they cannot do what they believe a good teacher should do in the face of policies, mandates, or institutional norms" (2018, 43).

Supporters of Indigenous language immersion schools can see the "goal of Western education is to gain knowledge and skills in preparation for the work

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force, not to create good human beings who live a balanced life” (White 2015, 167). Stanford University professor Guadalupe Valdés (1996) reports a similar perspective in Mexican-American immigrant families, many with Indigenous ancestry, who find 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 a greater percentage of its population in prison than any other country in the world (Kann 2018), including prisoners who have high test scores, it is hard to fault parents who prioritize their children’s behavior over their standardized test scores.

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