

Opportunity versus identity

Indigenous peoples learning new languages

Jon Reyhner looks at the negative effects of assimilationist educational efforts that sought to 'civilise' Indigenous peoples through English-only schooling.



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When Indigenous peoples in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States learn a new language, all too often it means learning their ancestors’ language. The long history of assimilationist English-only education in these countries often led to the loss of Indigenous languages and cultures. Colonising powers viewed education as a road upon which Indigenous peoples could travel from savagery to civilization, analogous to the evolutionary development of modern man.

While assimilationist education was seen as a way for Indigenous people to progress, there has been a dark side to these efforts. University of Arizona professor and Hopi scholar Dr Sheilah Nicholas recently examined how younger Hopi Indians 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. The disastrous results of Indigenous language and culture loss can be seen in a 2007 study by Darcy Hallett and his colleagues of 150 First

Nations communities in British Columbia, Canada. They found that the suicide rate among those that had suffered greater native language loss was six times that of those who had suffered a lesser degree of language loss.

Indigenous families want their children to become educated. Gay J. McDougall, the United Nations Independent Expert on Minority Issues, traveled across the globe, finding that disadvantaged, often Indigenous, minorities “most deeply felt concern... [was] that their children are not getting a quality education... [They saw] educating their children as the only way out of their poverty; their underdog status, their isolation”. However, too often Indigenous minorities are told by educators that they need to give up their Indigenous language in order to be educationally successful. This ‘English-only’ approach devalues Indigenous languages and cultures and has a long history of failure for many Indigenous people.

Language and culture loss

Schools, while teaching English and other national languages, also frequently teach a curriculum in history books and elsewhere that rationalizes the seizure of Indigenous lands and labels Indigenous resistance as massacres of settlers. They carry on the idea found in the United States’ Declaration of

Independence that explains how King George III “excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.” Thus the Declaration, along with many school textbooks today, ignores or downplays the many massacres of Indian men, women, and children by settler militias and how the government in London sought to provide protection for Indians. Recent books like Gary Anderson’s *Ethnic Cleansing* and the Indian and Brendan Lindsay’s *Murder State* document some of the many atrocities committed against Indigenous peoples in the United States.

When the College Board’s US History Advanced Placement (AP) Course guidelines tried to provide more balance to the teaching of American history, they faced conservative opposition. For example, the 2014 AP US History Framework Standard declared that “By supplying American Indian allies with deadlier weapons and alcohol, and by rewarding Indian military actions, Europeans helped increase the intensity and destructiveness of American Indian warfare”. However, this was revised in 2015 to, “The introduction of guns, other weapons, and alcohol stimulated

cultural and demographic changes in some Native American societies”. Too often the history of colonization is presented as ‘Manifest Destiny’, the belief that God meant for white European colonizers to push aside and take over the lands of Indigenous peoples all over the world.

Indigenous children often face assimilationist, English-only schooling that portrays their ancestors as brutal savages. In the past, they were also frequently punished if they spoke their native language or practiced their native religion, the goal being to erase Indigenous cultures. Indigenous peoples are still presented with a choice between giving up their native languages and cultures or remaining ignorant savages. This false dichotomy between remaining Indigenous and becoming educated is found in the title of anthropologist Karen Stocker’s “I Won’t Stay Indian, I’ll Keep Studying”: Race, Place, and Discrimination in a Costa Rican High School. This either/or mentality can lead either to the rejection of one’s heritage and sense of identity and belonging, or the rejection of schooling and the access it provides to expanding one’s knowledge of the world and its opportunities. The hope of liberal reformers was that Indigenous peoples could lose their unique identity and melt into the dominant culture. However, the trauma of cultural change was all too often accompanied by social disintegration.

Many Indigenous peoples today, even if they have lost their Indigenous language, are still not as successful academically and economically as non-Indigenous peoples. In the United States, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act of 2001 provided over a billion

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Native Americans have yet to regain control of their children’s education, so young Native people continue to attend schools where they learn only English.

dollars in an attempt to close the gap in test scores that separates White students from American Indian, African American, and Hispanic American students. However, test scores collected over the last decade and a half show that these efforts have had limited success. The act largely ignored the role of culture and language in education. All education is culture-based; the question is whose culture is it based on? There is a history of English-only and Manifest Destiny education in lands that were colonised by England, and schools are ‘places for becoming white,’ a biological impossibility for people of color.

Language revitalisation

The National Geographic Society’s website on disappearing languages noted a few years ago that, on average, one language dies every two weeks. At this rate, more than half of the world’s 7,000 languages may have disappeared by 2100, with a negative effect on our “wealth of knowledge about history, culture, the natural environment, and the human brain”. The Māori of New Zealand, Aborigines in Australia, Native Hawaiians, Inuits in Alaska, and various First Nations and American Indian tribes in the Americas are making efforts

to prevent that disappearance, using preschool language nests and native language immersion/ Indigenous medium schools where their children can learn their Indigenous languages.

Immersion schools try to insulate young people from the power of English and other ‘world languages’ that saturate the environment beyond the school boundaries, especially on television and in movies. Dr Elizabeth McCauley, interviewing Navajo (aka Diné) elders, was told, “television 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... These days... they see movies with people having sex in them and they're watching. In these movies they shoot each other... Movies are being watched every day, but there is nothing good in it".

Families become disconnected when English-speaking Navajo grandchildren cannot speak to their Navajo-speaking grandparents. Navajo elders interviewed by Dr Evangeline Parsons Yazzie told her that they "want to pass on their knowledge and wisdom to the younger generation" but "today the younger generation does not know the language and is unable to accept the words of wisdom". Yazzie concluded that "The use of the native tongue is like therapy, specific native words express love and caring. Knowing the language presents one with a strong self-identity, a culture with which to identify, and a sense of wellness".

Jeannette King at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand found that Māoris, the Indigenous people of New Zealand, saw learning their Māori language as a "personal transformation" and felt a "sense of responsibility towards the language". They viewed it as life, a treasure, as a journey, a dive into water, and as sustenance. Dick Littlebear, president of the Northern Cheyenne Tribal College, sees "native languages nurturing our spirits and hearts and the English language as sustenance for our bodies". The late sociolinguist Joshua Fishman collected quotes from around the world in his book *In Praise of the Beloved Language* to show the deep attachment that people often have to their mother tongues.

This attachment includes ways of seeing the world we live in. The Navajo have a concept of K'é, which translates to mean kinship and family and connotes how people should relate to one another with love, support, and responsibility. K'é represents a healthy community working together for sustainability and cultural continuity.

Cultural revitalisation

Cultural revitalisation is part and parcel of language revitalisation. Many Indigenous people don't believe you can really understand a culture or be a tribal member if you don't speak the language. Cultural rights became a part of the civil rights movement in the United States after World War II, and in 1969 a Special US Senate Subcommittee on Indian education issued a report titled *Indian Education: A National Tragedy – a National Challenge*. The Navajo, with the largest Indian Reservation in the United States, had already established the Rough Rock Demonstration School in 1966 as an Indian-controlled school under an Indian school board. Subsequently, the Navajo Nation government established the Navajo Community College (NCC, now Diné College) as a response to the high Navajo college dropout rate at 'white' colleges. At NCC and Rough Rock, curriculums in both English and Navajo emphasized the Navajo cultural and historical point of view. Dr Willard Sakiestewa Gilbert, a Hopi Professor at Northern Arizona University and former president of the National Indian Education Association, notes that if a school's curriculum does not reflect American Indian students' traditional teachings nurtured in the home and local community, then the school loses a valuable

educational tool for promoting Indian students' learning.

Timoti Karetu, who later served as New Zealand's Māori language commissioner from 1987 to 1999, visited NCC in 1976 and was impressed by Navajo efforts to take control of the education of their youth. Back in New Zealand, Karetu helped establish Māori language nests that aimed to help reverse Māori language loss. These language nests were Māori-only preschools where Māori-speaking elders immersed infants in their mother tongue. Native Hawaiians, who were in a similar situation – with almost no children left speaking their language due to assimilationist English-only education – started their own language nests and worked to repeal a law that mandated English as the sole language of instruction in Hawaiian schools. In both New Zealand and Hawaii, the immersion preschools were extended into higher grades to the point that a student can now write their PhD dissertation in the Māori or Hawaiian language. English and sometimes a third language are introduced in these schools around fifth grade. The Māori of New Zealand and Native Hawaiians have had some success in revitalising their languages, although Karetu declared in a recent interview that "There is an apathy and a torpor pervading the whole of the Māori world, and the language is its victim".

Language and cultural revitalisation is a constant struggle against the forces of globalization, which increasingly homogenize the world through mass media. However, at the same time this increasing global interconnectedness has allowed Indigenous peoples from around the world to

share their concerns. One result was Indigenous groups' successful lobbying of the United Nations for the adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This 2007 Declaration states that Indigenous peoples have the right to run their own schools and to teach and promote their languages and cultures.

Language remains an issue today

In 2015, controversy surrounded the requirement that responsibility for the Navajo presidency must be fluent in Navajo. The well-educated leading candidate was disqualified by the Navajo Supreme Court, and after the election there was a referendum that shifted the decision about fluency from the court to the voter. In a speech available on YouTube, former Navajo tribal chairman and future president Peterson Zah came out strongly against the relaxation of the Navajo language requirement, stating that the Navajo language "has been good to the Navajo people. It's the basis of our culture. It's the basis of our history. It's the essence of who we are. It's our identity. The Navajo people are internationally known for speaking the Navajo language, and continue to maintain that language".

The revitalisation of language culture is seen as a way to give young people direction in their lives as they learn traditional cultural values and beliefs. However, young people who are just learning their Indigenous language can't understand complex cultural teachings in a language they are just learning, so teachers and elders often shift to English for their explanations. The conundrum is that while students learn a language faster

the more time they spend on it, it takes an estimated six hundred or so hours of language-learning just to be able to carry on a simple conversation. It takes even longer to understand and discuss sophisticated ideas, and students often give up if they lack the persistence that a strong sense of identity can provide. This means that if they are not exposed to their Indigenous culture in English (or in Spanish in Latin America), then they will never pick it up. One thing to consider here is the fact that the traditional Christian teachings that many English speakers learn are found in a translated bible, but most Christians never even attempt to get into the original Aramaic, Hebrew, and Latin sources.

Indigenous peoples today face a struggle between either ending isolation by learning a world language and broadening their horizons, or developing their Indigenous language and deepening their understanding

of self. However, as repeatedly proven in Indigenous language immersion schools in New Zealand and the United States, one does not preclude the other: a national or world language can be learned without it having to replace a local language of place, community, and family. One can learn about the wider world and at the same time rediscover one's roots and find a sense of meaning for one's life. Indigenous language immersion schools can bring back traditional values that provide a strong positive sense of identity that strengthens character. ¶

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Find out more

Books

Joshua A. Fishman (editor) (2001) *Can Threatened Languages Be Saved?*, Multilingual Matters.

Teresa L. McCarty, Sheilah E. Nicholas and Leisy T. Wyman (editors) (2009) *Indigenous Language Revitalization: Encouragement, Guidance and Lessons Learned*, Northern Arizona University).

Louellyn White (2015) *Free To Be Mohawk: Indigenous Education at the Akwesasne Freedom School*, University of Oklahoma Press.

Leisy T. Wyman, Teresa L. McCarty and Sheilah E. Nicholas (2014) *Indigenous Youth and Multilingualism: Language Identity, Ideology, and Practice in Dynamic Cultural Worlds*, Taylor and Francis.

Online

Disappearing Languages – a National Geographic site that explores various facets of language loss and efforts at language revitalization: travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/enduring-voices

Teaching Indigenous Languages – a Northern Arizona University site that provides a variety of information related to teaching and the revitalization of Indigenous languages: nau.edu/til

We Shall Remain: Native Language Now – a US Public Broadcasting site with films of three tribes at different stages of revitalization talking about their innovative efforts to revive their languages: pbs.org/wgbh/amex/weshallremain/native_now/language