

# Academic Success and Cultural Resiliency: Language Immersion Education among Indigenous Communities.

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## Resumen/ Abstract

This paper examines the outcomes of language immersion models implemented by three Indigenous communities to revitalize and preserve their native languages through ethnographic research design and methods. The history and implementation of language instruction in three Indigenous communities are described. The multi-stage analysis includes an examination of national and state test scores and other qualitative and quantitative data for the school communities. School demographics and standardized tests are used in the comparison of case studies as well as the relevant issues featured in the research literature about indigenous language revitalization. Data findings are summarized and include analysis of additional anecdotal information and test data used to explore research questions about academic achievement and Native language-medium education.

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**Palabras clave / Keywords:** language immersion models

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## **Introduction.**

This study evolved from my initial work in public schools serving urban and rural Native Nation communities<sup>1</sup> in the early 1990's in the southwest and through 2003, when I completed my dissertation project, a cross-comparison of 14 case studies examining culturally responsive education and academic outcomes. I approached research from a community activist stance which also naturally grounds my work in critical ethnography. My research follows a grassroots, activist role in communities that is informed and co-constructed with the community rather than solely by the researcher. Beginning with inquiry around how Native youth's experiences are informed by assimilationist (mainstream) education, examining culturally responsive education and innovative educational program design (community-based education), was followed by further investigation of indigenous language immersion education with this recent study.

Troubled by the decades of public discourse around Native students as “at risk,” “low performing,” “failing,” and “dropouts,” and how these labels more often negatively influence Native children's academic experiences, our communities' voices are shifting the focus of research and discourse to reflect the positive influences of indigenous education. In this article, I describe and present data findings and summarize the history and implementation of language instruction for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children in three different language communities. The research question was: In what ways might language immersion programs affect the academic achievement and sociocultural development of indigenous students? I followed the same premise in this study as my dissertation research: Students who have a strong sense of their own ethnic identity do better in school than those who don't. Schools which reinforce positive ethnic identification for students will produce students with higher achievement.

## **Problem of Language Loss.**

The problem of language loss in indigenous communities invites research which examines the ways that immersion programs might affect the academic achievement and sociocultural development of indigenous students (Deyhle, 1992). Many conditions (including national policies) can influence a language's fate, but most important is whether children are learning the language of their parents and grandparents as a Native language and using it on a daily basis. Miyaoka's (2002) work indicates the seriousness of language loss among indigenous children. He elaborates:

Based on estimates by the Indigenous Language Institute (ILI), though more than 300 indigenous languages were viable in the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only 175 exist today. Of these, a mere 55 are spoken only by elders over the age of 60 years--whose numbers also are rapidly dwindling—and only 50 are being taught to children or adults (ILI 1997, chap. 3). In 1997, as few as 20 of these languages were widely used by children (p. 257).

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<sup>1</sup> American Indian communities are typically referred to as “reservation.” Since these are sovereign nations, I use the term Native Nation communities or Native Nations.



What becomes increasingly clearer from the research around Indigenous languages is that an:

- Increasingly large numbers of Indian school children have little real fluency in their Native language;
- Some children speak a mixture of Native language and English as their normal means of communication (McCarty and Zepeda 1995; Crawford 1995; Littlebear, 2003); and,
- Native language re-vitalization often is required before instruction in that language is possible.

Without organized efforts and consistent funding, these languages will be gone in a matter of several generations.

### **Theoretical Framework on Language Loss.**

Assimilationist models of education are the number one factor in language loss for Indigenous communities and nations (Aguilera, 2003). The policies that drive English-Only education for Native students are rooted in the educational institutions which support the hegemonic interests of White, middle and upper class Euro-American privilege and entitlement –the hidden curriculum of schools; prevalence of institutionalized racism. I will name a few of these sociocultural and political issues that impede language loss:

- overwhelming pressure to teach English across the U.S. educational system makes it difficult to implement Indigenous language immersion models in public schools; so why not in BIA and Tribally controlled schools?;
- recent emphasis on high stakes testing in English; culturally responsive education for non-White, Euro-American students is not valued in the overall system of mainstream dominant education;
- funding for language services to Indian children has been predicated on the TBE model rather than dual language and total immersion models; and
- complete lack of importance given to cultural aspects of language by non-Native policymakers and educational leaders in schools serving Indigenous communities.

### **History of Language Issues.**

Models for foreign language instruction fall short as Native language is not “foreign” to those from whose communities the languages originate (Holm and Holm 1995). Principal remedies used under the auspices of the Lau decision were designed primarily for immigrant populations, not American Indian, Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian populations. The 1990 Native American Languages Act continues to be undermined today with the persistence of mainstream dominant language and culture in schools serving Indigenous communities.

Political conservatism has confined funding streams for bilingual education to support TBE which is the principle model used with English Language Learners in the U.S. education system. Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) for dual language



instruction is inappropriate for most Native American children because very few Indian children are mono-lingual speakers of their Native language. Historically federal and state policies have violated treaty rights of Tribal Nations, impacting the language rights of millions of Native people. Impeding language preservation has predicated Indigenous children's failure in mainstream dominant schools (Aguilera, 2003).

### **Research Design and Methods.**

This study compares case studies of three language immersion programs using a mixed methods design. I used quantitative methods including: archival documents from state DOE accountability systems and NCES databases; public school archival test score data; and private/public non-profit educational organizations' documents. Qualitative methods were phone interviews with administrators, teachers, and families from the three case study sites.

My data analysis design consists of a three-stage process, first, examining data for each school community to answer the research questions, and comparing data findings across the three case studies based on issues featured in the research literature about indigenous language revitalization. I, then, compared the schools according to school demographics and standardized tests. Test score data from the state and district databases were accessed including state benchmark exams (Hawai'i, Alaska, and Arizona) and norm-referenced tests (CAT/6 and SAT9). Finally, I present a summary analysis of data findings from additional anecdotal information and test data to explore research questions about academic achievement and Native language-medium education.

### **Study Sites.**

The sites and models include the language nest model which was adapted for use in the 'Aha Pūnana Leo Hawaiian-medium schools and, the two-way or dual language immersion model used by both the Yup'ik Language Immersion School in Bethel, Alaska; and the Dine' Language Immersion School in Window Rock, Arizona.

Language revitalization began with parents/faculty in higher education committed to learning their Native language and in developing and implementing Hawaiian-medium education systems. Learning Hawaiian as a second language was the initial goal of the parents/faculty. They institutionalized their language through the language nest model for preschool age children and in public, private, charter and laboratory schools, implementing Hawaiian medium instruction in K-16 schools. Eleven certified teachers work in these Hawaiian medium schools; most learned Hawaiian by attending the Hawaiian Language College of the University of Hawai'i-Hilo (Wilson & Kawai'ae'a, in press).

Dual language model is used in the Yup'ik and Dine' immersion schools. Central Alaskan Yup'ik is the larger of the state's Native languages. Of a total population--21,000 people--about 10,000 are speakers of the language. Children still grow up speaking Yup'ik as their first language in 17 of the 68 Yup'ik villages. In the Dine' immersion school only 4% of students are fluent Dine' speakers; 40% have varied



abilities in speaking and understanding their Native language, and 56% speak only English or American Indian English (indigenous form of English).

### **Findings.**

Findings indicate that in all the cases, Native-speaking students performed well on the achievement tests which are given in English even as they were taught through Native-medium instruction. Hawaiian- medium education students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade exceeded national standards over a two-year period in one small K-12 laboratory school and Dine' immersion school students in 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades surpassed state standards in Math and Writing. As suggested by language experts, evidence was found that more of the older students met or exceeded proficiency than younger children in the primary grades on national tests. Limitations on test data from state and district databases such as special needs populations reveal a difficulty in concluding any impact of immersion model or school organization on academic achievement; however, this situation also suggests there is much more to be understood in this area of research. While no differences were noted in the study that would indicate a correlation between academic achievement and school organization-- public or private, autonomy and consistent leadership were factors in all these schools. As important were factors such as funding issues, Native language speakers, curriculum materials, and diversity of linguistic abilities among students. Total immersion models such as the Hawaiian medium education system are viewed both as comprehensive and thorough in providing the means for revitalizing and preserving indigenous languages and cultural knowledge; important aspects in support of indigenous students in their educational and lifelong aspirations. Further examination of policy and legislation that impedes the sovereign rights of Native students to their indigenous languages in schools could lead to additional resources and support for language immersion education.

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