Examining Three International Language Immersion Schools as a Model Indigenous-Serving Institution

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Abstract: An indigenous-serving institution is dedicated to the revitalization of culture within an educational system. The utilization of language solely stimulates and supports the learning and success of an indigenous people; by engaging and including culture within its framework. Over the past 50 years, indigenous people have begun reclaiming their languages and working towards its revival and use. The strategies and principles of language revitalization through immersion education serves indigenous people through traditional practices and beliefs. These nests allow us to engage both the learning of language and culture, as well as Western schooling. This article examines three international language immersion schools, Kōhanga Reo, Pūnana Leo and Waadookodaading as models of an indigenous-serving institution.

Keywords: Indigenous-serving institution, Immersion schools, Language education
An indigenous-serving institution is dedicated to the revitalization of culture within an educational system. The utilization of language solely stimulates and supports the learning and success of an indigenous people; by engaging and including culture within its framework. Over the past 50 years, indigenous people have begun reclaiming their languages and working towards its revival and use. The strategies and principles of language revitalization through immersion education serve indigenous people through traditional practices and beliefs. These nests allow us to engage both the learning of language and culture, as well as Western schooling.

With the devastating events of genocide, colonialism, linguistic imperialism, new disease, forced relocation, upset of Indigenous economic, social and political systems, Indigenous languages declined in use and existence. (McCarty, 2003; Spolsky 2002). Language is an essential expression and envelope of culture, necessary for maintaining a people’s pride and identity (New Zealand History, n.d.). To perpetuate indigenous languages in the modern world, the formalization of education is adapted to regain culture. Attempting to base an entire contemporary institution on an Indigenous cultural system within the physical boundaries and structures of a Western nation is a challenging task, requiring a significant paradigm shift to an Indigenous system that has not yet been fully developed (Hermes, 2005, p. 43). An indigenous-serving institution differs from the concept of the institutionalization of culture. The institutionalization of culture is the incorporation of culture in the existing western educational framework, whereas an indigenous-serving institution is constructed in an indigenous style of learning. An indigenous-serving institution is a solution to the educational system of initiating culture revitalization through language. Immersion language programs ensure the success of its people and culture in an indigenous-serving institution model.
In 2006, over 131,000 Māori could converse in te reo (Māori language) (New Zealand History, n.d.). The revitalization of indigenous languages has flourished in the past several decades with the bringing of cultural revitalization programs, such as Te Kōranga Reo, ‘Aha Pūnana Leo, and Waadookodaading. The use of formalized schooling supports both the academic and cultural success of the students. The indigenous community’s traditional style of learning is adapted into a formalized educational framework. Teaching language at a young age allows for language to be taught without involving the English language to taint the learning process. I cannot teach you culture; culture is something you have to live. Throughout the language, we can give a part of the culture that can be lived (Hermes, 2005, p. 44). Language is the culture; there is no culture without the language because culture is living (Hermes, 2005, p. 50).

The historical account of language revitalization programs captures the cultural genocide, the establishment of language within traditional principles, and the growing numbers of native speakers. In the early 19th century, Māori language was the predominant language in Aotearoa. By the mid-20th century, there were concerns that the use of the language was declining. The Māori language was suppressed in schools and children were punished for speaking their language. Despite the assimilation of the English language, the Maori language survived. During the Second World War, Māori society began to change, where plenty of work was available in the cities. Before the War, Māori people mainly lived in the rural lands of Aotearoa. English was the language of the urban areas, and children who went to city schools learned English. By the 1980s, less than 20% of Māori knew enough te reo to be regarded as Native speakers (Te Kōhanga Reo, n.d.).
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In the 1970’s, Māori recognized the need to reassert their identity. In 1972, three groups were created to support the promotion of the Māori language, Auckland-based Ngā Tamatoa (The Young Warriors), Victoria University’s Te Reo Māori Society, and Te Huinga Rangatahi (The New Zealand Māori Student’ Association) (Te Kōhanga Reo, n.d.). Three years later, Aotearoa’s first officially bilingual school opened at Rūātoki in the Urewera. The first Māori-owned Māori language radio station (Te Reo-o-Pōneke) went on air in 1983 (Te Kōhanga Reo, n.d.). Many language recovery programs were targeted towards young people and the education system. The kōhanga reo movement began with the opening of the first kōhana reo preschool in April of 1982 in Wainuiomata. Other programs followed, such as Kura kaupapa, a system of primary schooling in Māori language environment (Te Kōhanga Reo, n.d.). Thus, in an effort to secure the Māori language it was made the official language of Aotearoa under the Maori Language Act of 1987.

Kōhanga Reo flourished in an environment of excitement and celebration, and by the end of 1982 one hundred Kōhanga Reo were established. By the end of 1994, there were 800 Kōhanga Reo, catering for 14,000 children (Te Kōhanga Reo, n.d.). Kōhanga Reo was virtually springing forth all over the country and with very little financial assistance from the government. Kōhanga Reo had to come to terms with the regulatory environment while maintaining the unique kaupapa of the Kōhanga Reo movement. Such a system of measurement often came at a substantial cost to the kaupapa. There are 460 Kōhanga Reo throughout Aotearoa and also several Kōhanga Reo in Australia and the United Kingdom. Te Kōhanga Reo followed by Kura Kaupapa Māori, and Whare Kura all provide an environment where Māori language, cultural practices, and values are demonstrated and are recognized as providing a valuable training ground for maintaining marae practices and protocols.
In ways similar to the historical accounts in Aotearoa, Hawai‘i had its challenge around the use and integration of language. In 1896, education throughout the Hawaiian language in both public and private schools were outlawed on the model of U.S. policy towards the use of American Indian languages in education. Children were punished for speaking Hawaiian in school. By 1984, the community of fluent speakers had decreased to only elders and a small community on the rural Hawaiian island of Ni‘ihau. The need for language revitalization was necessary. In January 1982, a group of Hawaiian language educators strategized the need to perpetuate the language. Pūnana Leo preschool emerged from their collaboration, a concept strictly adopted from the Māori Kōhanga Reo movement in Aotearoa. Pūnana Leo means “nest of voices” and depicts that through this learning method, students are “fed” solely by the Hawaiian language much like young birds are cared for in a nest. The first school established was in Keaukaha, Kaua‘i in 1984. A year later, other Pūnana Leo preschools would open in Hilo, Hawai‘i and Honolulu, O‘ahu and continuing to the other islands.

The Hawaiian language shall live, the vision of Pūnana Leo. The guiding principles nurture education through the love of language, people, land, and knowledge, as well as supporting and nurturing the entire ‘ohana or family, to fulfill expectations of completeness, thoroughness, meticulousness, and perseverance all through multiple opportunities of learning (Aha Punana Leo, n.d.). In 1998, the Kumu Honua Mauli Ola Philosophy statement (Kuleana Kope, 2009) was established to document and clarify the basis of schooling through Hawaiian.

There are four major elements of self-identification as a Hawaiian, Ka ‘Ao‘ao Pili ‘Uhane, the spiritual element, Ka ‘Ao‘ao ‘Ōlelo, the language element, Ka ‘Ao‘ao Lawena, the physical behavior element, and Ka ‘Ao‘ao ‘Ike Ku‘una, the traditional knowledge element (Aha Punana Leo, n.d.). Each element is essential to the success of schooling that seeks to foster the Hawaiian
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culture. The principles established are used to conduct education programs, to prepare new
teachers, to develop cultural curricula, and as a framework for institutional operations and family
life. It strengthens and inspires to rebuild upon ancestral foundations of worth, foundations that
were the source of life for the people of Hawai‘i.

With similar accounts of language elimination, the Ojibwe people have also made
revitalization efforts. There are approximately 43,000 Ojibwe language speakers in North
America. In 1995, a research study found less than 500 fluent Ojibwe language speakers in the
tri-state area of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan (Waadookodaading, n.d.). The Ojibwe
were traditionally hunters and trappers and were heavily involved in the French fur trade. For
that reason, the Ojibwe language became the unofficial trade language of the northern Great
Lakes. In the 1830s, the Ojibwe people were displaced from their lands and forced to migrate
west of the Mississippi River. A slow catastrophe of events would follow, the Ojibwe were
slowly moved into reservations and territories, and their knowledge of language and culture
would become neglected as Western assimilation soared. In an 1868 report, the Indian Peace
Commissioners stated: “schools should be established, which children should be required to
attend; their barbarous dialect should be blotted out and the English language substituted” (Know
the Laws, n.d.). The decline of Native speakers dwindled into less than ten speakers in the Lac
Courte Oreilles Reservation in 1999 (Waadookodaading, n.d.). Currently, most of the first
speakers in the country are over the age of 70 which means that the mission of keeping the
language alive rally is a race against time (Waadookodaading, n.d.). There are currently about
1,000 first speakers left in the US.

The Waadookodaading Ojibwe Language Immersion Institute was established in 2000
(Bolt, 2011). Waadookodaading means “a place where people help each other. The mission of
Examining Three International Waadookodaading is to create proficient speakers of the Ojibwe language who can meet the challenges of our rapidly changing world. The school is a community center for language revitalization, local environmental understanding, and intergenerational relationships. Students are grounded in local language, culture, and traditions, while aware of global concerns (Waadookodaing, n.d.). The schools aim to foster a love of learning while teaching the skills that will enable students to create solutions for our community and our planet. The Waadookodaading Language Immersion School provides language instruction to young children ages 3-11, a prime stage level of learning languages (Waadookodaing, n.d.). The challenges are many and include funding, development or curriculum, employment/retention of certified Native teachers with the requisite language abilities, and lack of classroom space (Waadookodaing, n.d.). Students attend English Language Arts daily at Waadookodaading starting at Grade 4. In order to preserve the immersion environment, Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 3 students are immersed in the Ojibwe language. Understanding that English Language development should be guided at home is part of the commitment that families make when enrolling their children in a language immersion school (Waadookodaading, n.d.). All core subjects, including Ojibwe Language Arts, are taught through the medium of Ojibwemowin. Starting at Grade 4 students are offered English language instruction in both Math and Science on alternating years. The staff is guided by elders to teach students through Anishinaabe seasonal activities, aadizookaanan, and beliefs. The goal of the Waadookodaading Ojibwe Language Immersion School is to immerse not only students in the language, but also their culture.

The guiding principles of the Köhanga Reo, Pūnana Leo, and Waadookodaading language revitalization programs support the success of indigenous people. The adoption of these principles ensures the perpetuation of culture through language within an indigenous-serving
Examining Three International institution. A principle that was shared amongst all three programs was the importance of teaching language from a young age because it allows for cultural understandings and oral traditions to be passed down without English interference. The three groups also began their revitalization efforts as grass-roots organizations, where the community advocated for the language programs to be established. The help of the government would follow in creating Maori and Hawaiian as an official language in the 1990s. The three groups based their fundamental learning method on their ancestral knowledge of teaching. Incorporating language use, traditional practices, and protocols, seasonal activities, beliefs and elements of self-identification creates a thriving environment of indigenous culture revitalization.

Normalizing language in our communities supports the education of language. The institutionalization of culture is a new concept that we have integrated into our educational framework. Education is a lifelong process that is acquired through interactions with the environment and community members. Schooling and education may intersect but not synonymous with each other. Traditionally, children would grow up learning the language in their homes and not in a formal school setting. They would learn different skills in an informal environment, as well. By doing one learns; this was the method used. We have changed this style of learning based on the western ways of education. Most children will not learn indigenous languages in their homes today, and therefore immersion schools were created to offer indigenous children a way to learn their language. The concept of culture is that it is fluid and forever changing. Teaching a culture-based curriculum that authenticates skills and knowledge gained traditionally supports an indigenous-serving institution.
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