

## **Resiliency in Native Languages: The Tale of Four Native American Communities' Experiences with Language Immersion**

Dorothy Aguilera, PhD  
Margaret D. LeCompte, PhD, University of Colorado-Boulder

“To lose your language is to lose the soul of your culture, and when the language is gone you are forever disconnected from the wisdom of ancestors; the loss of language inevitably results in losing the gods you pray to, the land you live on, and your own government and sovereignty,” (Lilikal Kame’eleihiwa, Professor, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 2004).

Native American children historically and currently have resided uneasily within the strictures of state and US federal policies governing native language instruction and instruction for students who are not fully fluent in English. These have been contentious since the *Lau v Nichols* decision (414 U.S. 563) in 1974<sup>1</sup> which initiated a variety of models for providing effective instruction to non-English speaking students in US public schools. These models required consideration of the child’s native language and were mandated under the equal protection clause of the Constitution. Using arguments linked to the provision of services for disabled students, the court argued that failing to consider the inability of a child to understand instruction in English constituted a violation of that child’s right to an adequate education, and required schools to provide appropriate accommodations as a remedy. Federal dollars have supported the remedies, though the types used have both varied widely and been implemented with varying degrees of rigor.

In this paper, we describe the history and implementation of language instruction for Indian children in four different language communities. Each community chose a

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<sup>1</sup> For more information go to this web address: [www.stanford.edu/~hakuta/LAU/IAPolicy/IA1aLauvNichols.htm](http://www.stanford.edu/~hakuta/LAU/IAPolicy/IA1aLauvNichols.htm)

different way to provide instruction, and each face considerable obstacles to do so. Driven by the imminent disappearance of the community's native tongue, all these communities used variations of immersion models to revitalize their languages. These are the Maori "language nests" immersion model adopted by the Aha Punana Leo (which literally means language nests in Hawaiian) schools serving K-12 students and located on five islands in Hawaii; the Total Physical Response (TPR) model used in combination with the Maori "language nests" immersion model adopted by the Piegan Institute (Blackfeet), Browning, Montana; and the two-way or dual language immersion model developed by California schools and adapted for use by both the Ayaprun Charter School (Yup'ik Language Immersion School) in Bethel, Alaska; and Tse'hootsoi' Dine' Bi'o'lta' (Dine' Language Immersion School) in Window Rock, Arizona.<sup>2</sup>

We have chosen to focus on these models because the principal remedies used under the aegis of the *Lau* decision were designed primarily for immigrant populations, not American Indians. Both the courts and the educational system have tended to focus narrowly on acquisition of English as a means to improve academic achievement in all-English instruction, rather than simultaneously seeking to preserve native languages. Most commonly, students either have been provided instruction in English as a second language (ESL) only, or in ESL plus native language instruction in content areas such as mathematics, science, and social studies, for periods up to about three years, after which students are expected to "transition" into all-English classrooms. Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) is the most common form of dual language instruction; other forms of instruction commonly offered for non-native speakers include paired bilingual

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<sup>2</sup> The Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe Language Immersion Charter School in Hayward, Wisconsin, also adopted the TPR model. Details about the school are described in an article in this special issue (pp ) by Dr. Mary Hermes, director of the Ojibwe Immersion Charter School.

instruction, two-way or dual language immersion, structured English immersion, English “submersion” and native language immersion. Because of the lack of teachers who are both bilingual in languages other than Spanish and in possession of state teaching certification, Transitional Bilingual Education is used most commonly with Spanish-speaking populations; speakers of other languages have received structured English immersion, ESL, or “submersion. Table 1 displays the characteristics of the most common models for language instruction and related advantages and concerns (Linguanti 1999).

**Program Model Advantages and Concerns  
(Linguanti, 1999)**

INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL	PARTICULAR ADVANTAGES	PARTICULAR CONCERNS
Bilingual Education:		
Early-Exit Transitional	Berman (1992) notes that early-exit TBE: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. makes efficient use of limited bilingual teachers by concentrating them at early grades</li> <li>2. maintains native language oral fluency</li> <li>3. builds in bilingual communication with parents</li> </ol> Ramirez (1991) found that limited English proficient students in TBE improve their skills in mathematics, English language, and reading better than expected in comparison to at-risk students in the general population.	Berman (1992) notes native language skills may not be fully developed to allow transfer to English. Ramirez (1991) found most students remain in this program longer than expected. Brisk (1998) notes that success of early-exit TBE measured more by speed at which students are mainstreamed than content-area learning. Cummins (1998) maintains “quick-exit transitional bilingual education is an inferior model based on an inadequate theoretical assumption; this model aspires to monolingualism and does little to address the causes of bilingual students’ underachievement.”
Late-Exit Transitional/ Developmental or Maintenance	Encourages proficient bilingual students Strong promotion of students’ primary language literacy skills not only develops a conceptual foundation for academic growth but also communicates clearly to students value of the cultural and linguistic resources they bring to school (Cummins, 1998). Increased involvement of minority-language speaking families in children’s education because of home language use.	Students entering late or exiting early from the program (transience) Maintaining continuity of program model across grades and schools

## Resiliency of Native Language.docx

Bilingual Immersion	Appears to improve language arts achievement compared to transitional bilingual programs (Brisk, 1998).	Students may be unprepared for transition to mainstream classrooms.
Integrated TBE	Increases academic and social contact of minority and majority students through integrated classrooms. Supports bilingual students who have been mainstreamed	In practice, may become submersion with primary language support, if teachers and language do not have equal status (Brisk 1998).
Dual language Immersion (aka two-way bilingual)	Students learn language and acquire positive cross-cultural attitudes from each other and teachers. Integrates minority children and English-speaking peers Evaluations indicate effectiveness in promoting academic achievement and high levels of language proficiency for both groups of students.	Language used in early grades of immersion may be modified to accommodate English speaking students, impacting language development of language-minority students (Valdés, 1997) Privileged status may be conferred on participating language-majority students (Valdés, 1997). Unknown effect of programs using languages with different alphabets (i.e. Cantonese/English).
Immersion Education:		
ELD (English Language Development)/ESL (English as a Second Language) Pull-Out	Students with different primary languages can be in the same class. Flexible in accommodating small numbers of ELLs with diverse languages. Teachers do not need to be fluent in primary language(s) of students.	Very costly as additional ESL resource teachers must be used. Does not build on students' primary language for academic development Pull-out may stigmatize students or have them miss content instruction
INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL	PARTICULAR ADVANTAGES	PARTICULAR CONCERNS
Structured Immersion	Allows for English content instruction for intermediate ELLs. Students with different primary languages in the same class.	Complex subject matter content could be diluted. Rapid mainstreaming before development of sufficient English proficiency. Much variation in models Definitional blurring common in research
Submersion with Primary Language Support	Provides some support and access to comprehensible input	Largely a "sink or swim" method Neglects literacy development Insufficient access to academic content
Canadian French Immersion	Students achieve a high level of fluency in second language. Students score at or above norm of English speakers in monolingual English programs in tests of reading and mathematics.	Students' second language is "fossilized" since there is no contact with native French (L2) speaking peers Limited interpersonal communication skills
Indigenous Language Immersion (e.g. Navajo)	Programs shaped and supported by local people with authority to mold social environment of the school Rock Point Community School students (AZ-Navajo/English) improved academic achievement, scoring higher than neighboring schools, other Navajo-speaking students on reservation, and other Indian	Few texts and curriculum available in indigenous languages. Few programs extend beyond elementary school.

For most Native American children, strict adherence to the most commonly used models—and those most often funded by state-controlled federal flow-through money—is inappropriate. Very few Indian children are mono-lingual speakers of their native language. In fact, most speak English as a native language, even though the English they speak may have dialectical features characterized as American Indian English (Leap 1993). Native language loss means that 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. This means that it cannot be assumed that native language fluency is available for instruction; rather, language re-vitalization is required before instruction in that language is possible. Further, instruction for non-native speakers of English tends to treat language as an artifact separate from the culture of the people who speak it—an approach that is completely at variance with efforts by Native Americans to preserve not only their languages, but the culture which informs them. Finally, models for foreign language instruction also fall short, as native language are not “foreign” to those from whose communities the languages originate.

In the words of Darrell Kipp, Director of the Piegan Institute, “Tribal languages contain the tribal genesis, cosmology, history, and secrets within [them], and without them we may become permanently lost, or irrevocably changed” (2004). When native languages die out, as they have been doing over the past century, the sociocultural and intellectual heritage they embody is lost to indigenous communities. This heritage includes knowledge of medicine, religion, cultural practices and traditions, music, art,

human relationships and child-rearing practices, as well as Indian ways of knowing about the sciences, history, astronomy, psychology, philosophy, and anthropology. Kipp accompanied his characterization of tribal languages by a call for Native people to work actively to revitalize their indigenous languages in order to keep their cultural and historical traditions and knowledge alive. This approach has, however, been difficult to implement because of overwhelming pressure to teach English and the recent emphasis on high stakes testing in English, the fact that funding for language services to Indian children has been predicated on the TBE model—and a concomitant reduction in funds overall for language instruction to Indian populations--and the lack of importance given to cultural aspects of language by non-Indian educators and policy-makers.

### **The Problem of Language Loss**

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.<sup>3</sup> In 1997, as few as 20 of these languages were widely used by children, and according to ILI researchers, within 60 years only these 20 of the currently existing 175 will survive.

Notwithstanding, the legal right of American Indians to learn and maintain their first languages is reinforced by the 1990 Native American Languages Act (Public Law 101-477) and amended in 1992 (Public Law 102-524), which instated the policy of the United States “to preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native

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<sup>3</sup> The ILI online resource directory: Native American Language Crisis, April 1997 can be accessed at: <http://www.indigenous-language.org>.

Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages.” In 1989, new legislation was mandated for the nation’s educational objectives; Goal 7 of the Goals 2000 Indian America (1990) reads “By the year 2000 all schools will offer Native students the opportunity to maintain and develop their tribal languages and will create a multicultural environment that enhances the many cultures represented in the school.” However, the current No Child Left Behind legislation with its high stakes testing and English-Only mandates impedes the revitalization efforts of indigenous groups and greatly undermines the Native American Languages Act (1992; Public Law 102-524). As a consequence, the rapid decline of indigenous languages is as dramatic today as when that legislation was signed into law 14 years ago.

To date, few resources have been provided by the federal government to sustain indigenous languages. However, many Tribal leaders, parents, educators, linguists, students, and elders across the nation have united to do research on, develop, raise funds for, and implement native language programs (see the Indigenous Language Institute website<sup>4</sup>), despite the lack of federal and state Departments of Education resources to support the teaching and learning of indigenous languages and cultural knowledge. This paper documents the efforts of four such community groups.

### **Research Design and Data Collection Methods**

This study created comparative case studies of four language immersion programs. Data sources included information from prior research studies done in several of the sites, phone interviews with executive directors, and school and district administrators, extensive use of descriptive documents provided by the study participants,

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<sup>4</sup> Resources found at the ILI website: <http://www.indigenous-language.org>.

and published articles and non-published papers from internet websites pertaining to language immersion models and issues pertaining to program development and implementation. It also utilized information from Aguilera's (2003) comparative study of 14 schools serving American Indian students.

### **Common Features of Language Immersion Schools**

Before discussing the individual schools, it is important to describe just what language immersion means. Immersion schools represent an enormous tribal community effort targeting both language revitalization and cultural preservation, and culturally-inspired curriculum and instruction. They attempt to instill the Native language by making it the only medium for learning, teaching and communicating within the school. In the preschool and early childhood centers, Native language is used in all areas of schooling, including the playground, lunchroom and teacher meetings. Language immersion schools also incorporate culturally-compatible curricula and assessments, usually developing them in-house with local teachers, curriculum development specialists, linguists, and elders. A third feature of immersion programs is the use of Native Elders as teachers in preschool immersion centers. K-12 schools customarily hire as teachers Elders who not only are fluently bilingual, but who also have teacher education certification.

Administrators of many language immersion schools and preschool centers recommend starting with early childhood and preschool programs because at these ages, children acquire languages more quickly. Implementing these programs means beginning with the youngest children; the schools tend to grow by grade level as the children grow older and matriculate through the school. For older children, language revitalization is



supported through the use of native language instruction structured like foreign language courses, and language and culture camps or retreats. Many of the immersion schools also require that families learn the language and use it whenever they interact with their children. Language immersion schools also have in common local control of their programs, including the schools, early childhood centers and preschools, whether they are charter, public, or private schools.

### **Models for Language Immersion**

#### **The Maori Language Nests Model**

The Maori people of New Zealand developed their Te Kohanga Reo, or “language nests,” approach to teaching and learning their native language in response to the likely extinction of their language. In the early 1980s, Maori activists called people to a large tribal gathering to determine the fate of their native language. Following the tribal meeting, the Maori established an early childhood center where the first “language nest” was set up. Today there are more than 700 Te Kohanga Reo serving 13,000 preschool-age children throughout New Zealand.<sup>5</sup>

The basic principle underpinning the language nest is that Maori people should be totally immersed in their language, cultural values, and traditions from birth. Not only should teaching and learning take place completely in the medium of the Maori language, but the schools must function under local control where decisions are made by the tribe. The schools are held accountable to the children and the Creator of the Maori people. In addition, the schools are committed to the health and well-being of the children and the family. Core elements of the Te Kohango Reo are:

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<sup>5</sup> Information was accessed from the website at <http://www.kohanga.ac.nz/>

- 1) Language nests established within locally-controlled schools and preschool centers.
- 2) Language programs target the early childhood populations first.
- 3) Parents learn their Native language and speak it in the home.
- 4) Culturally appropriate curricula and instruction are used in core subject areas in schools; and,
- 5) Community members recognize the language and culture as invaluable contributions to individuals and the world.

Instruction in the Maori language is continued through K-13 grades and into tribal colleges located in the northern region of the country where the majority of Maori people reside. Teacher education programs require a three-year preparation in Maori pedagogy, the Maori language, and culturally appropriate curriculum and assessment programs<sup>6</sup> (Pease-Prety On Top 2003).

Faced with similar loss of their languages, other indigenous groups worldwide began to show an interest in the Maori Kohanga Reo as a way to preserve their language and cultural knowledge. The language immersion model spread throughout Hawaii and also was adapted for two Dine' tribal schools—Rough Rock and Rock Point in the early 1980s (Vogt, Jordan, and Tharp 1987; Yamauchi and Tharp 1995).<sup>7</sup> In Hawaii and Dine' "language nests," the Native language is considered the student's first language, and children converse and study in that language, every day and all day. English is taught as their second language and is learned after the children are literate in their native language, typically from third to fifth grade, as determined by the school administrators, teachers, and parents. The Native Hawaiian Aha Punana Leo schools using the language nests model are briefly described in the next section of this article.

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<sup>6</sup> The website address for the Maori Kohanga Reo programs is at [www.kohanga.ac.nz/](http://www.kohanga.ac.nz/)

<sup>7</sup> The website address for information about these schools is at [www.kohanga.ac.nz/](http://www.kohanga.ac.nz/)

### **Aha Punana Leo: Hawaiian Language Immersion**

The Native Hawaiian language immersion schools, which adapted the Maori “language nests” model, have produced over two thousand new native language speakers among both children and young adult populations since 1983, when the initial preschool program was established. This level of success is especially notable because in 1983, the majority of native speakers of Hawaiian were in their 70s and fewer than 30 children under eighteen years of age were fluent in their Hawaiian language.<sup>8</sup> One reason for such dramatic loss of indigenous language facility among Hawaiian native people was that the Hawaiian language had been banned from the public schools<sup>9</sup> since 1896.

The key motivation for establishing a language immersion school was the fear among Native Hawaiians that their language would disappear within one generation unless direct action was taken to stop mainstreaming Hawaiian children in public schools where English was imposed and enforced. The parents and educators who became the co-founders of Aha Punana Leo received considerable help from two Maori scholars, Amati Reedy, Head of Maori Affairs in New Zealand and Kimoki, a professor at the Waikato University in New Zealand (Pease Pretty On Top 2003, p. 77). In the 1983, the Aha Punana Leo founders with the help of the Maori scholars, challenged the Hawaiian State Legislature to change the laws mandating English-Only in public schools. Families boycotted the mainstream schools and in 1984 and opened the first language nests school in Kaua’i serving the Ni’ihau community. Although this first school closed temporarily

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<sup>8</sup> 2004 Hawaiian Tourism Magazine article, September/October issue.

<sup>9</sup> With the exception of Niihau, among a small group of Polynesian Indigenous residents (137) where Hawaiian is the only language spoken.

because of the lack of funding, other Hawaiian language immersion schools were established in Hilo and Honolulu.<sup>10</sup>

By 1987, Hawaiian indigenous activists accomplished their goals by developing a strong network of parents and teachers who are committed to the language immersion schools for their children's future. These activists literally built the PreK-12 education system and schools step-by-step. Raising awareness of the civil rights of students and families to maintain their Native language was the key to uniting larger communities on these principles and to take back control of their own schools. Changing attitudes of the parents, community members, and politicians was challenging and rewarding based on the accomplishments of the Aha Punana Leo leaders and the high status accorded to language and cultural knowledge among their children and families.

Today, there are twelve Aha Punana Leo preschools on five islands serving approximately 200 students ages 2-4 years, as well as three laboratory schools attended by 2000 students in grades K-12 across the state. Gains in the numbers of Hawaiian language speakers who matriculated through these immersion schools has jumped from 30 to over 2,400 students.<sup>11</sup> Over 80 percent of the youth from the K-12 laboratory schools attend college, and several have gone to Ivy League schools.<sup>12</sup> In 2001, the elementary and secondary schools were given charter status by the state Department of Education. The Aha Punana Leo created a solid foundation for developing an education system for Native Hawaiians and establishing subsystems of academic learning and technical support. These include a base system of language nest preschool centers, K-12

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<sup>10</sup> Aha Punana Leo Website: <http://www.ahapunanaleo.org/AR.htm> September 16, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> There are other Hawaiian language schools throughout the island communities that use the Maori "language nests" model including the Kamehameha schools.

<sup>12</sup> Hawaiian Tourism Magazine September/October 2004.

grade schools, and a support system including administration, human resource development, telecommunications, site development, scholarships, and curriculum development. The media division has produced over 250 professional-quality learning materials, many recognized for excellence, including print and non-print curriculum materials, videos, multimedia and music CD-ROMs, storybooks, textbooks, flash cards, posters, and puzzles for use by families, students, teachers, and the public.<sup>13</sup>

More than 100 students have graduated from the high school since 1999, and many of those have completed postsecondary and advanced graduate degrees at the Hawaiian Language College of the University of Hawaii-Hilo, the only college in the country offering a master's degree in an indigenous language. The Aha Punana Leo Corporation established a consortium with the local university in Hilo, and the University of Hawaii in Manoa. Teachers from other Hawaiian language immersion schools across the state attend the Hawaiian Language College to acquire a master's degree in literature in their native language and a teacher education certification.<sup>14</sup>

Following the lead from the Aha Punana Leo organizers, tribes in the United States and Canada have adopted the Maori model. Like the Maori scholars who helped them, Hawaiian activists also have provided technical assistance to tribal and school officials, including arranging site visits to preschool centers, K-12 laboratory schools, and the university's Hawaiian Language Center to observe the Hawaiian medium for learning and teaching. Administrators from two of the school sites described in this study--the Piegan Institute's Nizipuhwahsin Center for language immersion schools, and the Dine'

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<sup>13</sup> Aha Punana Leo Website: <http://www.ahapunanaleo.org/AR.htm> September 16, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Information about the Hawaiian Language College and the Lamakū *Higher Education Division* is on the Aha Punana Leo Website: <http://www.ahapunanaleo.org/CU.htm> September 16, 2004.

school, Tse'hootsoi' Dine' Bi'olta'--conducted site visits to Aha Punana Leo schools, the media centers, and the language college.

### **Total Physical Response**

In the 1960s, James Asher, a psychologist, began introducing educators to the Total Physical Response (TPR) model for the teaching and learning of second languages. In TPR, students initially learn to recognize about 150 nouns and verbs without being expected to say them during the first five or six weeks of the program. During the next few weeks, the teacher begins to use action commands such as, "Walk to the window!", with individual students and the entire class. After becoming familiar with the commands, qualifiers are added, such as "faster," "slower," "smaller," "blue," and "your." In this phase of TPR, students are not required to speak. TPR creates a non-threatening learning environment by reducing the need for spoken performance; in this way, the stress involved in trying to produce unfamiliar sounds as well as the embarrassment of making mistakes is reduced. Using Vygotsky's scaffolding strategy, new words are learned as the master (elder/teacher) demonstrates the meaning of words to apprentices (students); this practice is continued until the students no longer need assistance. During TPR, the teacher provides new items-- words, pictures, and objects—within the framework of items taught in previous lessons and links them to the learners' current knowledge (Vygotsky 1986). For example, if the students already know that the picture shown to them is a "cat," the teacher then introduces a new label in the second language-- "gato." This new word will be incorporated into the lesson, scaffolding the teaching of words such as "black," "big," and "little." Although TPR is considered an effective model for the initial stages of teaching second language, it has limitations for

more advanced learning because of its emphasis on commands alone, rather than on forms of language more commonly used in conversations and narratives. Additionally, TPR is very teacher initiated and directed; student creativity and individual interests are curtailed, particularly in terms of building the kinds of language skills among learners that not only produce conversation, but are considered essential to communicative competency. However, Ray and Seely (1997) argue that TPR-Storytelling strategies can be used to develop more complex levels of language proficiency. Storytelling involves learners in hearing, watching, acting out, retelling, revising, reading, writing, and rewriting of stories. In the retelling of stories, students use their newly acquired vocabulary to construct their own story variations to a partner, group or class, using illustrations, props, and toys. Eventually, students are able to produce their own stories using a variety of genres, including creating drama through story booklets with illustrations, bulletin boards, poetry, songs, and video. Continuing the low-stress learning environment, teachers respond to the storytelling content rather than grammatical accuracy (See the TPR website at <http://www.tpr-world.com/>.)

The Piegan Institute's private schools use the Total Physical Response model to teach vocabulary to Blackfeet children in the early grades. The Nizipuhwahsin Center, the oversight organization for the Institute's three language immersion schools, is featured in a subsequent section of this article.

### **The Two-Way Language Immersion Model**

Two-way immersion programs began to appear in the 1960s and 1970s, in programs such as Dade County's in Miami, formed in response to Cuban refugees, and

the Inter-American Magnet School in Chicago.<sup>15</sup> From 1980 to 1986, California schools began to establish two-way language immersion schools for teaching English learners and other culturally and linguistically diverse students. Key goals that the California Department of Education had set for any two-way immersion models used in schools in the state, previous to the No Child Left Behind mandates, included bilingualism, biliteracy, and multicultural proficiency. Bilingualism occurs when students have high levels of oral proficiency in two languages. Biliteracy exists when students can read and write equally well in academic settings in both English and a second language, particularly on standardized tests. Cultural proficiency refers to being adept in, and understanding fully, the cultural practices and beliefs of a given people; it often is associated with being fully fluent in a language. Multicultural proficiency results when students understand and value the different cultures of which they are a part, and as a consequence, develop a high sense of self-esteem by identifying with such valued cultures (See the California Department of Education website).<sup>16</sup>

Two common program models are the 50/50 model, in which both English and the target language are used 50 percent of class time, and the 90/10 model which supports the target language 90 percent of the time beginning in kindergarten, and increases the use of English by 10 percent annually until both languages are used equally—a 50/50 split by 4<sup>th</sup> grade. In both models, only one language at a time is used for instruction. Two-way immersion programs promote maintenance of the native language with simultaneous acquisition of a second language; they systematically combine a

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<sup>15</sup> Information about two-way models and programs is found on the Website: <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/ToolsforSchools/2way.html>

<sup>16</sup> California Department of Education website at [www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/ip/overview.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/ip/overview.asp).



maintenance bilingual model with a foreign language immersion model, typically lasting from five to seven years.

Before the new NCLB legislation, which virtually mandates English-Only instruction for student populations typically described as English Language Learners (ELLs), funding was provided for two-way immersion programs. A recent report points to the challenges schools across the nation are currently facing with the NCLB Title I and III mandates that require schools to simultaneously monitor both English Language proficiency and academic achievement among the ELL populations (Center on Education Policy 2004).<sup>17</sup>

### **Case Studies of Language Immersion in North American Tribal Communities**

#### **Nizipuhwahsin (Real Speak in English) Language Immersion Center<sup>18</sup>**

In 1985, the Piegan Institute<sup>19</sup> was established by a small group of Blackfeet tribal members, including Darrell Kipp, a tribal appellate court judge and Harvard graduate. Located on the Blackfeet Reservation in Browning, Montana, and surrounded by 1.5 million acres of prairie land and the Rocky Mountains, the Piegan Institute, a nonprofit organization, was formed to conduct research, promote, and preserve the Blackfeet language. These goals have expanded over the past decade to restoring and sustaining

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<sup>17</sup> Report, "From the Capital to the Classroom", can be accessed on the Website: [http://www.ctredpol.org/pubs/nclby2/cep\\_nclb\\_y2\\_full.pdf](http://www.ctredpol.org/pubs/nclby2/cep_nclb_y2_full.pdf) November 9, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Information for this case study was obtained through correspondence with Darrell Kipp and from the many publications, journals, newspaper articles available on the Piegan Institute Website: [www.pieganinstitute.org](http://www.pieganinstitute.org)

<sup>19</sup> The Piegan Institute Website: [www.pieganinstitute.org](http://www.pieganinstitute.org)

American Indian languages in general.<sup>20</sup> As of this writing, the Piegan Institute has worked with fifty tribes to help them restore their languages.

Darrell Kipp, one of the guiding spirits of the Blackfeet revival, was inspired to return to the reservation and to learn his tribal language and live according to Blackfeet traditions. He realized that his calling was to build a school where Blackfeet children could obtain an education that taught tribal language and traditional knowledge along with mainstream education," Kipp says. "I wanted to come back and assist my tribe; it was an extension of the responsibility I was taught as a child."<sup>21</sup>

The Institute's research in the 1980s indicated that only elders, primarily those over 55 years of age, were fluent in Blackfeet. This prompted the co-founders to engage in a seven-year process to gather language and culturally-based materials, dictionaries, and archived materials and to learn their Blackfeet language. This work preceded their opening of the first school in 1995, which was designed to resemble a "grandmother's home" where instructional methods followed the traditional ways of teaching children.<sup>22</sup>

According to Kipp, 1987 was a challenging time for the Institute because the college and the tribal council rejected the idea of establishing language immersion schools and ended its funding. Since then, Piegan Institute and the Nizipuhwahsin Language Immersion Center have been funded solely by private sources and no government monies have been accepted. Among the private foundations that have supported the Institute over the years are the Kellogg, Grotto, and Lannan Foundations.

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<sup>20</sup> Nijhuis, Michelle. "Tribal Immersion Schools Rescue Language and Culture." The Christian Science Monitor. 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Janine Pretty On Top, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Fromm, Peter. "Raising Minipokaiax" Big Sky Journal, October 27, 2003.

Building an endowment which can support the language immersion schools has been challenging, if only because the Blackfeet community is located in the ninety-fifth poorest county in the nation (Kipp 2002 p. 16).

To begin the process of developing the Blackfeet Language Immersion School, the co-founders initially attended a bilingual education conference where they met the administrators of the Native Hawaiian Aha Punana Leo organization. It was then that Kipp recognized the language immersion model which resembled his vision. This was the “language nests” model developed in New Zealand and adapted by the Native Hawaiians to save their indigenous languages and cultural knowledge. The Piegan Institute took 65 tribal members and a number of Canadian Blackfeet activists to the Native Hawaiians’ world retreat in 1994. From that learning experience, both the Montana and the Canada Blackfeet activists established “language nests” throughout their communities to restore and preserve their indigenous languages.

In 1995, the Nizipuhwahsin Language Immersion Center opened its first school to 50 Blackfeet children, ages 5-12, using the TPR method. Originally, co-founders designed the Center for 50 children; however funding and the lack of fluent Blackfeet teachers has limited the number of children who can attend the school to 36, even with an enormous waiting list. Parents pay a monthly tuition fee of one hundred dollars or less, depending on their income. Kipp considers paying this tuition to be a commitment signifying the responsibility of parents to encourage their active participation in the education of their children. Further, he believes the tuition payment, and the policy that requires children to attend the school through eighth grade, gives parents a sense of

dignity and a feeling of stewardship over the school, as well as restoring the value of education to the minds of the children and the community.<sup>23</sup>

Finding Blackfeet elders to teach the language involved traditional ways such as those Kipp used with the most fluent speaker in the community. Kipp knew that if he approached this elder three times requesting his help in teaching Blackfeet at the school the man would have to accept-- based on Blackfeet traditions, one cannot be refused after the third request. This elder responded by proposing to teach for one week only, but he became so involved that he continues to teach in the school today.<sup>24</sup> Finding fluent teachers has been a constant difficulty because only 700 (1.6 percent) Blackfeet out of the 17,000 enrolled members have college degrees (Kipp 2002, p. 23). Initially, Blackfeet language teachers from Canada were hired because there were no local fluent teachers.

The Piegan Institute purchased land to build their immersion schools and tribal members also have donated or sold their lands as well to raise funds to help preserve the language. Currently, the Nizipuhwahsin Language Immersion Center is the oversight organization for establishing, managing, and operating three language immersion schools which are dispersed throughout the Blackfeet Nation to provide academic instruction in the Blackfeet language. These schools are located in three communities, including Cuts Wood, Moccasin Flat, and Lost Child.<sup>25</sup>

Blackfeet traditions inform the design of school buildings. Spacious classrooms permit physical movement activities such as those used in the Total Physical Response model to teach vocabulary and phrases. TPR is used for several years at the schools in

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<sup>23</sup> Fromm, Peter. "Raising Minipokaiax" *Big Sky Journal*, October 27, 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Kipp Report 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Janine Pretty On Top, 2003.

conjunction with the “language nests” model to teach vocabulary. The Institute’s immersion-plus-TPR model teaches comprehension through repetitive physical movement, silence, and by modeling words and commands. In this way, students learn to use words and phrases for basic conversation.

Initially, the threshold language acquisition process for students in the immersion program involves a comprehension period, followed by the silent period, and then the pronunciation or dialogue phase (Kipp 2002, p. 30). Kipp’s (2002) model for language development via TPR builds on ideas about the brain development processes necessary for children to acquire their Native language. TPR is structured so that during all periods of learning language, listening, doing, and speaking activities are linked to how the brain does its work. In this way, young children develop listening skills to distinguish the synapse response range for sounds and pitches of the language. By being situated in a room saturated with tribal sounds, whether directed, ambient, or randomly heard, the brain builds the capacity for physical language acquisition. Kipp (2002) elaborates:

Comprehension of the language is accomplished through repetition. The repetition has a physical effect on children. It actually fosters the development of synapses, or nerve connections in the brain. Only after these synapses are established and the language is fully understood can speech occur. Thus, after comprehension comes a silent period and finally dialogue (p 30).

Older children and adults learn language differently. In children, language synapses are developed in the frontal lobe of the brain, and the process involves simultaneously encoding, decoding and sending language back out. This process differs for youth and adults; second language development changes from the frontal lobe to another part of the brain, where a micro-dash delay occurs and the first language is used

to translate the second language—or, in the case of Kipp’s program, through English to Blackfeet to English and back to Blackfeet (p 31).

Learning language in a stress-free environment is important, particularly during the comprehension period, because while students may be able to comprehend the language, they are not yet able to speak it. As described earlier in this article, teachers present vocabulary to students and demonstrate both the words and the associated actions through activities involving physical movement. After students learn a series of Blackfeet words and can comprehend their meanings, they then acquire phrases used by teachers as they direct students to move about the classroom.

Kipp indicates it takes four or five years to accomplish full immersion in the Blackfeet language because of the difficulty in getting the students to stop using English (p 29). Threshold immersion infuses everyday language or “playground talk” with Blackfeet to teach communicative competency involving complex sentence structures such as “What the boy and girl said is that the dogs eat at the table” (p 34).

The “language nests” model allows Blackfeet children to acquire their language and learn how that language interacts with life, with their families and with their communities. Using the pedagogy of learning language characterized by the “Grandmother’s House” also demonstrates the traditional role of elders in teaching and modeling Blackfeet language to children. At the Nizipuhwahsin Center, elders serve as native language resource consultants, not classroom teachers. They saturate the learning environment with tribal sounds that listening children will use to develop synapses and eventually acquire fluency.

Traditional knowledge becomes the content of the subjects taught, including environmental studies and science, music, storytelling, mathematics, history and social studies--all taught in Blackfeet. As the children learn their language, preservation and evolution of both the Blackfeet language and culture will occur. By developing and publishing a guidebook of sixty (60) academic lessons, the Institute co-founders have provided the structure and format for the academic instruction used in all the immersion schools. Although these materials primarily are used by teachers and students in the schools, parents and community members also use the lesson book as well.

The Piegan Institute has plans to expand both the curriculum and the book, based on the process by which educators learn the language; Blackfeet teachers have the task of catching up to the language that as children they did not acquire. This process is complex, both in its breadth and depth of Blackfeet knowledge and the conceptual definitions needed to describe it (Kipp 2002). Curricula involve developing content materials, and creating a culturally responsive environment where students learn, through the Blackfeet language, their traditions, values, belief systems and ceremonial practices.

No standardized tests are used at the language immersion schools to assess mainstream academic learning because neither the co-founders nor the teachers find these useful for Blackfeet children. Instead, the Nizipuhwahsin Language Immersion Center standards involve traditional values and beliefs including acts of kindness, friendship, responsibility, and living healthy lifestyles.

These standards also translate into actions modeled by the administrators to assist other tribes in exploring language revitalization through education systems. Annual conferences sponsored by Piegan Institute have enabled other tribal leaders to learn how

they too can develop language immersion schools in their communities. (See the Piegan Institute Website).<sup>26</sup>

### **Language Immersion Schools in Lower Kuskokwim School District, Alaska<sup>27</sup>**

Alaska Yup'ik schools use the California model of two-way immersion to teach and maintain their Native language. The next section describes the Lower Kuskokwim School District immersion schools and a Yup'ik language immersion charter school in the same district, as well as the Dine' Language Immersion School in Window Rock, Arizona, where these models have been adapted for their particular communities.

Alaska's largest rural district, the Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD) covers a 22,000 square mile area the size of West Virginia. Its largest town, Bethel, is located at the mouth of a river and inland from the Bering Sea, in an area nestled in an Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in the Northwest region. The village encompasses about forty-five square miles of land and five square miles of water. The only transportation in or out of the entire area is by boat, planes or snow mobiles (during winter). The LKSD serves 3800 K-12 students in 19 schools, with fewer than 100 students in some schools and more than 250 in others. The district's 19 schools are locally controlled and have adopted a combination of immersion models.

Along with the school administrators and teaching staff, local communities in the LKSD choose the model of language program for their children; this is termed "local

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<sup>26</sup> Numerous publications and resources related to the Institute and its schools and community can be accessed from their webpage at [www.pieganinstitute.org](http://www.pieganinstitute.org). One such publication produced by Kipp is the "Encouragement, Guidance, Insights, and Lessons Learned for Native Language Activists Developing Their Own Tribal Language Programs," a document based on conversations with 12 visiting activists in March, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Correspondence, interviews, and online documents were accessed for this case study, including an interview with Bev Williams, director of the Department of Bilingual Education Programs, LKSD, August 24, 2004.



option” or “community choice” by the district. The majority of students in LKSD are Yup'ik and 25 percent of the 352 certified teachers are indigenous--the greatest number of Yup'ik educators of any district in Alaska. While students in a small number of villages speak their Native language, the majority of students in the district speak the local dialectical form of English. As described by a district administrator, “language is so delicate...with the geographical issues, and [the degree to which there is] the desire [by the community] to keep the language going.”

Four key factors identified by district administrators are considered critical for successful language immersion schools. These are local community choice, and qualified teachers who are prepared to teach in the Native language, and teachers who have both local indigenous cultural knowledge, and who also possess the ability to teach and effectively connect to the students.

The LKS District has three primary types of language immersion models: Yup'ik language development programs, two-way immersion, and structured-English immersion. These models share five key components. These are culturally-based curricula and learning environments, effective instructional methods and assessments, professional development programs, local options or community choice schools, and strong parent leadership. Development of Yup'ik language curricula and materials for use by teachers, students and families in classrooms and homes begins with the classroom teachers, many of whom are also elders. Culturally compatible instruction in LKSD requires that all teachers be bilingual and fluent in both languages; two-way language immersion programs are only possible under such circumstances.

Below we present a description of the three versions of Yup'ik language immersion used in public schools in LKSD, as well as of the Ayaprun Charter Language Immersion School.

**Model I: The Yup'ik Language Development Programs (twelve schools)**

Twelve village schools in LKS District use the Yup'ik First Language Program. While all of the children enrolled in these schools speak Yup'ik, some are bilingual and others speak no English. The native language often is used more than English in the home. Literacy development in their Yup'ik language begins in kindergarten and continues to grade 3; students then begin a transition year of intensive English. From fourth grade until twelfth grade, English language instruction occurs simultaneously with Yup'ik programs consisting of supplemental language and culture classes. Schools involved in Yup'ik First Language Program include: Atmautluak, Cheforak, Eek, Kasigluk-Akiuk, Kasigluk-Akula, Kongiganak, Kwigillingok, Newtok, Nunapitchuk, Quinhagak, Toksook Bay, Tununak, and Tuntutuliak schools. Like the community of Ayaprun Charter School in Bethel, which we describe in later pages, these villages had strong parent and teacher groups who advocated for native language immersion programs in their schools.

**Model II: The Two-Way Language Immersion (four schools)**

Six schools use a two-way language immersion or dual language immersion model. The villages supporting these schools decided to reintroduce the Yup'ik language because one of them had no Native speakers (Ayaprun Charter), and another had only a few elders who knew Yup'ik. While students spoke either Standard English or dialectical

English, none knew Yup'ik. The two-way language immersion model used in these schools follows a 90/10 formula for teaching two languages--Yup'ik (90 percent) and English (10 percent). In 1999, Ayaprun Charter's teaching staff visited schools involved in California's two-way language immersion model and received training for language instruction. Another school went through a similar process in 2000. The two-way immersion Yup'ik/English programs provide Yup'ik/Cup'ig literacy development for children in early grades K-3. Subsequently, students enter a transition year of intensive English, and then begin English language instruction with Yup'ik/Cup'ig Programs for grades 4-12. Schools involved in two-way immersion programs are: Napaskiak, Kwethluk, Napakiak (K-2), Kipnuk, Ayaprun Charter School-Bethel, and Mekoryuk Cup'ig.

### **Model III: Structured-English Immersion (four schools)**

In two villages, students had a strong background in Yup'ik; however, the community decided to implement a structured-English immersion model. Students at the school in a third village did not speak Yup'ik and only knew the local dialectical form of English. The structured-English immersion model was instituted at this school as well. While English language instruction occurs in grades K-12, Yup'ik culture and language classes also are provided. In addition, a transition year for English Language support also is available. Schools using this model include: Goodnews Bay, Platinum, BRHS-Bethel Kilbuck Elementary-Bethel, and Mikelinguut Elitnaurviat-Bethel.

The school administrators and families in these villages were swayed by recent NCLB legislation and "terrified" they might lose local control of their school if third grade students didn't reach proficiency on the English language standardized tests.

However, according to administrators, these fears are unwarranted, based on the latest standardized test scores from the K-3 schools district-wide. These data indicate that students who have attained literacy skills in Yup'ik tend to do well in the standardized tests, even at the third grade level. Furthermore, in schools where Yup'ik is the primary language spoken, test scores are higher than in neighboring schools with a structured-English immersion model.

Additional data support LKS District administrators' notions that instruction in the native language helps Yup'ik children effectively transfer their literacy skills in Yup'ik to their second language, English. The test scores also indicate higher achievement among students attending the two-way language immersion and the Yup'ik language immersion schools than among those in the structured-English immersion schools. With regard to the 31 ways that NCLB legislation has established for schools to demonstrate progress, nine district schools met the criteria for satisfactory progress and another two sites met the criteria for proficient growth without "safe harbor."<sup>28</sup> The other nine sites did not make satisfactory progress, primarily because an insufficient number of students attended school on test days. Located in tiny villages with transportation problems, these schools suffer because the absence of only a few students can lower the test scores of the entire student body.

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<sup>28</sup> Safe Harbor is a term similar to a "safety net" that permits a school to qualify as showing AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) even when scores decline; it's a provision to make the AYP requirement even if it doesn't make its target for all subgroups. For example, if the school doesn't meet the reading target for all groups, as long as the percentage not meeting proficiency in reading is decreased by 10 percent from than the previous year; and as long as the school meets the additional indicator (chosen by the state); then the school will be deemed having met AYP. This example was found at The Education Trust Website: <http://www2.edtrust.org/edtrust/etw/ca+nclb>

### **Ayaprun Charter School<sup>29</sup>**

One of the nineteen Lower Kuskokwim district schools is Ayaprun Charter School, a Yup'ik language immersion school. In 2003, thirteen certified Yup'ik teachers worked at the school and 197 students were enrolled in the school. The ethnicity of students was 96% Yup'ik and 4% Caucasian. Ayaprun Charter serves K-6<sup>th</sup> grade Yup'ik students in the town of Bethel.

Ayaprun Charter School adopted a two-way language immersion model in 1996, after three decades of a series of discontinued bilingual programs, numerous needs assessments and evaluations within the community, and the work of several task force committees. A driving force behind the language immersion program was a strong parent and teacher group concerned with rapid loss of the native language in their community. Attempts by the district to improve Yup'ik language programs had occurred from time to time prior to the founding of the Charter School; these included increasing the amount of Yup'ik instructional time provided to students and mandating native language instruction for grades K-6 in all schools. However, these efforts were stymied by opposition from groups within the community, including Yup'ik elders and local Caucasians. Even after a community task force determined that forty percent of families in the LKS District wanted the program, the local Board of Education ruled against teaching the Yup'ik language in the school. Proponents of English-Only instruction have conducted an ongoing campaign to get rid of the language-immersion school in the belief that children should only learn English and not their native language. Another group of elders who originally supported the immersion program has continued to sabotage the program

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<sup>29</sup> The information for this case study was accessed from interviews and correspondence with the principal in December 21, 2002, by Dorothy Aguilera for her dissertation.

because, lacking teaching certification from the state or a university, these individuals were not allowed to teach in it.

In 1994, Ayaprun's Board of Education finally voted to implement an immersion program. During that first year, families and teachers in the district's bilingual department initiated preliminary planning for the immersion program. Parents formed an Immersion Steering Committee, meeting monthly with the district's Department of Bilingual Education teachers to plan the curriculum for the new program. Two fluently bilingual teachers were hired for a kindergarten class; these teachers collaborated with the bilingual department to prepare for the school's first year. Their plan was to expand the program one grade level each year. Currently, the program has been implemented in kindergarten through grade six.

### **Issues Regarding Local Control and Cultural Traditions**

In 1999, the parent's Immersion Steering Committee successfully applied for charter school status from the state's Department of Education. Charter school status and autonomy from the district was sought to protect the school against future closure by school board members who objected to native language programs. The charter school founders wanted to provide a more comprehensive immersion program that expanded the language curriculum and materials development. In addition, consolidating under one administration as a charter gave the school flexibility to secure additional funds.

School leadership grew out of the community's passion for maintaining their native language while teaching a second language—English--so their children could attain cultural and communicative bilingual competency as they became adults. Two of the bilingual Elders were teachers in the pilot immersion program, and, so that they could

become school administrators, they later returned to the university to earn doctoral degrees. They were instrumental in obtaining charter status for the immersion school. Teachers, elders and families also were instrumental in supporting the process that finally induced the school board to pass the resolution supporting their program. This eventually led to the founding of the charter school. Currently, in addition to the language-immersion program, Ayaprun helps children learn subsistence roles and responsibilities for their family food systems.

The first class of students enrolled in the fall of 1995. In 2002, the sixth grade class prepared to graduate. Their cohort group was the first to attend the pilot immersion program for their entire elementary education experience. The program continues to grow and evolve to meet the needs of the students and community. In the minds of the educators in this school, Native language use in the community has been saved by the school's immersion program. The principal reported that the school has gained both state and national attention for its accomplishments. School districts statewide have visited the school to observe teachers and collaborate with the administrators in making plans to develop their own language immersion programs.

### **Characteristics of the Native Language Programs in LKSD Schools Professional Development**

Professional development programs in LKSD involve utilizing university resources for learning effective, research-based instructional methods for language immersion models for both pre-service and in-service teachers. The schools also support teachers by providing time for them to share ideas and create culturally-based content materials in both languages-- Yup'ik and English—following state standards and benchmarks. Instructional methods for teaching all subject areas continue to evolve as

teachers co-construct team-teaching in multi-age classroom settings, pair up to participate in teaching and assessing students' learning processes, and to observe their teaching partners. Professional development continues to facilitate the advancement of instructional methods concerning how to create and facilitate culturally responsive learning environments. Learning environments coincide with instructional methods such as grouping students by varied levels, ages, learning styles, and number of students—from small to large groups and individual work.

Initially, teachers spent five weeks in the district's professional development program, receiving specialized training for the bilingual language immersion, the Yup'ik language development program, and the structured-English language models. Now, however, the district has pared down the professional development program to three weeks. In addition, elders and teachers co-develop approximately six new publications in both languages each year. Local artists are hired as the illustrators for these books. The quality of the books is professional and funding for publishing new books is generated from the sale of the books. In 2002, a CDROM was created by elders and teachers with federal funding provided by US Department of Education, under the Title III program.

### **Culturally Compatible Language Instruction**

As Blackfeet children leave the preschools and enter kindergarten, they will have acquired oral proficiency in their native language. Students in the primary grades --K-3<sup>rd</sup>-- are taught in Yup'ik, including reading, writing, math, and communicative competency skills. Once they are developmentally prepared in Yup'ik—that is, once they are proficient in the literacy skills in their native language—their literacy skills will readily begin to transfer to their second language, English.



In each school, teachers developed culturally based curricula, including integrated units for all content areas focused on the seasons of the year, and culturally based Yup'ik subsistence practices. The bilingual/bicultural curriculum is aligned with the state standards and teachers and elders have leveled books in both languages, which is a difficult process because Yup'ik uses phrases, rather than a single word, to express thoughts. As a consequence, the elders translated English words as sentences or phrases in Yup'ik. Schools were given permission by publishers of the English primary books to paste the Yup'ik phrases over the English words. Teachers also use a comprehensive instruction model for teaching content. The bilingual language immersion schools require teachers and elders to collaborate on selecting appropriate assessments for Yup'ik children that fulfill the state requirements of standardized testing, and to monitor student progress for learning their native language.<sup>30</sup> Alaska's department of education was one of the first in the nation to develop culturally responsive standards, benchmarks, and alternative assessments for its indigenous and mainstream populations. However, because state standards continue to change, district administrators and teachers refer to the alignment of curriculum as a "work-in-progress."

### **Appropriate Assessments**

One difficulty in creating appropriate language assessments has arisen because of the different structures of English and Yup'ik. Teachers have learned to monitor student progress in reading Yup'ik books by using an adaptation of a miscue analysis assessment method in which they count the syllables, rather than words, that students miss, as they read aloud to gauge the student's phonetic skills. Although teachers monitor student learning through a myriad of assessments (i.e., reading recovery, shared reading and

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Director, Department of Bilingual Education, LKSD, Bethel on August 24, 2004.

others), these K-3<sup>rd</sup> programs are un-graded. Parents are given student progress reports frequently to establish at what level their children are learning and the skills they need to learn to reach the next level. This strategy for involving parents in their children's academic progress has worked well for the students, the families and the schools.

### **Problems in Maintaining Native Language Instruction**

As we have hinted in the previous discussion, all of the schools in the LKSD have faced problems in maintaining the language immersion programs. Below, we describe some of these difficulties; as we shall argue, the experiences of the Yup'ik people parallels difficulties encountered by other communities as well.

**Disparities of Esteem and Derogation of Indigenous Practices** For Yup'ik people, subsistence practice has been a primary link between basic survival, and their cultural traditions and knowledge. As their ancestors have done for thousands of years, contemporary Alaska Natives also practice subsistence hunting and gathering of food from their natural environment, rather than purchasing processed and packaged food sold in grocery stores. These practices are embedded in linguistic forms and communication practices.

However, Alaskan Native communities have suffered for generations from being told their languages, religions, and cultural practices were inferior to those from Euro-American communities (Fred Tasker, Knight Rider News Service, 2003). Such derogation helps explain why some Tribal members don't support native language acquisition in the schools. Elders who were schooled according to the boarding school system were punished, sometimes harshly, for speaking their languages. Assimilationist

educational policies resulted in serious loss of language and cultural identity; today, few Elders remain who are fluent in their languages.

More than 95% of all indigenous children in Alaska attend public schools where English-Only standards are the norm. Families who for several generations attended the boarding and mission schools perpetuate the practice of not teaching Tribal languages to their children; this creates a disconnect with formal education and is the primary reason many families not only will not participate in the schools, but often argue against indigenous language programs,<sup>31</sup> fearing that their children won't learn English if they're taught in their Native language in the primary grades.

These fears have accelerated because of the recent No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Furthermore, school administrators also are beginning to substitute English-Only programs for the Yup'ik language immersion programs, fearing that students will do so poorly on standardized tests in English that their schools will be turned over to the state Department of Education and privatized.<sup>32</sup> Because achieving consensus among Native people supporting language acquisition and bilingual immersion programs is an essential component of maintaining effective language acquisition programs (Aguilera 2003), issues such as these, which destroy such consensus, pose a threat to language immersion programs.

**Funding Issues** Federal funding was awarded to LKS District through a Title VII grant to develop a native language-based curricula and materials (a CD ROM); however, those funds ended in 2002. When school administrators tried to apply for additional funds, they were told by federal program specialists in Title III and VII who visited the district in

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<sup>31</sup> Darrell Kipp (2004) Piegan Institute.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Bev Williams, LKSD, Department of Education, August 24, 2004.

2003 that the Yup'ik language immersion programs were not considered foreign language based (they were taught as an immersion program, not in individual courses). Consequently, no further funding would be awarded to the district for language acquisition or maintenance programs, and certainly not for language immersion programs where no English was being taught. According to these federal program specialists, English-only language immersion programs would be funded, but bilingual immersion programs would not be permitted, even those that were based on solid research on language acquisition--such as the two-way immersion programs used in LKSD.

**Lack of Indigenous Staffing** Historically, school administrator and teacher turnover is high in the district. Although the majority of support staff in schools, including the paraprofessionals, custodians, home liaisons, office and food service staff, is local and indigenous, only 25 percent of the certified teachers are Yup'ik. To increase these numbers of indigenous teachers, LKS District offers financial assistance to community members for getting their teaching certification degree through the local university program. Yup'ik adults, particularly the paraprofessionals, are encouraged by the district to become teachers in the local schools through this scholarship program. One district level administrator is participating in mentoring Yup'ik school administrators to fill administrative positions as the current administrators retire. Internships also are supported within the district departments.

Geographical location and cultural traditions also have compromised the training of local certified teachers. The villages are isolated from university campuses and the teacher education programs. Family members enrolled in universities typically are schooled through distance-delivery courses until they earn their associate degrees, but in

order to become a certified teacher, they then have to leave the community to complete their remaining coursework on a university campus. Family members are reluctant to leave the village because their responsibility is to provide subsistence for their families. If they are gone, no one remains to supply their share of the food. Many village homes don't have running water or sewer facilities, and this creates more work for family members, particularly those families with many of children.

**Limits on Access to University Training** The University of Alaska in Fairbanks, located 527 miles from Bethel, offers teacher education programs and in-service training for culturally responsive instructional methods for the Lower Kuskokwim schools. The district also has access to the University's Professional Development Center, which provides classroom instruction training for in-service and pre-service teachers. According to the LKSD administrators, offerings for other technical support services are limited, and based on their experiences, the other higher education institutions in the state have neither reached out to the rural districts nor indicated they are aware of the needs of these districts.

### **Dine' Language Immersion School (Tse'hootsoi' Dine' Bi'olta')**<sup>33</sup>

We now turn to yet another community's experience, the adaptation of language immersion for a community in the Navajo Nation. The Window Rock Unified School District initially began immersion classrooms in 1986 at the Fort Defiance Elementary School. The program began with kindergarten students and expanded by one grade each year to a K-5 program. Later, Fort Defiance Elementary became two schools, one serving K-2 students and an Intermediate Learning Center serving grades 3-5. They both offered

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<sup>33</sup> Information for this case study was accessed by interviews, correspondence, and documents provided by Florian Tom Johnson, Cultural Director on September 2, 2004 by Dorothy Aguilera.

language immersion classrooms with Dine' as the language of instruction. Window Rock Elementary School is the third district school providing a language immersion program for K-5 students. This year the district combined all classrooms into one building, creating the new Tse'hootsoi' Dine' Bi'olta' or Dine' Language Immersion School, which serves 250 students. The new school has 15 Dine' language teachers who instruct only in their language, and three English language teachers who, because they are fluently bilingual, can instruct in both languages to help students achieve biliteracy.

The Navajo Nation's Dine' Cultural Content Standards are infused into the state standards in all core subjects, including foreign language. The District's vision for schools includes creating student-centered learning environments reflecting the Dine' values of life-long learning.

Using a two-way language immersion model, K-1 students receive all instruction in Dine'. Beginning in second grade, 10 percent (45 minutes) of instruction is in English and 90 percent is in Dine'. An additional 10 percent is added to the English instruction in each grade level until 6<sup>th</sup> grade, where English and Dine' language usage is 50/50.

Language teachers use a verb-based strategy to develop basic interpersonal communicative skills, providing opportunities for students to learn through the use of situational contexts in their native language.

Challenges have arisen because of the school's open enrollment policy, which permits any students wanting to attend the new language immersion school to do so. This has meant that some students who have no Dine' language facility have enrolled. Older students in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades who only know English struggle in particular with the two-way language immersion model. School administrators are developing options to assist

these older students. Another challenge was finding out that though students seemed to be able to read and write in Dine', they did not understand what they were reading or writing about.

State assessment data indicate the Dine' language immersion students outperform their peers in mainstream classroom instruction in two of three core subject areas (see Appendix C). 73 percent of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade Dine' language immersion students met or exceeded standards in Mathematics as compared to 15 percent of the students mainstreamed in English language classrooms. In 5<sup>th</sup> grade writing assessments, 50 percent of Dine' language immersion students met or exceeded standards as compared to 15 percent of those mainstreamed. Dine' Immersion students lag behind their mainstream peers in reading in both 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades.

Administrators and teachers have begun to emphasize the development of basic interpersonal communicative skills in Dine' because research has indicated that these basic skills should transfer into improved reading comprehension in both languages. These findings also note as a problem the limited Dine' language based reading resources available to students, teachers, and families. Interesting, and entertaining print materials such as magazines and comic books, and fiction books tend to be outnumbered by the books related to storytelling and historical accounts of tribes; these are less compelling to new readers.

### **Conclusion**

Tribal communities often have had to settle for less than their aspirations for language and cultural education for their children and families. Rather than providing sufficient funding resources and validation for bilingual immersion programs, and

professional development programs that effectively support these models, mainstream schools, along with the federal and state Departments of Education, have mandated European-American culture and language programs for indigenous students. As a result, the typical model for a language and culture program consists of one hour of instruction each week per grade level. Further, most of the Caucasian school administrators who predominate in schools serving Indian students, as well as the majority of teachers providing instruction, do not view bilingualism or communicative competency in both languages to be important goals for students or schools. In some cases, even the Native teachers or instructors have given up on the idea that students could actually acquire enough fluency in their indigenous languages to speak, write, read, and sing competently.

This article examined several schools and districts that have successfully implemented language immersion models. It becomes clear that the most successful schools established an advisory council of experts who were Tribal members or European-American allies committed to effective education to direct and make policy. They also hired and/or trained bilingual teachers and Elder instructors, and created culturally based curricula and effective pedagogy to be used in regular classrooms. From these practices evolved successful and substantial language and culture immersion programs. The majority of these school communities also had private and/or non-profit funding for their schools and programs.

Although the current political climate continues to downplay the right of Native American students to learn their languages, and even though NCLB legislation virtually mandates English-Only instruction, the models for language and culture programs described in this article reveal the possibilities and the “how-to’s” for other communities



who want to develop and implement similar culturally responsive models of education, particularly language immersion models for their children and adults. They also demonstrate that native, or heritage languages can be emphasized without diminishing the performance of students in English.

In Appendix A, we have provided a description of numerous organizations and contact information. It is our hope that readers will explore these resources in their efforts to establish language immersion schools and programs.

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### **Organization Resource Information and Websites**

American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI), University of Arizona at

Tucson was accessed on September 16, 2004. AILDI Website:

<http://www.ed.arizona.edu/AILDI/program.htmig>

Grotto and Lannan Foundations provide resources to revitalize heritage languages. This

information was accessed on September 16, 2004 from the Websites:  
<http://www.grottofoundation.org/> and <http://www.lannan.org/>

Northern Arizona University's Bilingual Multicultural Education Program and its Center  
for Excellence in Education information was accessed on September 16, 2004.

The web version of Revitalizing Indigenous Languages can be found at  
[http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/RIL\\_Content.html](http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/RIL_Content.html)

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory information and source book was found  
in the publications section of the website and was accessed on September 27,  
2004. The Website: [www.sedl.org](http://www.sedl.org)

**Interviews and Correspondence with Language Immersion School Administrators**

- 1) August 24, 2004 with Bev Williams, Lower Kuskokwim School District,  
Director of the Department of Academic Programs, PO Box 305, Bethel, AK 99559;  
(907) 543-4850-wk; (907) 543-4924-fax; [bev\\_williams@lksd.org](mailto:bev_williams@lksd.org)
  
- 2) September 2, 2004 with Florian Tom Johnson, Window Rock, Arizona, Diné  
Language Immersion School/Tséhootsoí Diné Bi'ólta', Dual Language/Culture Director;  
[florianj@wrschool.net](mailto:florianj@wrschool.net)
  
- 3) September 16, 2004 with Nāmaka Rawlins, Executive Director, Aha Punana Leo,  
Hilo, Hawaii, (808) 935-4304; <mailto:namaka@leoki.uhh.hawaii.edu> and the Aha Punana  
Leo organization Website address is [www.ahapunanaleo.org](http://www.ahapunanaleo.org)
  
- 4) August 18, 2004 with Darrell Kipp, Developmental Officer, Piegan Institute,  
Browning, Montana, Correspondence; 406-338-3518, Website:  
<http://www.pieganinstitute.org/index.htm>

## Appendix A

### Resources for Language Immersion Models and Programs

Janine Pease-Pretty On Top's (2003) recent study<sup>34</sup> found that approximately 50 tribal communities are involved to some degree in language revitalization...<sup>35</sup> Pretty On Top's study examines a variety of programmatic structures adopted by Tribal school communities to teach language and culture, including language immersion, two-way language (bilingual), language camps, retreats, and instruction in the native language as a foreign language. According to sources identified in this study, there are fifty (50) active native language immersion schools, camps, and retreats; nine schools included in this study were described as providing language and culture programs. Several of these were language immersion schools, including the Hawaiian Language Immersion Schools which use the Maori model from New Zealand.

For additional information available on the Internet, see the American Indian College Fund website,<sup>36</sup> the Native American Language Issues (NALI) publications, including the papers presented at its annual conference,<sup>37</sup> and documents from the Piegan Institute, including a number of news articles and resources from the annual conference that promotes and provides technical support to tribes interested in implementing language immersion schools. Additional resources are available as links on these websites including publications, non-published papers, language immersion schools, and

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<sup>34</sup> This study was funded and sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the American Indian College Fund.

<sup>35</sup> This study can be accessed online from the American Indian College Fund website--  
[www.americanindiancollegefund.org](http://www.americanindiancollegefund.org).

<sup>36</sup> The website address is [www.americanindiancollegefund.org](http://www.americanindiancollegefund.org).

<sup>37</sup> Introduction to *Revitalizing Indigenous Languages*, edited by Jon Reyhner, Gina Cantoni, Robert N. St. Clair, and Evangeline Parsons Yazzie (pp. v-xx). Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University. Copyright 1999 by Northern Arizona University. Website address is [http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/RIL\\_Content.html](http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/RIL_Content.html).

funding resources such as the Grotto and Lannan Foundations. The websites for these foundations are: <http://www.grottofoundation.org/> and <http://www.lannan.org/>.

Another source for information about language programs for American Indian children is available thru SEDL (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, U.S. DOE). Based on its professional development work in Indian education with school communities in the Southwest region of the United States, SEDL developed a source book in 1999 for educators involved in language programs. Twenty-four language and culture programs are profiled in the source book which is available on the SEDL website.<sup>38</sup>

Since 1994, Northern Arizona University's Bilingual Multicultural Education Program and its Center for Excellence in Education have held annual symposiums featuring the teaching and learning of indigenous languages. Over the years, the symposiums featured a variety of training workshops and presentations ranging from language immersion models, to Total Physical Response instructional methods, to how to produce print materials including textbooks. Papers from the Louisville Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Conference were compiled by scholars and published in a book, *Revitalizing Indigenous Languages* (ed. by Reyhner, Cantoni, St. Clair, & Yazzie, 2002). Published by Northern Arizona University Press. Researchers and program directors contributed invaluable information on the process for adopting a model of teaching and learning language, for developing and implementing language immersion programs, for collaborating with teachers and community members, especially the elders who were

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<sup>38</sup> The website address is [www.sedl.org](http://www.sedl.org) and look for the source book in the publications section.



fluent speakers in their tribal languages. The book is available by chapters in a web version on the Internet.<sup>39</sup>

Founded in 1978, the American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI), University of Arizona at Tucson, has provided resources and supported the infusion of American Indian linguistic and cultural knowledge into school curricula. The Institute as well prepares American Indian teachers and parents to become researchers, practitioners, curriculum specialists, and effective language teachers. Over the 25 years since its inception, AILDI has sponsored a number of conferences and published resources and books to support the revitalization of tribal languages through public education. More information and resources are available on the website.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> The web version of Revitalizing Indigenous Languages can be found at [http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/RIL\\_Content.html](http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/RIL_Content.html)

<sup>40</sup> AILDI website at <http://www.ed.arizona.edu/AILDI/program.htm>