



Affirming Identity: The Importance of Revitalizing Indigenous Languages

**25th Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium
University of Lethbridge 6/7/18**

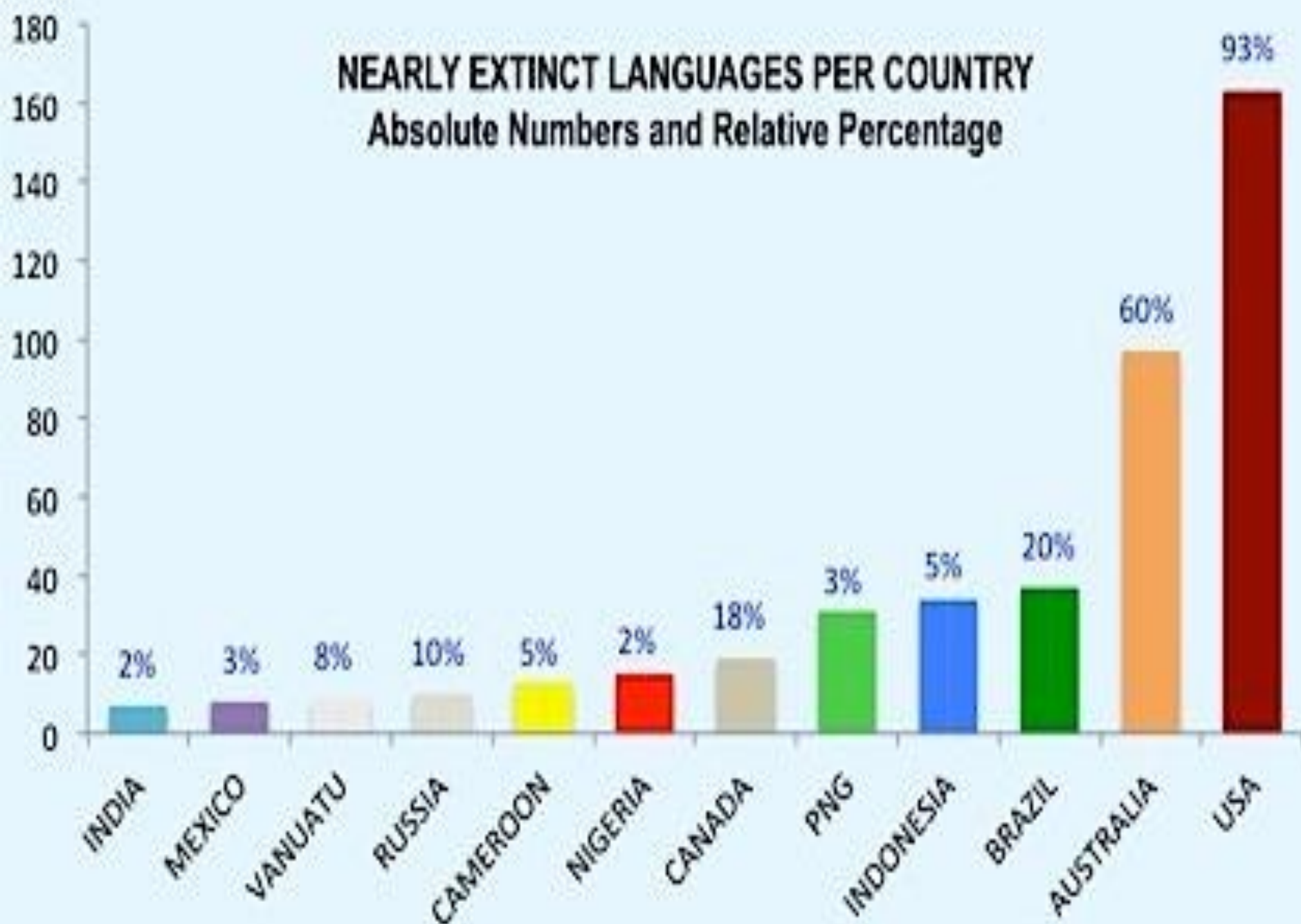
Jon Reyhner
nau.edu/TIL



Northern Arizona University

NEARLY EXTINCT LANGUAGES PER COUNTRY

Absolute Numbers and Relative Percentage



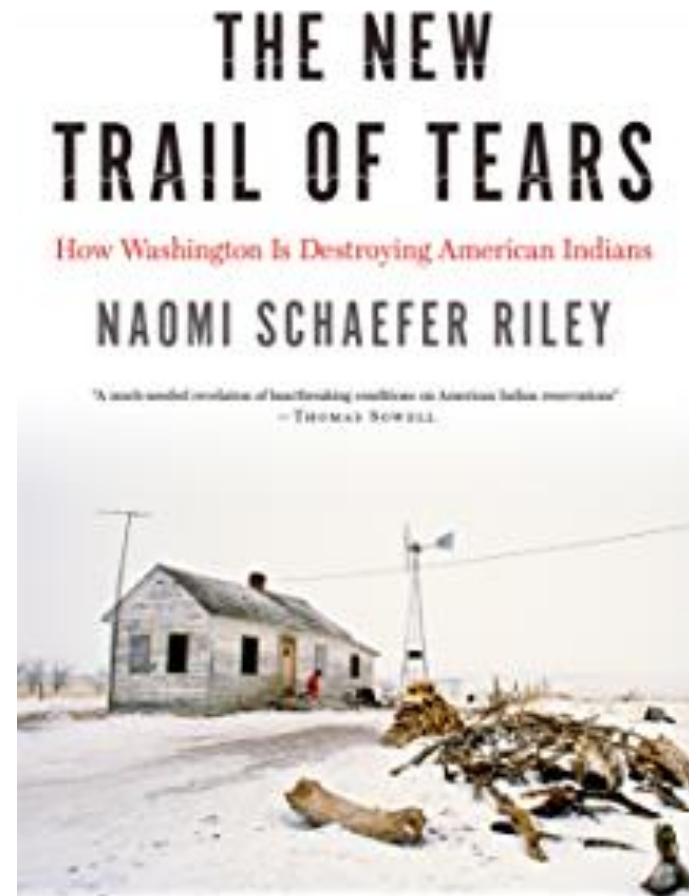


Writing in *The Wall Street Journal* in 2002, John J. Miller declared that the increasing pace of language death is “a trend that is arguably worth celebrating [because] age-old obstacles to communication are collapsing” and primitive societies are being brought into the modern world.

However, far too often this modern world is one of the materialistic and hedonistic MTV culture. Miller’s call for celebration is nothing new, and I will show in this presentation today to show how arguable his call for celebration is.

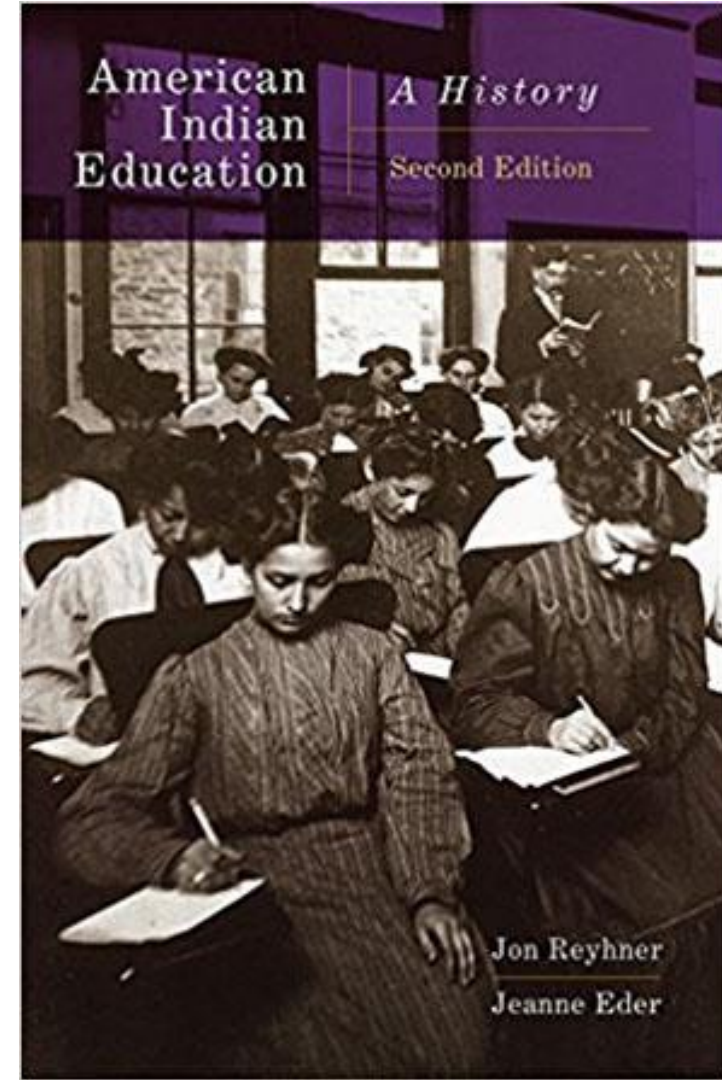


There are various explanations for the challenges faced by Indigenous people today. For example Naomi Schaefer Riley in her 2016 book, *The New Trail of Tears: How Washington is Destroying American Indians*, points to government welfare policies as leading to the family disintegration and culture of dependency found on many Indian reservations today.



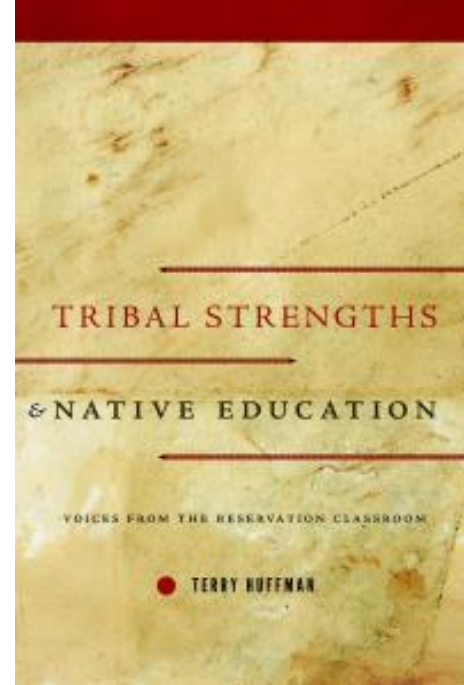


Riley and other conservative critics tend to ignore the long ethnocentric history of efforts in the United States and other colonizing countries to educate Indigenous peoples by bringing them from “savagery to civilization” (see, e.g. Adams, 1995; Reyhner & Eder, 2017; Szasz, 1999) by denigrating their languages and cultures and seeking to replace them with English and a Euro-American culture.





In contrast to Naomi Schaefer Riley who spent a short time studying Indian education, researchers like Terry Huffman who have spent decades studying American Indian classroom teachers and school administrators point to the importance of American Indian student identity and **tribal strengths**, which are too often ignored or even devalued by teachers.



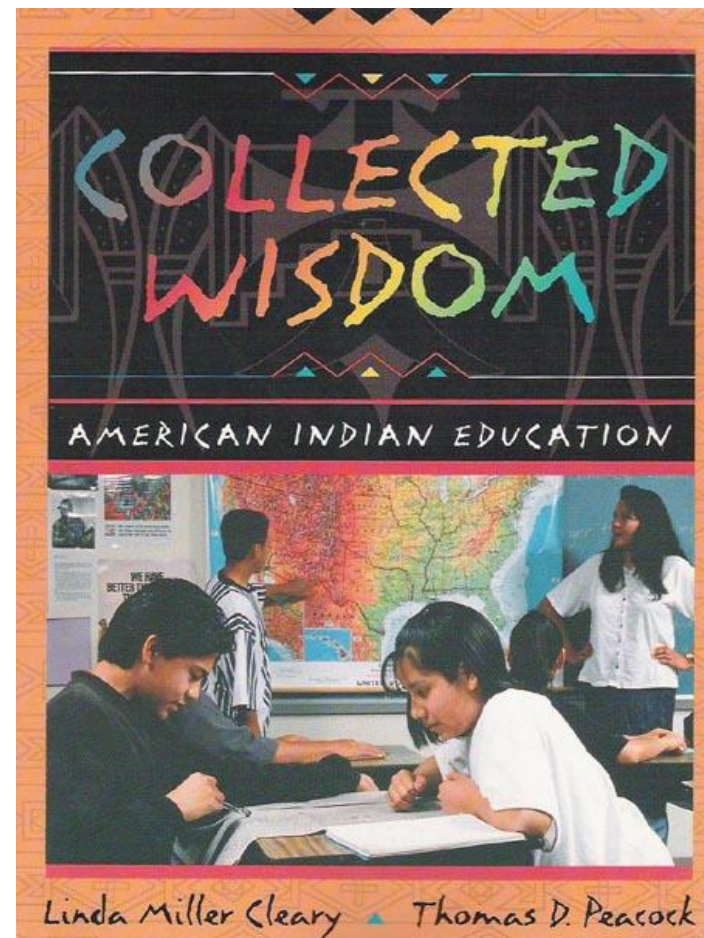
A principal Huffman interviewed lamented “We are leaving the child behind because we have forgotten teaching styles and, like I said, the language and the culture. That has all been put on the back burner when they should actually be up front” (Huffman, 2013, p. 95).



Huffman (2010), among others, has marshaled considerable evidence that “rejects the notion that American Indian students must undergo some form of assimilation to succeed academically.” He found through his research how a “strong sense of cultural identity serves as an emotional and cultural anchor. Individuals gain self-assuredness, self-worth, even a sense of purpose from their ethnicity. By forging a strong cultural identity, individuals develop the confidence to explore a new culture and not be intimidated. They do not have to fear cultural loss through assimilation. They know who they are and why they are engaged in mainstream education.”



Cleary and Peacock who interviewed over 100 teachers of Indigenous students summed up what they learned from the educators they interviewed, writing “The key to producing successful American Indian students in our modern educational system... is to first ground these students in their American Indian belief and value systems” (1998, p. 101).





Why Native Language Revitalization?

A. To Heal the Wounds of Colonialism

B. To Improve Students' Behavior

C. To Improve Students' Academic Success



Why Native Language Revitalization?

I. To Heal the Wounds of Colonialism

- Ganado Mission School's Entrance About 1950





Civilization *Versus* Savagery

In 1869 after the Civil War (America's bloodiest war where both the North and South spoke English), President Ulysses S. Grant's Indian Peace Commissioners concluded that language differences led to misunderstandings and that "by educating the children of these tribes in the English language these differences would have disappeared, and civilization would have followed at once . . ."



The Peace Commission went on to declare that “through sameness of language is produced sameness of sentiment, and thought; customs and habits are molded and assimilated in the same way, and thus in process of time the differences producing trouble would have been gradually obliterated.... In the difference of language to-day lies two-thirds of our trouble. . . . Schools should be established, which children should be required to attend; their barbarous dialect should be blotted out and the English language substituted.”



Damage from Assimilationist and Ethnocentric Education that Led to Language Loss

Dillon Platero, the first director of the Navajo Division of Education, described in 1975 the experience of a typical Navajo student: “Kee was sent to boarding school as a child where—as was the practice—he was punished for speaking Navajo. Since he was only allowed to return home during Christmas and summer, he lost contact with his family.”



“Kee withdrew from both the White and Navajo worlds as he grew older because he could not comfortably communicate in either language. He became one of the many thousand Navajos who were non-lingual—a man without a language. By the time he was 16, Kee was an alcoholic, uneducated, and despondent—**without identity**.”



Dr. Lori Arviso Alvord, the first Navajo woman surgeon writes in her 1999 autobiography *The Scalpel and the Silver Bear*, “In their childhoods both my father and my grandmother had been punished for speaking Navajo in school. Navajos were told by white educators that, in order to be successful, they would have to forget their language and culture and adopt American ways.”





“They were warned that if they taught their children to speak Navajo, the children would have a harder time learning in school, and would therefore be at a disadvantage. A racist attitude existed. Navajo children were told that their culture and lifeways were inferior, and they were made to feel they could never be as good as white people.... My father suffered terribly from these events and conditions.”

Dr. Arviso Alvord concludes that “two or three generations of our tribe had been taught to feel shame about our culture, and parents had often not taught their children traditional Navajo beliefs—the very thing that would have shown them how to live, the very thing that could keep them strong.”



Alvord's conclusion is supported by Hallett, Chandler and LaLone's (2007) study of 152 First Nations bands in British Columbia. They found that "those [First Nations] bands in which a majority of members reported a conversational knowledge of an Aboriginal language also experienced low to absent youth suicide rates. By contrast, those bands in which less than half of the members reported conversational knowledge suicide rates were six times greater" (p. 396).



Healing and Language Revitalization

As Joy Harjo (Muscogee Creek) notes, “**colonization teaches us to hate ourselves.**” We are told that we are nothing until we adopt the ways of the colonizer, till we become the colonizer.” But even then Native people are often not accepted—a brown [or black] skin can’t be washed off.





Assimilation
still in
progress

i talk
navajo
at
daycare



Even Some Indians Agree With Assimilation

I know what it's like to have a racial identity because I used to be an Indian. I grew up with this idea and people accepted me as an Indian and I believed in the whole concept of race. As a child, being Indian and having race felt shallow and mysterious at first, but it felt real enough. It felt important, too – it wasn't at all a slight matter to have race.

So when I gave up being Indian during the late 1990s, it wasn't easy to do. But I chose to give it up after I discovered the truth about race.

It's a lie. The whole concept defaces the nature of humanity. Race has more to do with satisfying the human impulse to sort things into convenient classes than with any meaningful biological definition of humankind. And its main purpose is not to comment on humankind, but rather to serve as a means for gathering and wielding social power – mostly the power to dehumanize ourselves and each other.

Roger Echo-Hawk, *The Magic Children*



Is Assimilation a Good Idea?

University of Utah Professor Donna Deyhle from 20 years of research found that Navajo and Ute students with a strong sense of cultural identity could overcome the structural inequalities in American society and the discrimination they faced as American Indians.

In a study of students on three reservations in the upper mid-west, Whitbeck, Hoyt, Stubben and LaFromboise reported in the *Journal of American Indian Education* in 2001 that the traditional cultural values defined “a good way of life” typified by pro-social attitudes and expectations and that learning the Native culture is a resiliency factor.



In a September 2000 press release, Navajo Nation President Kelsey Begaye declared that the “preservation of Navajo culture, tradition, and language” is the number one guiding principle of the Navajo Nation.”





Statement of Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr. in 2005 after a high school shooting incident



We are all terribly saddened by the news about our relatives on their land in Red Lake in Minnesota. Unfortunately, the sad truth is, I believe, these kinds of incidents are evidence of natives losing their cultural and traditional ways that have sustained us as a people for centuries.

Respect for our elders is a teaching shared by all native people. In the olden days we lived by that. When there was a problem, we would ask, “What does Grandpa say? What does Grandma say?”

On many native nations, that teaching is still intact, although we see it beginning to fade with incidents like this.



Even on the big Navajo Nation, we, as a people, are not immune to losing sight of our values and ways. Each day we see evidence of the chipping away of Navajo culture, language and traditions by so many outside forces.

Because we are losing our values as a people, it behooves native nations and governments that still have their ceremonies, their traditions and their medicine people, to do all they can to hang onto those precious pieces of culture. That is what will allow us to be true sovereign native nations. This is what will allow our people to stand on our own. The way to deal with problems like this one is contained in our teachings.



Why Native Language Revitalization?

II. To improve Students' Behavior



Interviewing Hopi elders, Hopi scholar Dr. Sheilah Nicholas ([2010](#), [2013](#)) found that they view the recent decline in youth speaking Hopi to be associated with their “unHopi” behavior leading to gang activity and disrespect of elders whereas the Hopi language is associated with traditional values of hard work, reciprocity, and humility. Indigenous and other youth need to develop a strong sense of identity that focuses on respect for oneself and others to make them less susceptible to peer group pressure and Madison Avenue advertising.



Dr. Richard Littlebear ([1999](#)) also points out how the attraction of gangs on Indigenous youth on Indian reservations today and how youth need to develop a strong sense of tribal identity to resist joining them.



I picked up this card at the 22nd BMEEEC in Alaska in 1996 and still carry it in my wallet.

Iñupiat Ilitqusiat

*E*VERY IÑUPIAQ IS RESPONSIBLE TO ALL OTHER INUPIAT FOR THE SURVIVAL OF OUR CULTURAL SPIRIT, AND THE VALUES AND TRADITIONS THROUGH WHICH IT SURVIVES. THROUGH OUR EXTENDED FAMILY, WE RETAIN, TEACH, AND LIVE OUR IÑUPIAQ WAY.





Similar lists of values can be found for Indigenous peoples around the world.

With guidance and support from Elders, we must teach our children Inupiaq values.

OUR UNDERSTANDING OF
OUR UNIVERSE AND OUR
PLACE IN IT IS A BELIEF IN
GOD AND A RESPECT FOR
ALL HIS CREATIONS.

knowledge of language
sharing
respect for others
cooperation
respect for elders
love for children
hard work
knowledge of family tree
avoidance of conflict
respect for nature
spirituality
humor
family roles
hunter success
domestic skills
humility
responsibility to tribe



Respect and Self-Discipline

The Rock Point Community School Board felt in the 1970s “that it was the breakdown of a working knowledge of Navajo kinship that caused much of what they perceived as inappropriate, un-Navajo, behavior; the way back, they felt was to teach students that system.” Their answer was to establish A bilingual education program with an extensive Navajo Social Studies component that included the theory of Navajo kinship.



BIG DREAMS: Pedro Lee, a second-grader at the Rock Point Community School on the Navajo Reservation, displays a book about himself, "I'll Be a Singer" (Stephen Trimble photo)



The Window Rock Navajo Immersion School emphasizes bringing traditional values into the classroom. “Navajo values are embedded in the classroom pedagogy.” Teachers address their students according to Navajo kinship relations. A parent, “noticed a lot of differences compared to the other students who aren’t in the immersion program. [The immersion students] seem more disciplined and have a lot more respect for older, well anyone, like teachers. They communicate better with their grandparents, their uncles and stuff. It seems like it makes them more mature and more respectful. I see other kids and they just run around crazy. My kids aren’t like that.... It really helps, because it’s a positive thing.”

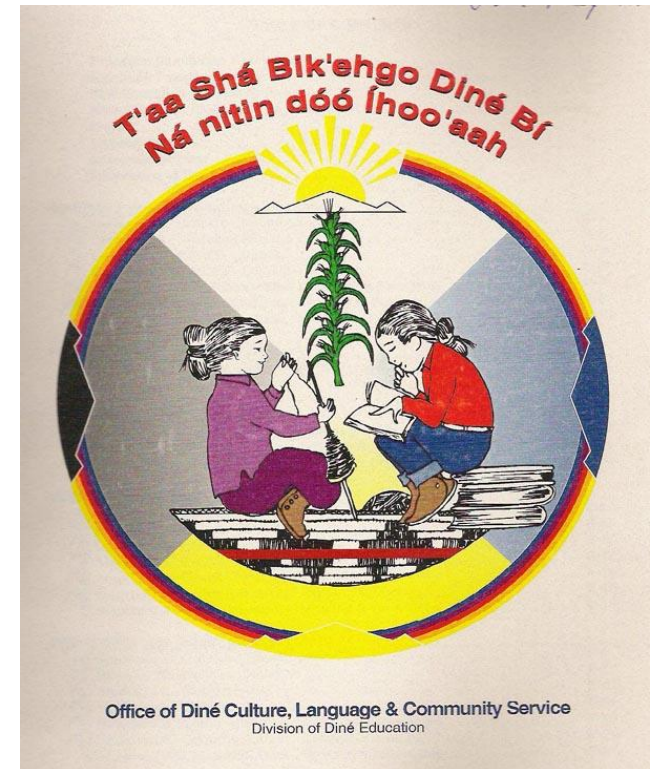


In the Navajo bilingual and immersion school students tend to act more responsibly as that is the behavior that was taught and expected.





The Navajo Nation's "*Diné Cultural Content Standards* [for schools] is predicated on the belief that firm grounding of native students in their indigenous cultural heritage and language, is a fundamentally sound prerequisite to well developed and culturally healthy students." Navajo values to be taught include being generous and kind, respecting kinship, values, and sacred knowledge."





Addressing the National Indian Education Association Denver in 2005, Cecelia Fire Thunder, President of the Oglala Sioux, spoke about her gratefulness for the sacrifices her ancestors made and the need to have an identity and belong somewhere.





She declared, “I speak English well because I spoke Lakota well.... Our languages are value based. Everything I need to know is in our language.” Language is not just communication, “It’s about bringing back our values and good things about how to treat each other.” And she called for tribal language total immersion head start programs in Indian country.



Why Native Language Revitalization?

III. To Improve Students' Academic Success



Research on Bilingualism

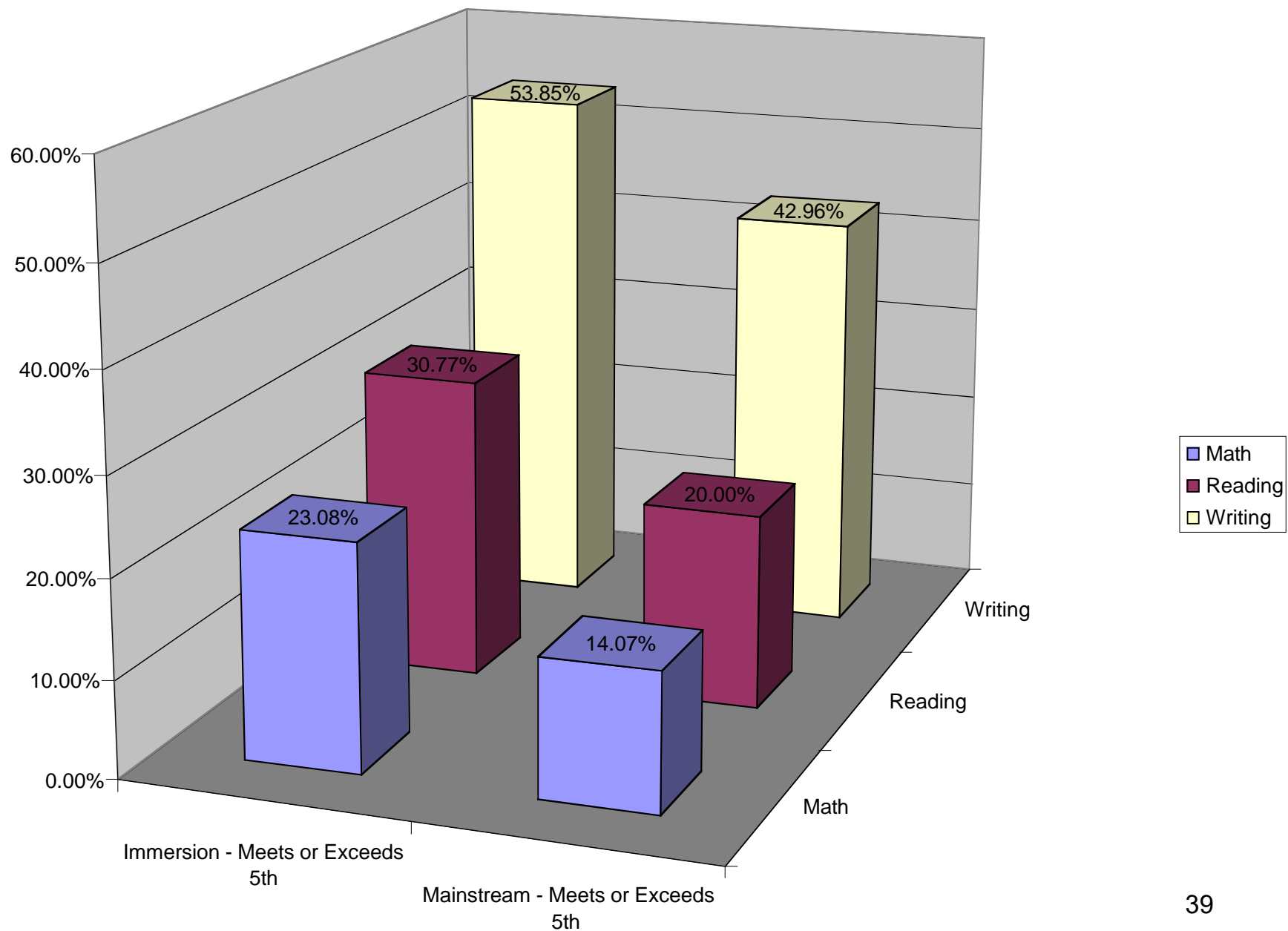
Reviews of research on fluent bilinguals indicate they have some cognitive advantages over monolinguals and are thus more intelligent. (See e.g., Colin Baker's *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 2001).

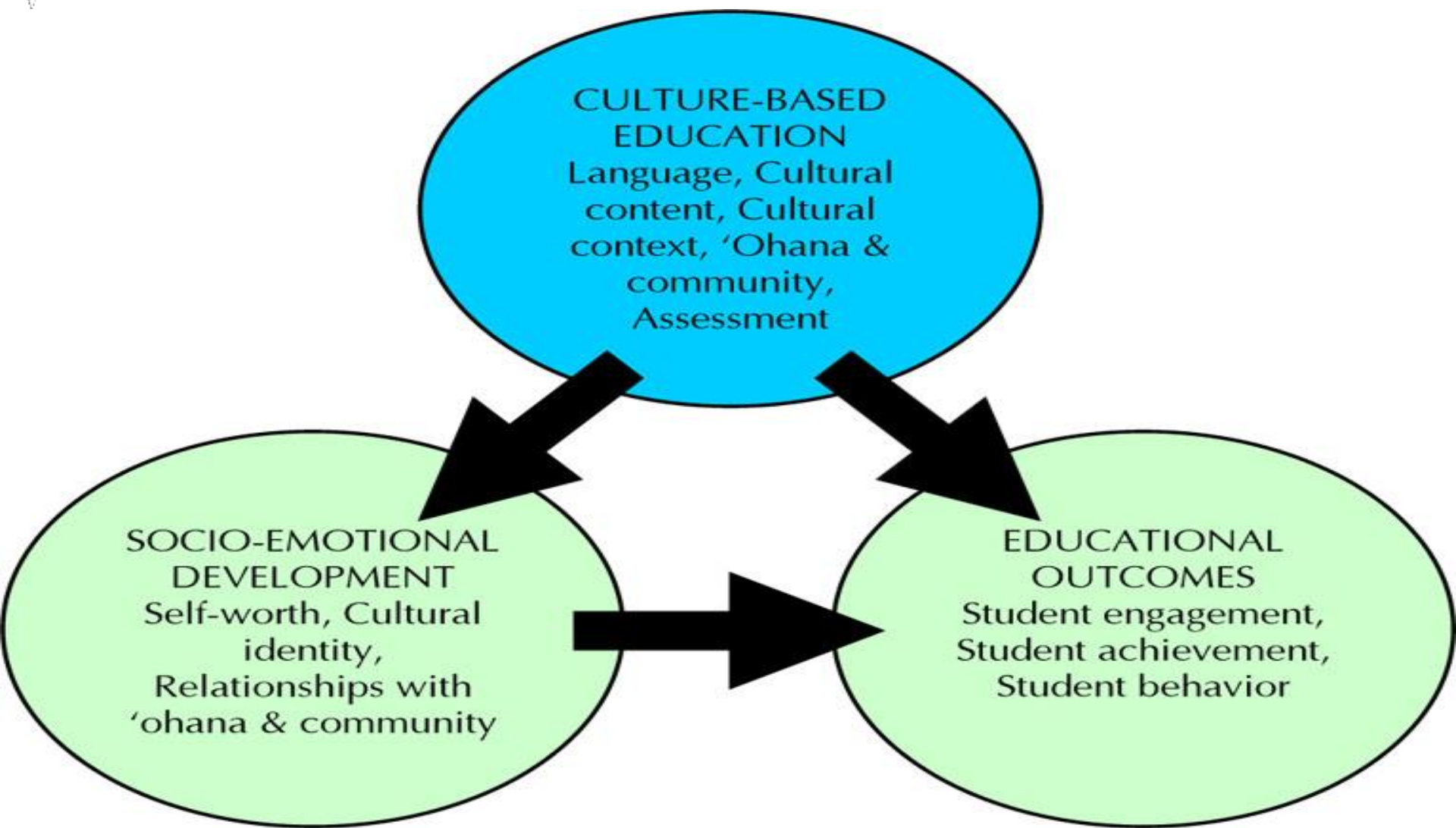


To help end the discordance between home and school, Rock Point Community School started a maintenance/developmental bilingual program in 1967 when it was found that English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching methods did not bring up Navajo students' tests scores to national averages. In Rock Point's bilingual program students were taught to read and write Navajo starting in Kindergarten while they also start learning English. This program has been modified and continues today in the Window Rock Public School District.



5th Grade Student Achievement Data Comparison - THTILC 2004







The Kamehameha Schools Research & Evaluation Division in Hawaii surveyed 600 teachers, 2,969 students, and 2,264 parents in 62 schools and found that: Culture-Based Education (CBE):

1. positively impacts student socio-emotional well-being (e.g., identity, self-efficacy, social relationships).
2. enhanced socio-emotional well-being, in turn, positively affects math and reading test scores.
3. is positively related to math and reading test scores for all students, and particularly for those with low socio-emotional development, most notably when supported by overall CBE use within the school.

Kana'iaupuni, Ledward, & Jensen, 2010



In 2004, the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs' Office of Indian Education Programs (OIEP) held its third Language and Culture Preservation Conference in Albuquerque, NM. OIEP director Ed Parisian welcomed the large gathering of Bureau educators to this meeting, emphasizing the BIA's goal that "students will demonstrate knowledge of language and culture to improve academic achievement." He went on to say that "we know from research and experience that individuals who are strongly rooted in their past—who know where they come from—are often best equipped to face the future."



Revitalizing Indigenous Languages & Cultures With Indigenous Language Immersion Schools



One of the most successful efforts at Indigenous language and cultural revitalization is the establishment of Indigenous language immersion schools (see e.g. Reyhner, 2010; Reyhner & Johnson, 2015). Studies show that language immersion schools can have far-reaching effects on their students.




Dr. Kathryn Manulito in a study of a new Navajo immersion teacher describes how she addresses students by Navajo kinship terms and models other Navajo cultural behaviors. She quotes a student's parent: "You know I noticed a lot of differences compared to the other students who aren't in the immersion program. They [students in immersion classes] seem more disciplined and have a lot more respect for older, well anyone, like teachers. They communicate better with their grandparents, their uncles and stuff. It seems like it makes them more mature and more respectful. I see other kids and they just run around crazy. My kids aren't like that ... It really helps, because it's like a positive thing" (2004, p. 50).



In a case study of a new Hawaiian language immersion teacher, Kawai‘ae‘a, Kawagley, and Masaoka note how “part of the success of the school was that the teachers, staff and teachers show much ‘aloha.’ They went on to write how “Aloha is a Hawaiian word that is profound and complex, but above all it is wholeness of mind, body and soul and connectedness to the universe. In the school, aloha was shown by hugs by teachers, staff and students, opinion is sought and valued from all, and the realization that the school’s success is dependent on family, the unit working together. The children learned to respect one another, respect the space of others, and to work quietly and diligently on class activities.



Teachers and staff are role models through silent leadership and responsible actions. The power was not wielded by anyone in particular; rather it flows amongst all as it did in ancestral times. By seeing this and putting into practice, the children learn to honor and respect themselves, others, and all other things around them. Being thoughtful in school transfers to the home, making it safe and comfortable. For kindergartners, the first graders become the role models as they have gone through the experiences that the younger ones are going through. This is the beauty of a multiage, multidisciplinary classroom. The older helping the younger, this is peer teaching and learning as often the younger ones have something to give” (2017, p. 92).

The Hawaiian language curriculum incorporates Hawaiian culture. Families report that they valued the program's emphasis on Hawaiian culture as much as its focus on the language. Several families placed a higher value on their children's cultural education than on their academic achievement. A mother noted, "Academics—that's what people send their kids to school for, academics. And that's what we started off thinking ... academics in Hawaiian. And that was great, but we've also seen more than that." The families believed that the cultural aspect of Kaiapuni would promote children becoming more well-rounded and felt that the program created positive images of being Hawaiian and could affect the community in positive ways. (Luning & Yamauchi, 2010, p. 53)



A parent noted about the affects of the Hawaiian language immersion program on the students: “I just think that some of the things that they learn in that school, they’ll never learn in an English school. The culture, the respect I think it’s gonna have some kind of impact with them as they grow up.” (Luning & Yamauchi, 2010, p. 54)



Hawaiian-Medium Education at Nāwahīokalani'opū (Nāwahī) Laboratory School

- Begun in 1997-98.
- Hawaiian-medium, early childhood through high school program.
- College preparatory curriculum rooted in Native Hawaiian language and culture.





All subjects taught through Hawaiian language and values





Findings from Nāwahī:

- Students surpass non-immersion peers on English standardized tests.
- 100% high school graduation rate.
- 80% college attendance rate.
- Bilingualism and biliteracy (“additive bilingualism”) – ***“holding Hawaiian language and culture high.”***
(Wilson & Kamanā, 2001, 2006)





- *“The benefit of [Nāwahī’s] approach...is a much higher level of fluency and literacy in the Indigenous language plus psychological benefits to their identity that encourage high academic achievement and pursuit of education to the end of high school and beyond.”* — William Wilson, Kauanoe Kamanā, & Nāmaka Rawlins (2006, p.43)



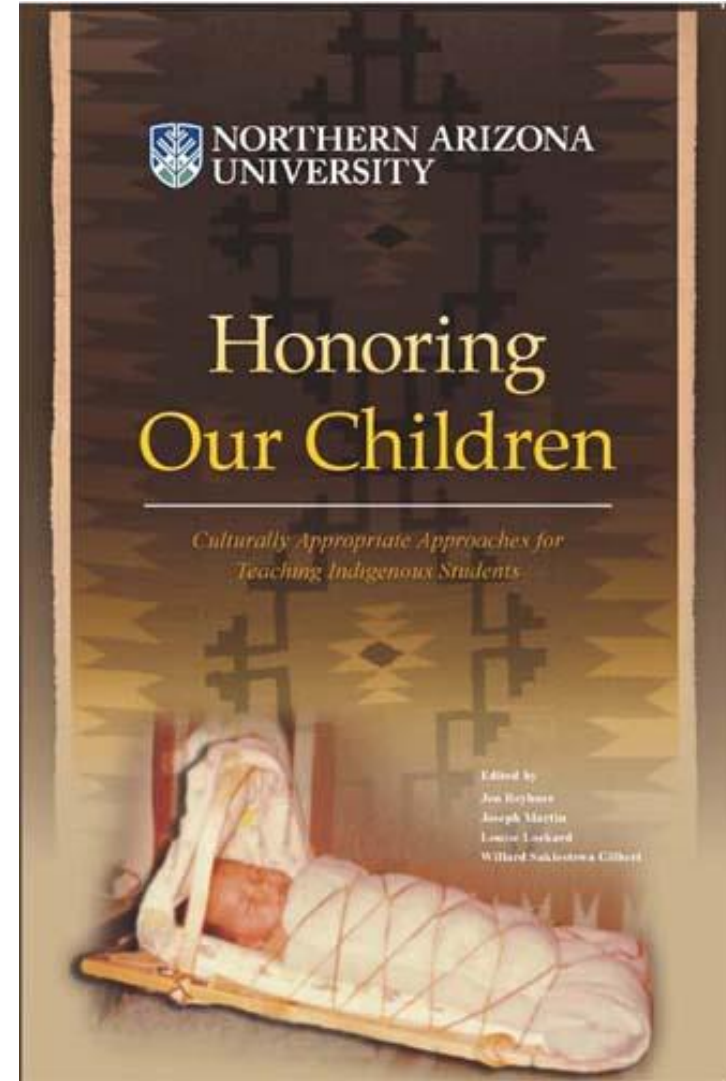


Sioux teacher and author Luther Standing Bear (1933) recalled being the first student through the doors Of Carlisle Indian Industrial School In 1879 and taught in an American Indian day school; he concluded in his autobiography that young Indians needed to be “doubly educated” so that they learned “to appreciate both their traditional life and modern life.” Today’s immersion schools have students learn computer skills as well as their tribal language.





Language and cultural revitalization efforts work to not just revitalize tribal languages; they work to revitalize and heal Indian communities by restoring traditional cultural values. There is good evidence that it is one-size-fits-all, assimilationist English-only educational efforts, not government welfare policies as Riley (2016) and other conservatives contend, that produce family disintegration today faced by many Indigenous people.





Students who are not embedded in their traditional values are only too likely in modern America to pick up a hedonistic culture of consumerism, consumption, competition, comparison, and conformity.

As Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) wrote, “A society that cannot remember and honor its past is in peril of losing its soul.”





“It’s sad to be the last speaker of your language. Please, turn back to your own and learn your language so you won’t be alone like me. Go to the young people. Let go of the hate in your hearts. Love and respect yourselves first. Elders please give them courage and they will never be alone. Help our people to understand their identity. We need to publish materials for our people. To educate the white people to us and for indigenous people.”



--Mary Smith, last speaker of Eyak



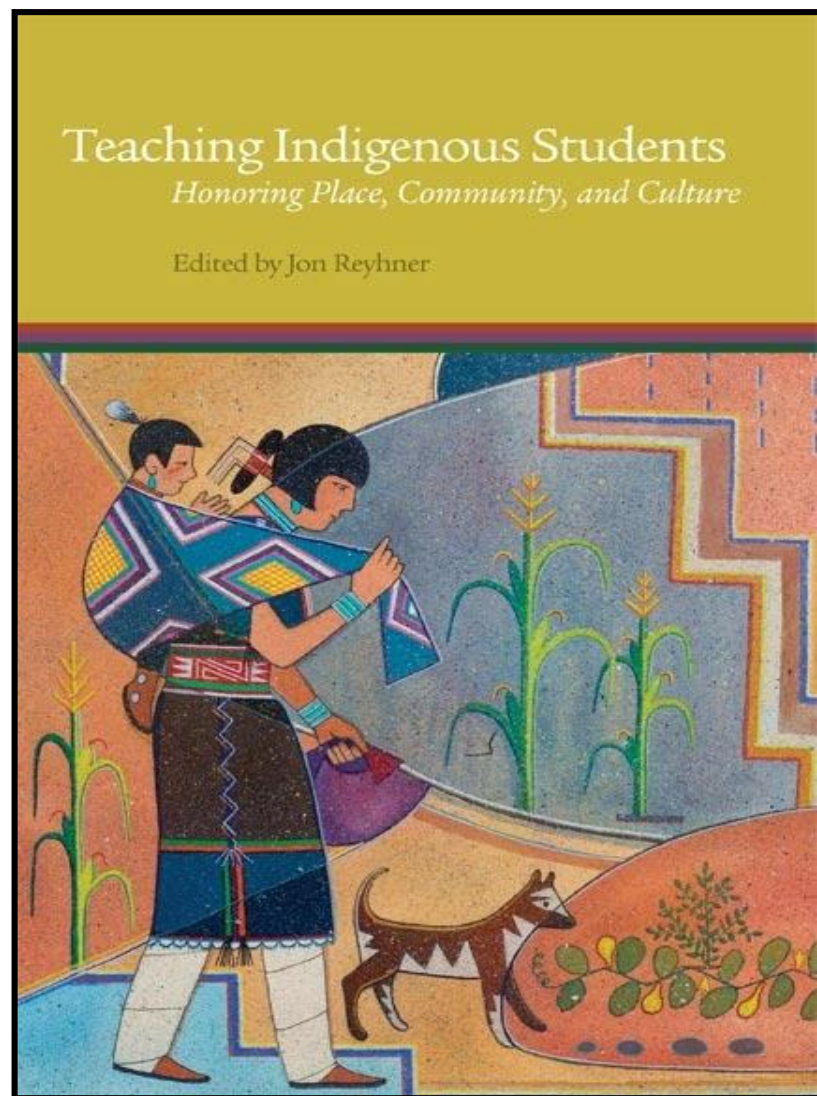
“Believing in the language brings the generations together.... If there’re any seeds left, there’s an opportunity to grow.”



Leanne Hinton, Co-chair
2004 Annual Stabilizing
Indigenous Languages
Conference, University of
California at Berkeley



Jon Reyhner is Professor of Education at Northern Arizona University. He previously taught at Montana State University-Billings and before that he taught junior high school for four years in the Navajo Nation and was a school administrator for 10 years in Indian schools in Arizona, Montana, and New Mexico. He has written extensively on American Indian education and Indigenous language revitalization. He has also edited a column on issues in Indigenous education for NABE for over two decades. He currently maintains an American Indian Education website at <http://nau.edu/aie> with links to full text online copies of his co-edited books published by Northern Arizona University. His newest edited book is *Teaching Indigenous Students: Honoring Place, Community, and Culture*.





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