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COMMENTARIES

Indigenous Youth Bilingualism from a Yup'ik Perspective

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Yuk eliskuni, qanruyutni-llu maligtaqunikuni nalluyagutevkenaki, tauna yuk unyuartuarkauguq.

When a person learns and follows what he is taught and does not forget them, that person is led toward wisdom. (Marie Nichols, Yup'ik Eskimo Elder [deceased]; in Tennant & Bitar, 1981, p. v)

The theme of this special issue could not be more appropriate for today's conversation, as we address and share young people's language issues in many of our communities where a language other than English is spoken or has been spoken. The growing distance between heritage languages and youth has become a constant point of discourse between Elders in Indigenous communities and those who could listen. Since Western contact, the pursuit for a "better life" through formal schooling has institutionalized Indigenous youth, separating them from their homelands and broadening a space between those who speak the heritage language and those who abandoned language and culture for formal Western education's sake. It is often the descendants of early residential school students who suffer the loss of language and identity (see, e.g., Lomawaima, 1994). But the challenge is for Elders to find ways to create a language of concern so those who have the language can act as diplomatic agents for change if language revolution is evident.

The compelling stories about youth and Indigenous languages reveal an awakening of a generation who otherwise would not have a voice or the academic language with which to express their feelings, their involvement, and their concerns about being members of an ancestral-language community in which English has become a pervasive vehicle of everyday expression. As Lee points out, "The students actually greatly respect their language, but the sociological influences surrounding their use of the language . . . impede their efforts to speak."

Since Western contact and the advent of schooling, religion, and, especially, boarding schools, finding what it means to have an identity has become a struggle for many of our Indigenous people in the "Lower 48" (United States) and Canadian mainland First Nations communities, as well as in rural Alaska, where Indigenous heritage languages are spoken. The generational products

of the boarding school era are evident, as with many of our neighbors “outside.” As Hopi people state (see Nicholas, 2009 [this issue]), “We are now interjecting English into our Hopi. Therefore, we are speaking a truly different language.” Indigenous Alaskans are facing a similar dilemma. More and more, our heritage languages lie in the minds and hearts of the Elders, and, in a very few cases, in smaller communities where economic development such as harvesting salmon and other natural resources seems absent—where there is no chance of drilling for oil, for example, the heritage language is more vibrant.

Nicholas addresses a theme around which many of the articles in this issue revolve: What role does the Hopi language assume in how Hopi youth define and assert their personal and social identities as members of Hopi society and as Hopi citizens in the broader sense? I would like to take this statement as a point of discussion for bringing all of the articles together. I tell it in story form, a vehicle through which Yup’ik people have learned about identity, survival, respect, honor, hope, and perseverance.

The Yup’ik people of Alaska populate the southwestern part of the state, and Yup’ik, one of 20 Indigenous languages, has the highest number of heritage speakers in the state (Wyman, this issue.) The common thread of this special issue is familiar to the Yup’ik Eskimo people, and similar stories are heard from other Indigenous peoples in the Lower 48. Although the Yup’ik people were never forced out of their homelands, colonization by church and school was just as evident. When young Yup’ik children began leaving home to go to boarding schools in places such as Wrangell Institute and Sitka (1,500 to 2,000 miles away from their families), children learned how different they were from English speakers—culturally, socially, and physically. For decades the boarding schools removed the Yup’ik children from their homes and parents and brought them to foreign locations. There they had to adapt to different lifestyles in a boarding school culture in which students cohabitated with students from other language communities in Alaska and experienced ritualized rules and punishments, as well as a new diet, all in the absence of their home languages. For decades the boarding schools housed high school students as far away as Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma; Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas; Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon; and Mt. Edgecumbe High School, Wrangell Institute, and St. Mary’s High School in Alaska. When adolescents returned home for summer break, there was often not enough family contact. Most young men and women found seasonal work in fish canneries, firefighting, or commercial fishing. When the jobs were over, it was time to head back out to the boarding schools.

In the mid-1970s, Rural Education Attendance Area schools were established, and school districts were developed in rural Alaska for K–12 populations in remote villages. Around the same time, a successful lawsuit resulted in the provision of education for children in their home communities through the development of local high schools in almost all communities of Alaska. This is when the challenges arose in rural Alaska. Although it was an emotional trauma for both the young children—sometimes as young as 5 years old—and the families to have to see their children leave for 9 months out of the year without any contact except an occasional letter (if the parents were able to write or find someone in the community to write for them), the establishment of local schools, especially high schools, caused another set of problems.

In the fall of 1975, most adolescents didn’t return to the by-then familiar boarding schools because they could stay home and go to school. Parents quickly realized that they were now housing adolescents who for decades had left home in August and returned in May for summer jobs and subsistence harvesting of food, fish, and the like. One autumn, these students didn’t

leave; they stayed to live with their own families. This created a mixed bag of emotions for parents and adolescents. No longer were children leaving home; they were staying home where they belonged. Yet adolescents also no longer had a sense of independence or peer contact with students from other Alaskan villages. Many of these adolescents had been in boarding schools since they were 6 or 7 years old. In most cases they'd lost their ability to speak the heritage language, although they could "get by" with simple commands (Wyman, this issue). At this point, it was more common for adolescents to communicate in English, creating a challenge for many Yup'ik parents, as well as the grandparents and Elders in the community.

While this was going on at home, the new school districts contracted new teachers, most of whom had never been to rural Alaska. The new teachers began their teaching in a new environment, with children of people about whom they had very little knowledge. Most of the new teachers had not had any training in teaching students of Indigenous heritage, or in working with students who had learned to survive in hostile academic institutions. The teachers struggled to find an adequate language to teach. From my own personal observation, the new teachers of the mid-1970s were frustrated because they wanted to teach, but felt they couldn't because of tensions from home and from the students. In most cases they felt inadequate to handle the trials of teaching in rural Alaska.

Accommodating students and parents by creating small high schools in larger villages of Alaska created many obstacles. First of all, at boarding school, the adolescent had professionals or paraprofessionals who provided guidance or discipline when needed. In the fall of 1975, when the students didn't leave for boarding school, the issues that came with the culture of adolescents became quickly apparent, yet parents didn't know how to accommodate them. There quickly grew a distance between parent and adolescent. "How can I talk with my child? I don't understand him/her. I don't know what to say to make him/her understand I'm trying to help, and, at the same time, I'm not able to communicate with him/her because he/she only speaks English, and I don't."

The new teachers faced their own predicaments: "Not only am I a new teacher in the community, but I really don't know the culture. Nor do I have the adequate communicative knowledge to make sense of talking with the parents, let alone the students."

Students, on the other hand—although fortunate not to have had to leave for boarding school—faced the challenge of being home and sharing space with younger siblings, parents, and extended families. There was also a tug between being a student and being an older child in the family with familial and cultural responsibilities. More often than not, schoolwork became ancillary because of parents' demands to "help out" with chores and activities.

The feeling of "not fitting in" to family and culture, and related confusion among the younger high school-age children was just a tip of the iceberg. A 10-day *Anchorage Daily News* series published in 1988 documented alcohol-related problems including high rates of suicide, attempted suicide, homicide, and accidents in Alaska Native villages, relating these devastating life situations to a "deeper malady" rooted in the government removal of children to boarding school and the subsequent return of these children now with "elevated aspirations, diminished prospects for advancement, and little experience in family living" (Weaver, 1988, p. 2). The series captured the situation at one point in time, tracing cultural distress and destruction to historical schooling practices and the overtaking of Native culture, but what is the situation in those communities today? How are they similar or different to those in the Lower 48?

NOW WHAT?

The articles in this issue are compelling. They tell of struggles similar to the situations in rural Alaska when the educational system attempted to provide “adequate” education for Indigenous students. What binds these articles is the fact that the authors have firsthand knowledge of the related challenges they continue to see amongst Indigenous youth, and in some cases, the stories are firsthand experiences.

What these articles have provided is a voice for the Indigenous youth vis-à-vis academics—most of us who are Indigenous to our own communities and some of us who are products of the historical educational traumas of the 1900s. The authors of this issue have created a language, a profound one at that, revealing the struggles that our youth had and continue to face, as we attempt to move forward toward positive change. In this issue, the voices of Indigenous youth are heard in a way that would not have been possible in earlier years of the academy. Today we have educational leaders—professors at universities Indigenous to the cultures of their homelands—beginning to address critically the silent voices of the youth in our communities and creating stories that reveal their needs and explore how we should prepare ourselves to assist in educating youth for a stronger tomorrow.

Language and cultural shift is evident—but yet, nothing on the inside changes among Indigenous peoples and youth. Justin (Nicholas, 2009 [this issue]) eloquently expresses the identity that resonates among Indigenous youth:

Since you’re a Hopi [by birthright], you’re brought up that way [in the language and culture of the Hopi]. [Then] you are [Hopi, and] you can’t let go [simply discard it]; it’s gonna be too hard. (p. 333)

If we can’t “simply let go,” how do we frame our efforts to hold onto the realization that we’re always going to have the essence of being Native but also move forward at the same time? I guess we start from the beginning—as a blossoming Yup’ik Elder once told me before he died: When you’ve taken the opportunity to listen, and the opportunity to observe, then you, too, will have a story to tell.

The stories in this issue are stories written after a great deal of observing and listening. They are a story of hope, a story of change, and a story of self-determination.

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