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INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE
EDUCATION AND LITERACY:
INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME ISSUE

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This special issue grows out of a series of symposia on indigenous language education held at recent annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association and the National Association for Bilingual Education. The objective of these symposia, and now of this theme issue, is to critically examine the relationship of pedagogical change—specifically change in the teaching and learning of indigenous language—to larger sociopolitical and cultural processes set in motion by post-1960 bilingual reforms. In particular we are concerned with the aims and effects of American Indian/Alaska Native bilingual and bicultural programs.

Our starting point in raising these issues is, on the one hand, the observation of numerous positive social-educational outcomes associated with programs that systematically utilize local linguistic and cultural knowledge (see, for example, Lipka & Stairs, 1994; McCarty, Lipka & Dick, 1994; Zepeda & Hill, 1993). These promising developments notwithstanding, we simultaneously observe, with growing alarm, the rapid loss of the local languages upon which such positive changes are based. Of the once hundreds of distinct indigenous languages in North America, only about 250 remain. A majority of these are seriously threatened. This represents a human and an intellectual loss of enormous proportions, while presenting an urgent challenge to indigenous

communities. Even for indigenous groups with large numbers of speakers-the Navajo in the U.S. Southwest and the Yup'ik in Alaska and Canada-language extinction is a mounting threat.

The circumstances in which this situation has evolved embrace a variety of interrelated sociohistorical, cultural, political and linguistic factors. These are described in the papers that follow. Here, it is important to point out that in both the United States and Canada, schools have been at the center of the shift toward English monolingualism. At the same time, while schools in many communities continue to be agents of language repression and assimilation toward English, some indigenous communities are building education programs that strengthen local language and culture resources by using them directly to improve schooling for indigenous students. This special issue features several such cases, highlighting the achievements and the continuing struggles local educators face in making community knowledge a vital part of the life of the school.

Each of the contributors to this issue has been involved over many years in action research related to these developments. Their combined experience provides fertile ground within which to examine the educational, social, political and cultural dimensions of indigenous language education and literacy. To facilitate an examination that is at once comprehensive and detailed, the issue is divided into four sections. We begin with a conceptualization of indigenous literacies by Ofelia Zepeda. Within Zepeda's conceptualization, literacy is by definition pluralistic and a resource in bridging home and school within a "seamless continuum" of learning. Part II presents the demographics and the stakes involving the survival of such language and culture resources. Drawing on U.S. and Canadian data, Crawford, and Freeman, Stairs, Corbière & Lazore, contextualize the crisis of language loss while suggesting political and educational strategies to address the crisis. Richard Ruíz then presents a framework for language planning to stabilize indigenous/heritage languages.

Part III builds upon these historical and theoretical foundations, describing programs for native Hawaiian and Navajo students. Specifically, Jordan, followed by Vogt & Au, and by Begay, Dick, Estell, Estell, McCarty & Sells, lay out the ten-year history of a unique collaboration between the Hawaii-based Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP), and the Navajo elementary school at Rough Rock, Arizona. Each of these articles shows how local educators themselves are the critical change agents in gaining local choice and voice within the school. Holm & Holm then discuss two exemplary Navajo language programs at Rock Point and Fort Defiance, Arizona, relating those programs to the larger issue of the survival of Navajo as a child-language. McLaughlin expands upon these accounts, suggesting six “social engineering” strategies to connect schools with indigenous communities in ways that invite maintenance of the local language. Finally, in Part IV, Silentman, Ayoungman, Watahomigie, and Lipka & Ilutsk synthesize the issues raised in the preceding sections, and relate those issues to their own work in Navajo, indigenous Canadian, Hualapai, and Yup'ik education.

The fliture of indigenous languages in North America remains unquestionably tenuous. We suggest that schools have a definite and even a central role to play in turning that situation around. We recognize, however, that schools and educators cannot act alone, and that ultimately, the survival of indigenous languages depends on what families and communities do to ensure that survival within the web of social institutions in which children are raised. Many of the papers here show, quite clearly, what can be accomplished when school and community resources are marshalled for such purposes.

This volume is a call to action. Schools and educators are not the only ones to undertake the challenges required to maintain indigenous languages and cultures as valued parts of children's identities and everyday lives. But because of the social centrality of schools in indigenous communities, schools--and local educators--are the ideal places to start.

References

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