

---

Faculty of Education

Faculty Publications

---

This is a pre-print version of the following chapter:

Canada's Big Chill: Indigenous Languages in Education

Jessica Ball & Onowa McIvor

2013

---

Citation for this paper:

Ball, J. & McIvor, O. (2013). Canada's big chill: Indigenous languages in education. In C. Benson & K. Kosonen (Eds.), *Language issues in comparative education: Inclusive teaching and learning in non-dominant languages and cultures* (pp. 19-38). Sense Publishers.

---

JESSICA BALL & ONOWA MCIVOR

## 1. CANADA'S BIG CHILL

*Indigenous Languages in Education*

### ABSTRACT

wihtaskamihk kíkác kahkiyaw níhíyaw píkiskwíwina î namatípayiwa wiya mōniyāw oníkānīwak kayās kākíy sihcikícik ka nakinahkwāw níhiyaw osihcikíwina. atawiya anohc kanāta askiy kápimipayihtácik î tipahamok níhiyaw awāsisak kakisínāmākosicik mína apisis î tipahamok mína ta kakwiw miciminamā níhiyawíwin. namoya máka mitoni tapwíy kontayiwāk î nísokkamákawinaw ka miciminamā nípíkiskwíwinān. pako kwayas ka sihcikiy kispin tápwiw ká kakwiw miciminamā níhíyawíwin íkwa tapwiw kwayas ka kiskināhamowāyâ kicowāsim'sinān. ôma masinayikanis íwihcikátíw tânihki kíkác kâ namatípayicik nípíkiskwíwinān íkwa takahki sihcikíwina mína misowiy kâ apicihtácik ka pasikwínahkwāw níhiyawíwin nanāntawisi. (*Translated into Níhíyawíwin (Northern Cree) [crk], a language of Canada, by Art Napoleon*)

Canada's Indigenous languages are at risk of extinction because of government policies that have actively opposed or neglected them. A few positive steps by government include investments in Aboriginal Head Start, a culturally based early childhood program, as well as a federal Aboriginal Languages Initiative. Overall, however, government and public schools have yet to demonstrate serious support for Indigenous language revitalization. Language-in-education policies must address the historically and legislatively created needs of Indigenous Peoples to increase the number of Indigenous language speakers and honor the right of Indigenous children to be educated in their language and according to their heritage, with culturally meaningful curricula, cultural safety, and dignity. This chapter describes how Canada arrived at a state of Indigenous language devastation, then explores some promising developments in community-driven heritage language teaching, and finally presents an ecologically comprehensive strategy for Indigenous language revitalization that draws on and goes beyond the roles of formal schooling.

It's been a cold 130 years for Canada's first languages, and the thaw is still awaited. (Fettes & Norton, 2000: 29)

## INTRODUCTION

A basic Canadian value is that regardless of where children live, programs for promoting their optimal development should be accessible, available, and linguistically and culturally appropriate to them (Canadian Centre for Justice, 2001). Yet despite being party to innumerable universal declarations and policy documents enshrining the rights of Indigenous Peoples to practice and perpetuate their cultures and languages, including children's right to both learn and be educated in their mother tongue (United Nations, 2008), government efforts to implement these commitments have moved at glacial speed. Less than one-fifth of Aboriginal<sup>i</sup> children in Canada are learning their ancestral languages, and this number is dwindling (Statistics Canada, 2006). The forecast for preserving and revitalizing Canada's Indigenous languages is gloomy (Norris, 2007): All are at risk of extinction within this century because of government policies that have actively opposed or neglected them.

This chapter describes how Canada has arrived at the current state of Indigenous language devastation and how schooling has been used to pursue a national policy that recognizes only two colonial languages – English and French – to the detriment of Indigenous language maintenance and of Indigenous children's school success. Language-in-education policies and a host of other threats undermine Indigenous languages. Immediate threats include the (unofficial) promotion of monolingualism through a lack of state support for a multilingual society and the global expansion of English. Another set of risk factors is the plethora of other competing and urgent concerns facing Indigenous<sup>ii</sup> communities due to past and present effects of colonization. These include: poverty, addictions, mental and physical health issues, protracted treaty negotiations, (re)building self-governance, and conflicts between Indigenous communities and various levels of government over rights to natural resources and protection of traditional Indigenous lands.

We begin with an overview of the current status of Indigenous language-in-education developments in Canada, describing both challenges and early indicators of promise. Next we outline the multiple levels of intervention needed to support the survival of Indigenous languages and examine the roles that non-formal and formal education could play to promote Indigenous learners' language retention and school success. We encourage a view of language as not only a medium of instruction, but as "the life blood of a people," with the capacity to carry "the spirit of the past to the children of the present" (Aboriginal Head Start Association of British Columbia, 2011: 1). Language is widely understood by Indigenous Peoples as the vehicle for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, culture, spirituality and identity.

## OVERVIEW OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE LEARNING IN CANADA

### *Current Conditions*

Among the approximately 7,000 languages presently spoken in the world, up to 90% are predicted to disappear within the next century (Lewis, 2009). This pattern holds in Canada, which has 11 Indigenous language families comprised of 50 or more Indigenous languages (Norris, 2007). Language death occurs when one group is colonized and assimilated by another and adopts its language (Crystal, 1997), either forcibly or by choice. Over the past 400 years, Indigenous Peoples in Canada have experienced a succession of colonial government incursions, including genocide, forced relocation of villages, linguistic imperialism, prohibition of Indigenous economic, social, and political systems, and enforced enrolment of children in Indian residential schools (McCarty, 2003). These processes have already obliterated ten Indigenous languages (Norris, 2007) and nearly extinguished all others; only Nihíyaw (Cree), Anishnaabe (Ojibway), and Inuttitut (Inuit), due to their large population bases, are expected to survive the current century (ibid.).

Tremendous diversity exists among Indigenous Peoples in Canada on dimensions that affect the survival of their languages, including population size, oral and written language use, number of dialects, level of language documentation, cultures, histories, political organization, social and health conditions, and geographic location. Further, Indigenous language communities vary with regard to their engagement in policy creation and motivation towards sustaining their languages in or outside formal schooling (Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, 2005; Fettes & Norton, 2000). Although each group has had different experiences, some commonalities exist, and these are outlined below. The authors have been involved in Indigenous language revitalization in various ways for the past 10 years ranging from language nest (early childhood immersion) to adult Indigenous language learning, with focus on the speech and language development of Indigenous children and on the impacts of language in education policies in Canada.

### *Declining Intergenerational Transmission of Indigenous Languages*

The number of children who are learning a certain language is arguably the best indicator of its health and longevity (Barrena et al., 2007). The most recent Canadian census data indicate that only 12.4% of Indigenous children aged 0-4 are learning an Indigenous language at home; another 5% are acquiring one as an additional language (Norris, 2006). About two-thirds of these children are Inuit living in Canada's northernmost regions; one-third are First Nation<sup>iii</sup> children living on reserves.<sup>iv</sup> Over 60% of Indigenous children are growing up in urban and peri-urban settings off reserves. Few of these children are learning an Indigenous language, mainly as a result of language loss among parents and grandparents who were forced to attend English-only residential schools, but also due to ongoing monolingual education policies. Children whose home or preschool supports them

in learning an Indigenous language almost invariably are required to start primary school (i.e., Kindergarten and Grade 1) in English or French. This lack of language support is of grave concern, as expressed by the Assembly of First Nations (2000), First Nation scholars (e.g. Battiste, 2000), linguists (e.g. Phillipson, 1992) and others. Some researchers warn that mainstreaming young speakers of Indigenous languages into English- or French-medium schooling is a form of linguistic genocide (Day, 1985); they predict that English and French will continue to replace Indigenous languages until no native speakers remain.

### *Mismatched Languages and Learning Goals at School Entry*

With most Indigenous children in Canada now speaking English or French as their first language, one might assume they would not experience difficulties attributable to language mismatches at school. However, language and culture-based challenges figure prominently among factors that may account for high rates of learning difficulties and early attrition. First, there are still communities where a majority of children speak their Indigenous language but are forced to start school in English or French, with no support for transferring skills from the more familiar language to the newly introduced language. In Labrador, 35% of Innu children never attend school, a trend that is partly due to an unfamiliar language environment (English) and school culture that is seen by Innu children and their parents as “foreign, devoid of culturally relevant curriculum, and having little or no relevance to their lives” (Philpott, 2006: 373). Second, many children, especially in rural and remote communities, speak a non-standard variety of English that creates communication difficulties for children and their teachers. Several Canadian investigators have reported unique difficulties confronting children who start kindergarten speaking an Indigenous language or a non-standard variety of English or French that is different from the language of instruction (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Crago, 1990; Wright, Taylor, & Macarthur, 2000). Third, the pragmatics of communication in some Indigenous families and communities may be at odds with the discourse expectations of non-Indigenous professionals in institutions of the dominant culture, including public schools. For example, Indigenous children may have been socialized not to answer questions to which they know an older person already knows the answer (e.g., rhetorical questions such as “What colour is the sky today?”) (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008). The forms of oral narratives that are recognized in their home communities as constituting a ‘good story’ may be seen by non-Indigenous teachers as lacking in the necessary elements of story-telling (e.g., context setting, linear time line) (Peltier, 2011). They may have a propensity to want to learn by watching and doing rather than by listening and following explicit instructions. Failure by teachers or non-Indigenous peers to recognize, value or encourage these forms of learning readiness can cause low self-esteem, cultural identity confusion and conflict, difficulties for parents wanting to accompany their children in their journeys through formal education, and overall lack of engagement in formal education. Altogether, the situation nationwide raises serious doubts about whether Canadian public schools are willing or able to

support the social inclusion, linguistic rights and educational success of Indigenous children.

Many Indigenous parents, Elders,<sup>v</sup> and leaders argue that linguistically and culturally inappropriate teaching methods, curricula, and learning assessment procedures frequently result in serious negative consequences for their children (Canadian Centre for Justice, 2001; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). For example, many Indigenous children have social and environmental literacies that are valued and adaptive within the context of their everyday lives, but that are not valued or even recognized by mainstream teachers focused almost exclusively on text-based literacy. They may speak a variety of English that is the norm in their home communities but that is not readily accepted or understood by non-Indigenous teachers (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008). Consequences may include undermining Indigenous parents' goals for children; creating cultural alienation among young people; inhibiting development of school readiness skills; perceiving Indigenous children as socially reticent or resistant to instruction; and over-identifying developmental delays and disorders, especially in the speech-language domain (Hibel, Faircloth, & Farkas, 2008). While the nature and scope of misguided practice no doubt varies across schools and regions, overall Canada is failing to support the educational success of Indigenous children (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). It is worth noting that while the number of Indigenous, professionally-accredited teachers is growing, there are few teaching in off-reserve schools and even fewer who are speakers of their Indigenous languages.

### *Cultural Learning through Language*

Indigenous language speakers are concerned that, as fewer children learn their ancestral language, not only their languages but also their cultures will be lost (Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1996). Indigenous languages convey culturally based ways of interpreting the world and experiences within it (Battiste, 2000), and it is impossible to translate the deep meanings of words and concepts into the languages of other cultures. When children learn their Indigenous languages from infancy, they are able to consolidate a culturally cohesive identity with links to the land, to traditional knowledge, to Elders, and to their communities (Battiste, 2000; Crystal, 1997). According to a national task force, "the ability to speak one's own language helps people to understand who they are in relation to themselves, their families, and their communities, and to Creation itself" (Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, 2005: iv). One of the few Indigenous speech and language pathologists in Canada, Sharla Peltier, explains:

We're taught that our language comes from the Creator and that speaking it acknowledges our connection. We're taught that our voice is a sacred gift and that there is a lot of power in our words. When we speak, our words go around the world forever. (Ball, 2006: 1)

Given the importance of Indigenous languages for preserving Indigenous cultural identity, knowledge, social belonging, spiritual life, and existence on the political landscape, the potential for education to promote or hinder Indigenous children's opportunities to learn their mother tongues is of critical concern.

#### HISTORICAL EXPLOITATION OF SCHOOLING FOR LINGUISTIC ASSIMILATION

Links between language, education, and sovereignty were not lost on the early colonizers of the land called Canada, where using schools to strip Indigenous children of their culture and language is a long-standing tradition. Because the historical treatment of Indigenous Peoples has created enormous challenges for intergenerational transmission of Indigenous languages (and, arguably, Indigenous children's educational engagement), a brief history is provided here.

##### *History of Indigenous Language Policy in Canada*

The new country of Canada froze out Indigenous languages from the outset (Derwing & Munro, 2007). At confederation in 1867, policies supported by legislation and funding established the nation as bilingual in English and French (Gourd, 2007). A century later, heightened political tensions about the comparative status of the two languages led in 1963 to a Royal Commission mandated to study the country's "two founding races" and "other ethnic groups" (Innis, 1973, Foreword), but the latter were defined as those who had immigrated to Canada (Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, 1967). Indigenous Peoples, despite their efforts to be included and to have their language rights considered, were rendered invisible in policy and practice (Laurendeau & Dunton, 2006). From this foundation of cultural and linguistic imperialism, the Commission recommended an Official Languages Act, enacted in 1969, securing English and French as the official state languages (Burnaby, 1996). The Commission did assert Canada's responsibility to do "everything that is possible ... to help the native populations preserve their cultural heritage, which is an essential part of the patrimony of all Canadians" (Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, 1967, Vol 1: xxv). However, responsibility for language maintenance was left entirely in the hands of Indigenous people who had no resources to ensure creation of opportunities for young people to learn through and develop in their Indigenous languages. This failure to recognize Indigenous languages as official created, in effect, a policy of exclusion.

##### *Variable Control of Language and Education*

Over the past two decades, the Assembly of First Nations (1990, 1991, 1992, 2000) produced four reports calling for official recognition of Indigenous languages. Parliament recently passed the Aboriginal Languages of Canada Act (Senate of Canada, 2009), but this Act falls short of calling for legislative action to guarantee support for language preservation and revitalization efforts, including public

schooling offered in Indigenous languages. Instead it recommends creating local bylaws to declare languages as “official” within a particular Indigenous community. This provision mirrors an earlier national policy allowing for local control of education of First Nation children who attend schools on reserves, and means that children may access education in an Indigenous language *if* they live on a reserve, *if* the reserve operates a school, and *if* that school has the community mandate and resources to offer education in the Indigenous language. Although rare, there are a few schools able to provide this kind of education (e.g. in Secwepemc territory in British Columbia and Mohawk territory in Quebec), but few or no resources are provided by the federal government.

Some bright spots in Canada’s North give hope despite the country’s gloomy language policy environment. The Official Languages Act of the Northwest Territories (1988), including the Yukon Territory, recognizes nine Indigenous languages in addition to English and French. The Nunavut Official Languages Act (Parliament of Canada, 2009) recognizes Inuttitut, Inuinnaqtun, English, and French. Education in Indigenous languages is more readily available throughout these northern regions, which are the traditional territory of the Inuit, approximately 70,000 people strong (Statistics Canada, 2006).

#### *Against Time and against the Odds*

Despite progress in some regions of the country and ongoing advocacy by national Indigenous organizations, barriers to Indigenous language preservation appear almost insurmountable. A contributing factor is the lack of support of the non-Indigenous population and, in some locations, of Indigenous people themselves. In the first case, non-Indigenous Canadians have never been educated about the rich language resources that are part of the country’s heritage. Canadian mainstream media reinforce a construction of Canada as populated entirely by immigrants. Within a context of ongoing disinformation and social stigma surrounding Indigenous Peoples, their rights, and their roles in Canada’s history, widespread apathy, if not overt negativity, exists about the importance of teaching Indigenous languages. Further, “a history of Canadian government suppression and oppression of the Native language has created an attitude of apathy and fatalism about the need and utility of Native languages” (Assembly of First Nations, 1992: 2). This makes it difficult for people to mobilize successfully on behalf of their languages and cultures. For Indigenous communities struggling with challenges to their very survival, including their right to live on traditional lands, language issues may be seen as secondary at best (Romaine, 2002).

#### *Indian Residential Schools: Multigenerational Impacts*

Around the world, language-in-education policies are often motivated by an explicit or hidden curriculum of assimilation (Ball, 2011; Milloy, 1999). Canada’s overt intentions are among the worst, where successive governments historically legitimated the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families and

communities to Indian residential schools and, later, to non-Indigenous adoptive and foster homes. In the late 1800s, the colonial government recognized that language is the main channel for culture and lifestyle, and anticipated that if children were prevented from speaking their mother tongue, their cultures would likely die out (Milloy, 1999). For a century, Indigenous children in Canada were forced through legislation to attend Indian residential schools, with a penalty of incarceration for parents who did not comply (Milloy, 1999). While the residential school era began winding down in Canada in the 1950s, the last school did not close until 1996 (Milloy, 1999). Canada has since offered an apology to those affected by the residential school era (Office of the Prime Minister, 2008), however, measures taken toward retribution and reconciliation remain controversial.

The degradation of children's languages and cultures in residential schools instilled a belief among many of today's Indigenous parents and grandparents that their language was inferior and their forms of social interaction and spiritual practice were unspeakably demonic (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smoleski, 2004). In most residential schools, children were forced to stop speaking their home language, to stop communicating with their siblings, to repudiate their cultures and to relinquish their Indian names (Miller, 1996). As a result, many of today's Indigenous parents and grandparents lost not only their capacity to speak their languages but also their confidence in using *any* language effectively (Lafrance & Collins, 2003). Even more fundamentally, many lost confidence in their capacity to engage in the kinds of care-giving social interactions that promote attachment in families (Chrisjohn, Young, & Maraun, 1997). As Hart and Risley (1995) have shown, everyday family interactions are the primary contexts for developing vocalization and speech communication. A rewarding experience of verbal communication within the context of caring relationships is critical to optimal oral language development during infancy and early childhood, which in turn is foundational for subsequent literacy. Indigenous scholar Lorna Williams has explained that when Indigenous people were told by colonial educators and Indian agents that their language was unclean, uncivilized and not useful for learning or for commerce, many parents developed a sense of shame about speaking the only language they knew, and the capacity and spirit for transmitting caring and knowledge through verbal interaction with their children was greatly attenuated (personal communication with Lorna Williams, 2006). Parents and grandparents who experienced poor parental modeling or abuse in residential schools or other settings may require extra support to learn how to engage in spontaneous, nurturing, language-mediated interchanges with their young ones (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smoleski, 2004). Policy makers and educators need to appreciate language development as an aspect of intergenerational family development that is relevant to a range of policy areas, including social justice, community development, education, literacy, and healing for Indian residential school survivors and the children of survivors.

### *Indigenous Language and Education Policy*

In the 1970s, Indigenous organizations became increasingly vocal about their rights to raise and educate their own children and to practice their own cultures, languages, and forms of government, which included a growing sovereignty movement. Indigenous rights activists, scholars, and parents emphasized the loss of identity, cultural knowledge, personal well-being, and social belonging caused by language-in-education policies that have denied Indigenous children the right to be educated in their mother tongue. Initially, activists saw Indigenous language policy, support for language revitalization initiatives, and language-in-education policy as interconnected. In 1972 the National Indian Brotherhood published a pivotal paper – “Indian Control of Indian Education” – that led to swift government action in the devolution of responsibility for education to First Nations themselves followed by continued strides towards the goal of self-determined Indigenous education in Canada (Assembly of First Nations, 2003).

As noted by the Assembly for First Nations (1992: 2), “any strategy to increase the number of speakers of any language must necessarily involve the education system.” However, over the past two decades, international movements for language revitalization and self-determination in education have become increasingly separate. This uncoupling of language and education policy is a common problem around the world that results in missed opportunities for language advocates and educators for mutually beneficial, coordinated efforts and avoiding working at cross purposes. Nevertheless, just as colonial governments have been instrumental in the demise of Indigenous languages and cultures by excluding Indigenous languages in policies and exploiting the power of the school system, the potential of schooling must now be harnessed as part of a multipronged approach to revive and maintain Indigenous languages and cultures.

#### STRATEGIES FOR INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE TEACHING IN EDUCATION SETTINGS

##### *Strengthening Capacity for Language Teaching*

Training programs for Indigenous language teachers have been instituted at a few postsecondary institutions in Canada. For example, in 1999, the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) forged a partnership with the British Columbia College of Teachers to create an accredited Developmental Standard Teaching Certificate (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2001). The program enables First Nation communities to partner with postsecondary institutions to offer community-based teacher training focused on Indigenous language revitalization. The University of Victoria partnered with an Indigenous education centre to co-create a university-accredited Certificate in Aboriginal Language Revitalization, which now transitions into a baccalaureate teaching degree. The University of Alberta annually delivers a Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute (CILLDI) focusing on teaching Indigenous language teachers.

### *Indigenous Language as an Elective Subject of Study*

A growing number of schools in Canada with a high enrolment of Indigenous students now offer classes in the Indigenous language that is most prevalent in their catchment area. Typically a language speaker from the local area is hired on a part-time basis to teach students – not all of whom are Indigenous – who elect to study the language. British Columbia's Ministry of Education has created a system whereby school districts can create curriculum in a language other than English or French and offer it as a second language from Grades 5-12.<sup>vi</sup> However, there is little support for these initiatives and little evidence that teaching an Indigenous language as a subject supports oral proficiency and literacy to the degree necessary for higher order cognitive skills or for linguistic transfer to acquiring other languages (Hinton, 2001). Except in the North (because of the activism mentioned earlier) and in some communities on reserve lands where it is feasible to make Indigenous language recovery a focus of community development work, youngsters typically have no opportunities to hear or interact in the language outside the classroom.

### *Immersion Schooling*

Language revitalization scholars tend to agree that, in the absence of language immersion at home, immersion schooling programs stand the best chance of producing a new generation of proficient speakers (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006; McCarty, 2003). Several Indigenous immersion programs<sup>vii</sup> exist in Canada, but as Richards and Burnaby (2008) report, there has been no comprehensive study to date. Some have been documented; for example, Fulford (2007) identified the following Indigenous immersion programs as some of the most successful in Canada: the Eskasoni school in Nova Scotia, the Waskaganish schools in Quebec, and Chief Ahtam School near Adam's Lake, BC.

### *Bilingual Schooling*

Beginning around 2001, a few completely bilingual community-controlled schools have been introduced in Canada, including a K-12 Cree-English school in Thompson, Manitoba (Fulford, 2007) and 14 K-3 Inuttitut-English schools in Nunavik (Louis & Taylor, 2001). Kahnawà:ke in Quebec has a school that started as a Mohawk-English program and has moved increasingly towards a full immersion approach, where more attention is placed on the Indigenous language, in this case Mohawk. In 1982, when the program was described as a partial immersion approach, two research teams explored outcomes for children in grades one and three. Both studies concluded that, compared to control subjects in English-only primary education, the Mohawk immersion students increased their ability to speak Mohawk, spoke Mohawk more often outside the classroom, scored equally well on tests of English acquisition, and performed equally well on academic tests (Hoover, 1992; Lambert et al., 1984). A study of Inuttitut-English bilingual

primary schools in Nunavik indicates that their main impact has been on personal and collective self-esteem, because children and their parents have regained control over education, and because culturally based curriculum content came in when the Indigenous language became the medium for sharing and creating knowledge (Wright & Taylor, 1995). Guèvremont and Kohen (2010) report, based on the Aboriginal People's Survey results of 2006: "Children who spoke an Aboriginal language and learned it in school were more likely to be rated as doing very well in school" (ibid.: 13) and "Aboriginal language was associated with positive school outcomes for children if learned in school" (ibid.: 19). Unfortunately, while research from outside Canada shows that bilingual schools can make an important contribution to language revitalization, no controlled studies with carefully designed outcome measures have yet been done in Canada (Charron, 2010).

#### *Language Initiatives in Early Childhood Programs*

Although formal schooling would be the preferred site for supporting Indigenous language acquisition, it is not currently viable in Canada. However, there is gathering momentum in communities for promoting Indigenous language acquisition through community-driven programs at the pre-primary level. Initiatives include language nests for infants and toddlers, heritage-language-based and bilingual early childhood programs, and Aboriginal Head Start. These programs involve community members who have some degree of proficiency with the children's heritage language(s). Cross-cultural investigators have demonstrated the potential utility of collaborative, strengths-based approaches to language-in-education practices (Crago, 1992; van Kleek, 1994). Community members are uniquely positioned to identify core features of language socialization, to understand the contexts of child development and care in the community, and to offer insights to teachers about the conditions, needs, and goals of a family or community (Rogoff, 1990). However, a well-established principle in language research is that early childhood is not the best time for children in these contexts to begin learning a second language (Asher & Garcia, 1969; Snow & Hoefnagel-Hoehle, 1978), unless it is an everyday language spoken at home or in an alternative care environment such as daycare.

#### *An Ecologically Comprehensive Strategy*

A federal task force concluded that "language revitalization can occur through formal education but maintenance or retention of the Aboriginal language necessitates the interaction of multiple social spheres where the language can be accessed, expressed and transmitted" (Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, 2005: 38). [Figure 1](#) below portrays the interdependent ecological systems in which Indigenous young children and their families are nested. Supportive interventions could be introduced in any or all of these contexts to promote Indigenous language acquisition through education, either by using an Indigenous language as a medium of instruction, as in immersion and bilingual approaches, or

at least by teaching it as a subject. This schema situates the family as the core – or heart – of language-mediated relationships between caregivers and young children. However, responsibility cannot rest solely with Indigenous families and communities to ensure that Indigenous languages do not die. Partners and allies are needed in government, non-government organizations, academe, schools, the media, and society as a whole.

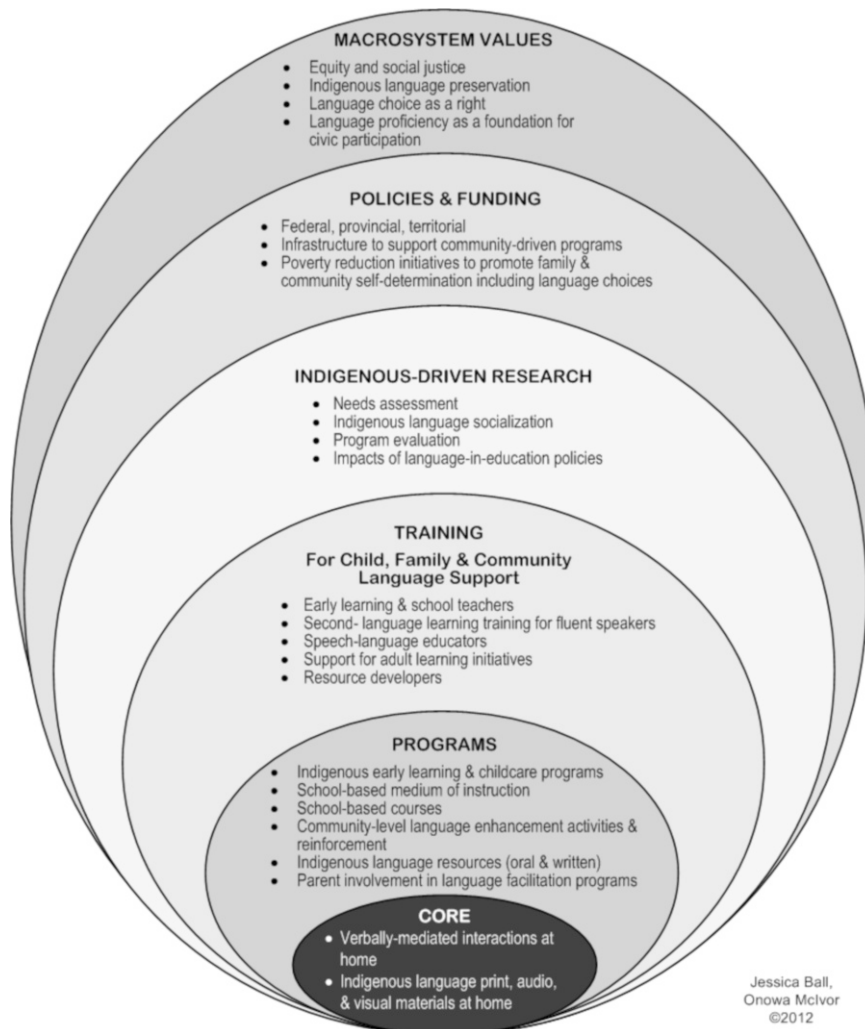


Figure 1. Systems of support for Indigenous language acquisition and maintenance in Canada

Investments in the areas identified in [Figure 1](#) would yield new knowledge and a potentially effective system of supports driven by Indigenous community agendas and organizations. Partnerships across Indigenous organizations, postsecondary institutions, and health, education, and social development sectors could support new resources, capacity, and program strategies. Support for Indigenous language and literacy facilitation could be expected to:

- help retain endangered languages;
- promote cultural continuity and self-esteem;
- counteract prevalent misconstructions of cultural and language differences as communication and parenting deficits;
- reduce high rates of diversion of Indigenous children at school entry to special programs for learning support, with their attendant social stigma and exclusions; and
- increase social inclusion of Indigenous children within the fabric of Canadian society.

Policy reforms and interventions at only one or two of these levels – for example, Indigenous language immersion preschools without provisions for ongoing opportunities to learn in an Indigenous language, or early childhood immersion programs without support for parental pathways to language proficiency – are not likely to yield either measurable gains in Indigenous language maintenance or educational equity for Indigenous children. As already discussed, most Indigenous children and their parents in Canada learn English or French as a first language and acquire their heritage language, if at all, as a second language. A growing body of research shows that the process of second language learning is longer, harder, and more complex than previously believed (Lightbown, 2008). Children cannot develop proficiency through preschool immersion programs only, or through after-school language clubs; they require long-term instruction in their heritage language, as well as opportunities to use the language for learning and practice with increasingly complex forms of the language in functional settings (Collier, 1989). While learning more than one language has been associated with enhanced cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness once children are fully bilingual (Bialystok, 1991; King & Mackey, 2007), there can be real risks to children’s academic achievement if they are struggling to learn more than one language over an inadequate time period without adequate supports. Children need ongoing support for developing proficiency in their first language in order not to fall behind in content area learning, as well as ongoing opportunities to develop proficiency in their second language (Ball, 2011). For these reasons, piecemeal, bootstrapped approaches that depend solely upon community-initiated and sustained efforts are not likely to yield sought-after gains in Indigenous children’s educational success and Indigenous language recovery.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In a colonial country like Canada, Indigenous language exists within “a historically charged and politically loaded landscape” (Aylward, 2010: 297). Political will is

needed to support increasing numbers of Indigenous children entering schools to learn the language that is their birthright and to succeed academically. Political will must be followed by action taken by school administrators and teachers, informed by a program of research to generate knowledge about what kinds of innovations are likely to be effective and under what conditions (Ball, 2008).

Now that Canada has acknowledged responsibility for the debacle of the Indian residential schools (Office of the Prime Minister, 2008), it must take action. Payments to individual victims do nothing to bring back Indigenous languages and cultural knowledge that were beaten to the brink of extinction. One meaningful reparation the government could make is to create policies, backed by secure and sufficient resources to implement them, to support a multi-pronged, locally controlled strategy for ensuring that Indigenous children have opportunities to acquire their heritage languages. Investments are needed to design, deliver, document, and evaluate innovative language development programs that: (a) are culturally and linguistically appropriate; (b) assist Indigenous parents to play active roles in achieving their goals for their young children's language development; (c) avoid extensive reliance on professionally accredited teachers who almost invariably do not speak an Indigenous language and are likely to be unaware of the language socialization environments and expectations for Indigenous learners; and/or (d) create fast-track alternative post-secondary training to increase the number of Indigenous teachers while concurrently supporting them to develop proficiency in their languages.

The idea that children should be 'ready' for school is a popular one, but Canadian public schools have yet to demonstrate that they are ready for Indigenous children. Language-in-education policies must address the historically created needs and goals of Indigenous families, as well as their specific needs for ensuring that children have opportunities to learn an Indigenous language within the context of culturally meaningful teaching and curricula, cultural safety, and dignity (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). Understanding cultural variations in language varieties, language socialization, and the pragmatics of verbal and written communication heightens awareness of the potential cultural biases in education programs. For example, Heath (1983) found that children whose home culture values listening, observing, and "doing" over "talking" – as is likely to be the case for most Indigenous families – are more likely to be marginalized in a mainstream school that values verbal explanations and oral participation. Even if schooling is provided only in the dominant language, educators can support Indigenous children by understanding how children's early language socialization is likely to influence their interests, attention, memory, story-telling, social interactions, and responses to pedagogical techniques.

The priority placed by Indigenous organizations on Indigenous-led programs suggests the need for programs that assist family members to promote children's Indigenous language acquisition in the home from birth. As children approach the age of school entry, language promotion strategies need to reinforce positive cultural identity and promote success in school through programs that bridge the gap from home to school. Scholars specializing in Indigenous language acquisition

must be supported to work alongside community advocates, activists, speakers, and learners to maximize limited resources and time. An immediate need exists for methodologically sound research that examines outcomes of initiatives such as Nunavik's bilingual programs and immersion programs in Kahnawà:ke that have existed for over two decades. Research that has been done to date (e.g., Brittain, Dyck, Rose, & MacKenzie, 2006; Peter, Hirata-Edds, & Montgomery-Anderson, 2008; Zwanziger, Allen, & Genesee, 2006) represents a starting point. However, much more must be done to document innovative ways of promoting, reviving and continuing Indigenous languages.

The experiences of other non-dominant groups internationally suggest that the most promising approach to creating new speakers is through immersion, beginning with language nests (Wilson & Kamana, 2001) and followed by full-immersion schooling (Aguilera & LeCompte, 2007). Other approaches that have produced proficient Indigenous language speakers include the Accelerated Second Language Acquisition method (Strengthening Indigenous languages and Cultures, 2011; Sarkar & Metallic, 2009), and the Master-Apprentice Language Learning program (Hinton, 2001). Efforts must reach members of every generation within a community.

Given past and present policies governing the education of Indigenous children in Canada, there is reason to be discouraged about the survival of Indigenous languages and the cultural knowledges and identities they embody. Still, the Indigenous population is growing at twice the rate of the non-Indigenous population (Statistics Canada, 2006), and increasing numbers of Indigenous communities are becoming aware both of the urgency of saving their languages and of their children's rights to be supported in learning their heritage languages. If languages are indeed "the life blood of a people" (Aboriginal Head Start Association of British Columbia, 2011), allowing them to die can only be seen as a form of cultural genocide.

Within Canada's generally chilly climate for Indigenous languages and Indigenous language-in-education initiatives, a slight warming trend includes the federal government's Aboriginal Head Start, which funds over 500 locally operated early childhood programs, and the Aboriginal Languages Initiative (ALI), which provides \$5 million (CAD) annually to be divided equally among provinces and territories (Andrews Miller, 2008). Much more must be done. Providing equitable resources and supports for Indigenous children to exercise their right to learn their mother tongue and to maximize their potential for bilingual learning throughout their school years is a critical component of a comprehensive strategy that could potentially restore Indigenous languages within one or two generations.

#### NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Aboriginal is a legal term meaning the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people of Canada.

<sup>ii</sup> Indigenous is a contemporary term used globally with a capital 'I' to refer to the first peoples of a colonized land. It is used throughout this chapter to mean the three distinct Indigenous groups of Canada (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit).

- iii First Nation is a political term created by the Indigenous leaders of Canada to assert their position as the first, organized communities of self-governing peoples in the land now called Canada.
- iv Reservations, commonly known as reserves, are lands set aside by the federal government for the use and habitation of First Nation people.
- v The word Elders is capitalized as a sign of respect for senior members of Indigenous communities who are not only elderly but also are carriers of the history and wisdom of their People.
- vi The British Columbia Ministry of Education provincial language template application site describes this initiative: [http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/template\\_developed.php](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/template_developed.php).
- vii Immersion in this context is used to mean language learning methods in which the target language, in this case Indigenous, is “the medium as well as the object of instruction” (Ellis, 2005: 217).

## REFERENCES

- Aboriginal Head Start Association of British Columbia (2011). *Resources*. (<http://www.ahsabc.net/viewcategory/17>)
- Aguliera, Dorothy, & LeCompte, Margaret (2007). Resiliency in Native languages: The tale of three Indigenous communities' experiences with language immersion. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 46(3), 11-36.
- Andrews Miller, Heather (2008). Mi'kmaq and Maliseet languages to be revitalized. *Windspeaker*, 25(12), 26.
- Asher, James J., & Garcia, Ramiro (1969). The optimal age to learn a foreign language. *Modern Language Journal*, 53, 334-341.
- Assembly of First Nations (1990). *Towards linguistic justice for First Nations*. Ottawa, ON: Author. Education Secretariat.
- Assembly of First Nations (1991). *Report of the national conference on Aboriginal languages and literacy*. Ottawa, ON: Author.
- Assembly of First Nations (1992). *Towards rebirth of First Nations languages*. Ottawa, ON: Author.
- Assembly of First Nations (2000). *A time to listen and a time to act: National First Nations language strategy*. Ottawa, ON: Assembly of First Nations: Language Secretariat.
- Assembly of First Nations (2003). *“Investing in the future”: First Nations education in Canada*. Ottawa, ON: Assembly of First Nations.
- Aylward, M. Lynn (2010). The role of Inuit languages in Nunavut schooling: Nunavut teachers talk about bilingual education. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 33(2), 295-328.
- Ball, Jessica (2006). *Talking points: Exploring needs and concepts for Aboriginal early childhood language facilitation and supports*. Concept paper prepared for Public Health Agency of Canada – Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities, Ottawa.
- Ball, Jessica (2008). Promoting equity and dignity for Aboriginal children in Canada. *IRPP Choices*, 14(7), 1-30.
- Ball, Jessica (2011). *Enhancing learning of children from diverse language backgrounds: Mother tongue-based bilingual or multilingual education in early childhood and early primary school years*. Paris: UNESCO. (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002122/212270e.pdf>)
- Ball, Jessica, & Bernhardt, Barbara May (2008). First Nations English dialects in Canada: Implications for speech-language pathology practice. *Clinical Linguistics and Phonetics*, 22(8), 570-588.
- Barrena, Andoni, Amorrortu, Esti, Ortega, Ane, Uranga, Belen, Izagirre, Esti, & Idiazabal, Itziar (2007). Does the number of speakers of a language determine its fate? *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 186, 125-139.
- Battiste, Marie (2000). Maintaining Indigenous identity, language, and culture in modern society. In Marie Battiste (Ed.), *Reclaiming Indigenous voice and vision* (pp. 192-208). Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.

- Bialystok, Ellen (Ed.) (1991). *Language processing in bilingual children*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Brittain, Julie, Dyck, Carrie, Rose, Yvan, & MacKenzie, Marguerite (2006). *The Chiasibi Child Language Acquisition Study (CCLAS): A progress report*. Presentation at the 38th Algonquian Conference, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, October 27-29, 2006.
- Burnaby, Barbara (1996). Language policies in Canada. In Michael L. Herriman & Barbara Burnaby (Eds.), *Language policies in English dominant countries: Six case studies* (pp. 159-219). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Canadian Centre for Justice (2001). *Indigenous peoples in Canada*. Statistics Profile Series. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Industry.
- Canadian Council on Learning (2007). *State of learning in Canada: No time for complacency*. Ottawa, ON: Author.
- Canadian Council on Learning (2009). *The state of Aboriginal learning in Canada: A holistic approach to measuring success*. (<http://www.ccl-cca.ca/sal2009>)
- Charron, Nadine (2010). *Exploring the links between Aboriginal-language-medium instruction and academic performance: A literature review in support of the PCH Aboriginal Languages Initiative*. Canada Heritage: Aboriginal Affairs Branch, Policy and Research Directorate.
- Chrisjohn, Roland David, & Young, Sherri Lynn, with Maraun, Michael (1997). *The circle game: Shadows and substance in the Indian residential school experience in Canada*. Penticton, BC: Theytus.
- Collier, Virginia P. (1989). How long? A synthesis of research on academic achievement in second language. *TESOL Quarterly*, 23, 509-531.
- Crago, Martha (1990). Development of communicative competence in Inuit children: Implications for speech-language pathology. *Journal of Childhood Communication Disorders*, 13, 73-83.
- Crago, Martha (1992). Ethnography and language socialization: A cross-cultural perspective. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 12(3), 28-39.
- Crystal, David (1997). *English as a global language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal, David (2000). *Language death*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Day, Richard (1985). The ultimate inequality: Linguistic genocide. In Nessa Wolfson & Joan Manes (Eds.), *Language of inequality* (pp. 163-181). Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Derwing, Tracey M., & Munro, Murray J. (2007). Canadian policies on immigrant language education. In Reva Joshee & Lauri Johnson (Eds.), *Multicultural education policies in Canada and the United States* (pp. 93-106). Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- Ellis, Rod (2005). Principles of instructed language learning. *System*, 33, 209-224.
- Fettes, Mark, & Norton, Ruth (2000). Voices of winter: Aboriginal languages and public policy in Canada. In Marlene Brant Castellano, Lynne Davis, & Louise Lahache (Eds.), *Aboriginal education* (pp. 29-54). Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- First Nations Education Steering Committee (2001). Developmental standard term certificate (DSTC): Bulletin. *Aboriginal Languages Newsletter*, 1, 4.
- Fulford, George (2007). *Sharing our success: More case studies in Aboriginal schooling*. Kelowna, BC: Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education.
- Gourd, Karen M. (2007). A critical examination of language policies and practices in Canada and the United States. In Reva Joshee & Lauri Johnson (Eds.), *Multicultural education policies in Canada and the United States* (pp. 120-128). Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- Grenoble, Lenore A., & Whaley, Lindsay J. (2006). *Saving languages: An introduction to language revitalization*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Guèvremont, Anne, & Kohen, Dafna (2010). *Knowledge of an Aboriginal language and school outcomes*. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, Health Analysis Division.

- Hart, Betty, & Risley, Todd R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- Heath, Shirley Brice (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hibel, Jacob, Faircloth, Susan C., & Farkas, George (2008). Unpacking the placement of American Indian and Alaska native students. *Harvard Educational Review*, 78(3), 498-528.
- Hinton, Leanne (2001). The master-apprentice language learning program. In Leanne Hinton & Kenneth Hale (Eds.), *The green book of language revitalization in practice* (pp. 217-226). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Hoover, Michael, & The Kanien'kehaka Raotitiohkwa Cultural Center (1992). The revival of the language in Kahnawake. *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 12(2), 269-287.
- Innis, Hugh R. (1973). *Bilingualism and biculturalism: An abridged version of the Royal Commission report*. Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart with the Secretary of the State Dept. and Information Canada.
- King, Kendall, & Mackey, Alison (2007). *The bilingual edge: Why, when, and how to teach your child a second language*. New York: Collins.
- Lafrance, Jean, & Collins, Don (2003). Residential schools and Indigenous parenting: Voice of parents. *Native Social Work Journal*, 4, 104-125.
- Lambert, Wallace E., Genesee, Fred, Holobow, Naomi, & McGilly, C. (1984). *An evaluation of a partial Mohawk immersion program in the Kahnawake Schools*. McGill University, Unpublished paper.
- Laurendeau, Andre, & Dunton, Davidson (2006). *The CBC digital archives website*. ([http://archives.cbc.ca/politics/language\\_culture/dossier/655/](http://archives.cbc.ca/politics/language_culture/dossier/655/))
- Lewis, M. Paul (Ed.) (2009). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world*, Sixteenth edition. Dallas, TX: SIL International. (<http://www.ethnologue.com/>)
- Lightbown, Patsy M. (2008). Easy as pie? Children learning languages. *Concordia Working Papers in Applied Linguistics*, 1, 1-25.
- Louis, Winnifred, & Taylor, Donald M. (2001). When the survival of a language is at stake: The future of Inuititut in Arctic Québec. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 20(1-2), 111-143.
- McCarty, Teresa (2003). Revitalising Indigenous languages in homogenising times. *Comparative Education*, 39(2), 147-163.
- Miller, James Rodger (1996). *Shingwauk's vision: A history of Native residential schools*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Milloy, John Sheridan (1999). *"A national crime": The Canadian government and the residential school system, 1879 to 1986*. Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press.
- Norris, Mary Jane (2006). Aboriginal languages in Canada: Trends and perspectives on maintenance and revitalization. In Jerry P. White, Dan Beavon, & Susan Wingert (Eds.), *Indigenous policy research: Moving forward, making a difference*, Vol. 3 (pp. 197-228). Toronto, ON: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Norris, Mary Jane (2007). Aboriginal languages in Canada: Emerging trends and perspectives on second language acquisition. *Canadian Social Trends*, 83, 20-28.
- Northwest Territories (1988). *Official languages act*. Yellowknife, NT: Government of the Northwest Territories.
- Office of the Prime Minister (2008). *PM offers full apology on behalf of Canadians for the Indian residential schools system*. (<http://pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=2146>)
- Parliament of Canada (2009). *Nunavut official languages act*. (<http://www.parl.gc.ca>)
- Peltier, Sharla (2010). *Valuing children's story-telling from an Anishnaabe orality perspective*. Unpublished M.Ed. Thesis, Nipissing University, North Bay, Ontario. (<http://www.ecdip.org/docs/pdf/Sharla%27s%20Final%20Revision%20without%20signatures.pdf>)

- Peter, Lizette, Hirata-Edds, Tracy, & Montgomery-Anderson, Bradley (2008). Verb development by children in the Cherokee language immersion program, with implications for teaching. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 18(2), 166-187.
- Phillipson, Robert (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Philpott, David F. (2006). Identifying the learning needs of Innu students: Creating a model of culturally appropriate assessment. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 26(2), 361-381.
- Richards, Merle & Burnaby, Barbara (2008). Restoring Aboriginal languages: Immersion and intensive program models in Canada. In Tara Williams Fortune & Diane Tedick (Eds.), *Pathways to multilingualism: Evolving perspectives on immersion education* (pp. 221-241). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Rogoff, Barbara (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context*. New York: Oxford.
- Romaine, Suzanne (2002). The impact of language policy on endangered languages. *International Journal on Multicultural Societies*, 4(2), 194-212.
- Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996). *Gathering strength: Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Supply and Services.
- Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1967). *Report of the Royal Commission on bilingualism and biculturalism: General introduction and book 1, the official languages*. Ottawa, ON: Queen's Printer.
- Sarkar, Mela, & Metallic, Mali A'n (2009). Indigenizing the structural syllabus: The challenge of revitalizing Mi'gmaq in Listuguj. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 66(1), 49-71.
- Senate of Canada (2009). *Bill S-237: An act for the advancement of the Aboriginal languages of Canada and to recognize and respect Aboriginal language rights*. Ottawa, ON: Publishing and Depository Services.
- Snow, Catherine E., & Hoefnagel-Hoehle, M. (1978). The critical period for language acquisition: Evidence from second language learning. *Child Development*, 49, 1114-1118.
- Statistics Canada (2006). *Aboriginal peoples of Canada: A demographic profile, 2006 Census*. Ottawa, ON: Author.
- Strengthening Indigenous languages and cultures*. (n.d.) (<http://www.nsilc.org/index.htm>)
- Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures (2005). *Towards a new beginning: A foundational report for a strategy to revitalize First Nation, Inuit and Métis languages and cultures*. Ottawa, ON: Department of Canadian Heritage.
- United Nations (2008). *United Nations declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples*. New York, NY: Author.
- van Kleeck, Anne (1994). Potential cultural bias in training parents as conversational partners with their children who have delays in language development. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 3(1), 67-78.
- Wesley-Esquimaux, Cynthia C., & Smolewski, Magdalena. (2004). *Historic trauma and Aboriginal healing*. Ottawa, ON: Indigenous Healing Foundation.
- Wilson, William H., & Kamana, Kauanoe (2001). "Mai loko mai O ka 'Iini: Proceeding from a dream": The 'Aha Punana Leo connection in Hawaiian language revitalization. In Leanne Hinton & Kenneth Hale (Eds.), *The green book of language revitalization in practice* (pp. 147-176). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Wright, Stephen C., Taylor, Donald M., & Macarthur, Judy (2000). Subtractive bilingualism and the survival of the Inuit language: Heritage- versus second-language education. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92(1), 63-84.
- Zwanziger, Elizabeth E., Allen, Shanley E. M., & Genesee, Fred (2006). Cross-linguistic influence in bilingual acquisition: Subject omission in learners of Inuktitut and English. *Journal of Child Language*, 32, 893-910.

