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Saving Culture Through Language: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of Ojibwe Language Immersion Educator Experience

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Abstract

With the near extinction of many tribal languages at the present, language immersion education offers considerable promise for the revitalization of Ojibwe culture and identity. Through a series of structured interviews and longitudinal text-based dialogue, eight educators from three school-based programs described the lived practice of working with language and culture in language immersion education. This study principally revealed how the lived experience of Ojibwe language immersion educators is important, challenging, and rewarding. The dynamic synergy of culture, language, and content that happens in Ojibwe language immersion requires competent and creative educators who are knowledgeable about language, cultural traditions, and teaching practice. This study concludes by noting how the lived experience of immersion school practitioners as cultural workers is marked not only by excellence in practice and professionalism, but by dedication, responsibility, and hope for the future of the culture, language, and tribal nation itself.

Keywords

First Nations education, hermeneutics, indigenous language, language immersion, language revitalization, phenomenology

Revitalization of the Ojibwe language is among the most important issues facing Anishinaabe communities in Canada and the United States. Speaker numbers are approaching historically low levels, with many communities having only a handful of fluent speakers remaining. The creation of enriched second language programs in schools represents one widespread attempt to revitalize language and culture (McCarty, 2003). Language immersion education is one such model that employs a second language to teach academic and cultural knowledge throughout the entire day.

Indigenous peoples such as the Maori, Native Hawaiians, Haudenosaunee, Navaho, and Arapaho effectively employ language immersion as a part of their revitalization efforts (Aguilera, 2008; Hinton, 2001; Hornberger, 2008). A focus on culture is an important component of immersion education programs, particularly so for Indigenous languages (Fortune & Tedick, 2008). A limiting factor for many Indigenous immer-

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sion efforts is the lack of licensed educators who possess the necessary linguistic and cultural competencies required for such a position (Hinton, 2003; Reyhner, 2003; Richards & Burnaby, 2008).

The professional and personal lives of many immersion teachers often become intertwined, and the long hours and hard work are often accompanied by a deep commitment and a sense of satisfaction. The teaching staff in many Indigenous immersion schools is composed of individuals from a variety of educational and linguistic backgrounds. University-educated second language learners with advanced degrees work alongside traditionally - educated first speaker elders. Understanding the experience of the few individuals presently engaged in Ojibwe language immersion instruction is important to helping communities retain and recruit personnel and to ensuring that this system of education maintains a sense of quality, growth, and sustainability.

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explored the experiences of Ojibwe language immersion educators implementing culture-based content within a school-based setting. As a former Ojibwe language immersion teacher, and a current teacher-educator of students who would one day like to be Ojibwe language teachers, this study was an important opportunity to explore the unique experience of those dedicated individuals who are making the language immersion experience possible in school-based programs. Educator perspectives were collected through semi-structured small group discussions and analyzed using van Manen's (1997) interpretative framework. Initial themes were discerned from significant statements made by participants and were later refined into a number of essential themes through hermeneutic dialogue with participants, thematic analysis, and participant and researcher hermeneutic reflection.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Phenomenology is concerned with the meaning of real world experiences toward a given phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). van Manen (1997) noted the focus of phenomenological inquiry is to discover the essence of lived experience, or "that which makes a thing what it is" (p. 177). Phenomenology is a methodology dedicated to understanding the everyday lived experience of people in myriad situations and environments. Hermeneutics, described as the science of interpretation by Brian Smith, is "a systematic approach to interpreting a text, firstly analyzing the whole text, then parts of the text and comparing the two interpretations for conflicts and for understanding the whole in relation to the parts and vice versa" (1998, p. 125). van Manen (1997) described his approach to human science research as a synthesis of each respective paradigm:

It is the phenomenological and hermeneutical study of human existence: phenomenology because it is the descriptive study of lived experience (phenomena) in the attempt to enrich lived experience by mining its meaning; hermeneutics because it is the interpretive study of the expressions and objectifications (texts) of lived experience in the attempt to determine the meaning embodied in them. (p. 38)

As a methodological framework for research, the use of hermeneutic phenomenology has specific implications for both the collection and analysis of data, as well as a broader philosophical orientation that focuses knowledge building as a pedagogical act. Both the researcher and the participants are involved in the exploration and interpretation of the phenomenon of study (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). This is particularly important to an Indigenous research study that values the importance of dialogic

conversation between the researcher and participants.

As a research methodology, hermeneutic phenomenology is not characterized by static procedures or approaches. A discovery orientation is necessary, as is a willingness on the part of the researcher to be open to new and unexpected findings (Finlay, 2009; Lauver, 2010; Laverty, 2003). van Manen suggested the researcher should be sensitive to emergent needs, and not be “obstructed by pre-conceptions and theoretical notions” (1997, p. 184). Laverty (2003) summarized van Manen’s (1997) approach as requiring “an ability to be reflective, insightful, sensitive to language, and constantly open to experience” (p. 16). The present study employed Laverty’s (2003) flexible approach to building understanding “using whatever approaches are responsive to particular questions and subject matter” (p. 16).

Hermeneutic Text and Language

“For research purposes lived experience has to be fixed in texts, which then always needs interpretation” (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004, p. 148). Robertson-Malt (1999) noted the strength of a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology in moving beyond “the superficial explanation or description of an experience that the ‘text’ first offers” (p. 292). The interpretation of text necessarily involves that experience be contextualized within “the world of language and social relationships, and the inescapable historicity of all understanding” (Finlay, 2009, p. 11). The social context, or lived experience, of language use is particularly important within the dynamic and complex relationships that comprise Indigenous language revitalization. As stated by van Manen (1997), “the object of human science research is essentially a linguistic project: to make some aspect of our lived world, of our lived experience,

reflectively understandable and intelligible” (pp. 125-126).

In the production and interpretation of texts referencing lived experience, acknowledging the significance of the language used is an integral part of the overall conceptual design. Ricoeur (1981) affirmed the “lingual condition of all experience” (p. 115) and van Manen contextualized the central place of language within hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry:

We are able to recall and reflect on experiences thanks to language. Human experience is only possible because we have language. Language is so fundamentally part of our humanness that Heidegger (1971) proposed that language, thinking, and being are one. (1997, pp. 38-39)

Hermeneutic phenomenology is attentive to the notion of multiple interpretations, metaphor, analogy, and the range of meaning that language provides. Gadamer (2004) wrote, “In language the order and structure of our experience itself is originally formed and constantly changed... It is from language as a medium that our whole experience of the world, and especially hermeneutical experience, unfolds” (p. 453).

Context of the Study

The study is dedicated to the describing the cultural and language-based experiences of Ojibwe language immersion educators who are currently employed in P-12 licensed programs. The challenges posed for Indigenous language immersion educators are many, and the qualifications necessarily high. Bringing together the voices of practitioners from the field is a powerful way of generating some collective understanding of our work and needs. The linguistic and cultural interpretations being made within immersion schools today will have great implications for the sustainability of both

language and culture. Nieto (2010) referred to the role people play as “agents of culture” (p. 136) who have responsibility for the creation and transformation of cultural reality. Indigenous immersion practitioners are cultural agents by vocation, working to adapt ancient linguistic and cultural codes for a dynamic present and future. Gaining an understanding of immersion teacher experience through collegiality, friendship, and conversation is a means of describing a challenging practice in a constructive and hope-giving way.

An Ojibwe language immersion school is defined in the study as any school-based program that is committed to teaching subject content matter through the Ojibwe language 100% of the time. The programs included in this study include both on and off-reservation programs, and include children of primarily Indigenous but also non-Indigenous descent. The study refers to First Nations people using the terms Indigenous, Native, or the Ojibwe language term Anishinaabe.

Methods

Specific Procedures

The study involved interviewing small teams of Ojibwe language immersion educators about their experiences integrating culture-based programming within a language immersion program. Teaching teams from three similar, but separate schools, were included to allow for a broader range of perspectives and experiences. Follow-up dialogue with individual participants occurred after the initial team interviews.

Study Participants

Eight participants who presently work in Ojibwe language immersion programs were included in the study. Each of these individuals is a first or second language speaker of

Ojibwe and has direct experience as an immersion educator or support person. Participants ranged in age from young adults to tribal elders and included three men and five women. Half of the participants have teaching degrees or certification attained through formal education programs. The others achieved state-based teaching qualification through eminence credentialing in Indian language or culture. All participants are Ojibwe Anishinaabe people and are enrolled in a Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Dakota, or Ontario tribal community.

Data Collection Procedures

The research process used a combination of small group interviews with teaching teams, hermeneutic interviews with individual participants, and reflective journaling by the researcher. Initial interviews were completed within the first two months of the study, and reflective journaling and hermeneutic interviews occurred over the next six months.

Small group interviews. Small group interviews comprised the primary means of data generation and collection. I served as the facilitator or moderator of the small group discussions in the protocol, but also engaged in parts of the dialogue as a co-participant. All questions were asked bilingually, and participants were informed they could choose whatever language they wanted to use in whole or in part for each answer. Interviews were audio recorded with field notes taken by myself. All interviews were transcribed in a line-by-line format, and I completed any required translation from Ojibwe to English. Member checks were used to ensure validity. I asked participants to share their experiences and perspectives on how cultural content may best be integrated within an immersion school setting.

Hermeneutic interview reflection. As a part of the interpretative process, I reviewed

interview-generated materials with participants. Hermeneutic conversation took place through a series of oral and electronic exchanges during the study period. Checking the accuracy of the transcript and any translations I made were key initial tasks. The hermeneutic conversation was moreover focused on reviewing the thematic summary that had been compiled by myself. Both revisions and additions to the thematic content resulted in a process whereby both the interviewer and the interviewee weighed the appropriateness of each item by asking, “Is this what the experience is really like?” (van Manen, 1997, p. 99). This stage of the research design is oriented as an interpretive conversation wherein both partners self-reflectively orient themselves to the “interpersonal or collective ground that brings the significance of the phenomenological question into view” (van Manen, 1997, p. 99). The electronic nature of the text-based dialogue was true to the hermeneutic orientation of the research design.

Reflective journal. I maintained a reflective journal throughout the research process. Although bracketing is not a part of an interpretative phenomenological approach, Grbich (2007) added, “you will need to keep a reflective journal recording your own experiences, personal assumptions and views” (p. 91). Hermeneutics suggests the assumptions, perspectives, and biases of the researcher are not only embedded in the study but, as Laverty (2003) noted, are “essential to the interpretive process” (p. 17).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Within hermeneutic phenomenology, data analysis and interpretation is a longitudinal process. The process of analyzing language and identifying thematic content began during the first interview and continued until the end of the study. Interview text from the small group discussions and hermeneutic conversations was put through an interpre-

tive process that “aimed at generating a deeper understanding of the topic by facilitating a fusion of the world views of both participant and researcher” (Smith, 1998, p. 124). There was some important common ground between the participants and me: all belong to the Ojibwe nation, work in Ojibwe immersion, and speak both English and Ojibwe. Although hermeneutic phenomenology is not intended to adhere to any strict procedures by definition, some guidelines for data collection and analysis originate in the six key research activities listed by van Manen (1997):

1. Turning to the phenomenon, which seriously interests us and commits us to the world.
2. Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it.
3. Reflecting on the essential themes, which characterize the phenomenon.
4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting.
5. Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon.
6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.

These six activities formed the basis for the analytic framework used in the study.

The first and second of these research themes were particularly important to the development of the study. The experience of the Indigenous language immersion educator, as culture agent, is of deep interest to the participants and myself alike. This profession requires a holistic investment of spirit, heart, mind, voice, and hand. One’s personal and professional lives become intimately and necessarily intertwined in such an involved job capacity. As one participant noted in hermeneutic discourse:

This is like nothing else I have ever done. I’ve been a teacher before but not like

this. It takes every part of me: my spirit, my heart, my mind, my body. I breathe and sleep and dream this stuff now. Sure it's hard but I can see my life, our lives, our peoples' lives and hopes and stories going into the future now. That's why it means so much, that's the why behind it all.

Notably, the experience being investigated is profoundly lived by all involved in the study. While a focus on one's conceptualized or idealized practice versus one's lived practice is a potential caveat in any such discussion, the common truths that emerged from the small group conversations were mutually grounding for all participants. As one team member summarized, "This has been helpful to me to understand all the ways I am not alone in this and to keep the big picture in mind. It is good to know that my co-workers also feel and go through these things."

Thematic analysis. van Manen stated that the identification and reflection on themes that characterize the phenomenon is a vital research activity (1997). Thematic reduction and analysis is a core part of any phenomenological study albeit with differing approaches to achieving each (Finlay, 2009; Lavery, 2003). van Manen further noted, "Phenomenological themes may be understood as the structures of experience. So when we analyze a phenomenon, we are trying to determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up the experience" (1997, p. 79). The production of interview texts is precursor to the analysis process. van Manen (1997) suggested three key ways of isolating or identifying themes from the text:

1. The wholistic or sententious approach.
2. The selective or highlighting approach.
3. The detailed or line-by-line approach.

Because of the length of the interviews, and the number of lines of text that were generated from each conversation, the second of these approaches was selected as an efficient and practical way to determine thematic content.

Based on the selective or highlighting approach, several of what Lauver (2010) described as "significant statements and key words" (p. 292) were coded from the verbatim texts. These significant statements were reworded as initial themes that were ultimately summarized as essential themes. These major or essential themes were shared with the participants as a part of member checking, as well as to ensure their continued participation and reflection. The procedure suggested by Robertson-Malt (1999) was applied at this point in the study:

These themes (essentials) were then revisited with the participants, who at this point of the study became co-researchers through their validation and guidance of the emergent themes. During this phase I worked with individual participants in an effort to weigh the appropriateness of each essential item by asking: 'Is this what the experience is really like?' (p. 295).

It was an emotional journey for many participants, with several commenting that this research protocol was a necessary intervention to understanding what their work was truly about:

We find ourselves so extraordinarily busy, with teaching, with curriculum writing, with translation, with talking with parents, with making up words, with trying to make sure these kids feel and learn why we are doing this . . . that we never have a chance to really think through or describe or understand our purpose and what all this really means. This is the "step away" from the work

that was needed to see it all and reinvigorate as well.

Determining, summarizing, and writing essential themes was an iterative process that took many drafts. In this regard, van Manen's fourth key research activity of describing a phenomenon "through the art of writing and rewriting" (1997, p. 30) was fulfilled. The extended dialogue with participants, and a constant revisiting of the original research questions throughout this phase, ensured that van Manen's fifth key research activity of "maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon" (1997, p. 31) was also achieved.

van Manen's sixth key research activity, considering parts and whole as a means of establishing research context, was key to the ultimate refinement and determination of thematic content. Differentiating between incidental and essential themes is a vital determination in hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1997). This process is a part of the hermeneutic circle, whereby the dialectic consideration of parts and whole is key to the process of developing an understanding of the phenomenon:

The hermeneutic circle is a metaphor for understanding and interpretation, which is viewed as a movement between parts (data) and whole (evolving understanding of the phenomenon), each giving meaning to the other such that understanding is circular and iterative... Understanding emerges in the process of dialogue between the researcher and the text of the research. (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007, pp. 622-623)

Following the suggestion of Robertson-Malt (1999), "commonalities in essential themes between the various interviews were identified which guided the uncovering of . . . essences" (p. 295). The determination of a

final number of essences is "seen to reveal the essential nature of the lived experience" (Robertson-Malt, 1999, p. 295), or as noted by van Manen, "transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence - in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful" (van Manen, 1997, p. 36). As noted by Ricoeur (1981), "The reference of the linguistic order back to the structure of experience (which comes to language in the assertion) constitutes, in my view, the most important phenomenological presupposition of hermeneutics" (p. 118).

An extra interpretive lens was required in the co-translation of material from Ojibwe to English. Once ideas from practice were transmitted into words, and the thematic summaries of those words agreed upon, then began the task of interpreting these constructs into English. Although a step removed from the original discourse, translation may have been strengthening to the interpretive process. As noted by one participant, "It's always difficult to turn the words into English, but it's something we have to do to help others understand. It's helpful to us as well, as we really have to be deliberate in what words we choose. I'm more careful with English when I'm translating than when I'm just speaking it."

Study Findings

Data collected from the small group interviews, individual hermeneutic conversations with participants, and the researcher-kept phenomenological journal were used to generate 32 initial themes that were further summarized to eight essential themes. From the different interviews there were a total of 332 significant statements: (a) 101 from site one interview, (b) 114 from site two interview, and (c) 117 from site three interview. Initial themes were derived from a single significant statement or several related

significant statements. The process involved constant interaction between the data and myself as initial themes were combined, separated, entirely reworked, or refined. van Manen explained that it was an expected part of the reduction process: “Theme formulation is at best a simplification. We come up with a theme formulation but immediately feel that it somehow falls short, that it is an inadequate summary of the notion” (1997, p. 87). All initial themes were revised several times.

Each of the three teaching team interviews shared 25 of 32 initial themes in common. No additional themes were suggested by any of the interview participants. A difficulty cited by almost all participants was the lack of broad understanding even within their immediate school communities about the nature of their work. Participants related that the recent emergence of their programs meant there is little established definition for their lived practice, and little opportunity to reflect on its meaning or purpose.

Almost all participants noted considerable dissatisfaction that the traditional experience of world-language immersion educators was often generalized to include Indigenous language immersion practitioner experience and work. As summarized in my research journal,

Our work is categorically different in Indigenous immersion. We have the same content obligations and language fluency requirements . . . but there is an expectation (and need) from our communities of our students achieving true cultural competency (not just knowledge of cultural products or practices, but at the deeper level of cultural perspective). To accomplish this, we have to be people who live this worldview – if we are to ever hope for the children to do the same. This means significant learning

and transformation for most of us – not only in learning new things, but also in terms of divesting the experience of colonization that has in part made us who we are today. This may also mean changing what it means to be “a teacher.”

Essential Themes

After the final list of initial themes was derived from interview and hermeneutic conversation data, further reduction was necessary in order to generate a list of major themes. Table 1 lists each of the essential themes identified in the study. The listing of major themes is representative of key facets of immersion teachers’ experience teaching culture and language.

Table 1

Essential Themes of Immersion Educator Culture and Language Experience and Source

Initial Themes

1. Indigenous language immersion educator experience is inclusive, broadening, holistic, and supports the cultural, linguistic, content knowledge, and identity needs of participants.
2. Indigenous language immersion educator practice requires the collaborative effort of students, staff members, parents, community members, language learners, and language speakers.
3. Indigenous language immersion teachers must have or attain the requisite skills, knowledge, understanding, and materials to be effective.
4. The teaching of language and culture is complicated within Indigenous language immersion educator practice by school-based structures.

5. Culture, language, and academic objectives must be clearly defined and prioritized within Indigenous language immersion educator practice.

6. Indigenous language immersion teaching experience is challenging, important, and rewarding.

7. Indigenous language immersion teaching requires learning from others and connecting with the past and present for the future.

8. Indigenous language immersion educator experience is about leadership, nationhood, spirit, and hope.

An explication of each essential theme is made in the following section. Direct reference is made to initial themes from which essential themes were derived.

Indigenous Language Immersion Educator Experience

This first essential theme speaks to the definitional and applicative foundations of immersion education teacher practice. Not only is such practice supportive of the needs of students, there is tremendous benefit for practitioners involved in the delivery of culturally - based programs. Importantly, Indigenous immersion education systems need not necessarily be confined to reservation settings alone. The key idea noted by one participant is that “Ojibwe language immersion is for everywhere in this modern world.” Participants reported identity development for Indigenous children is at the heart of the immersion effort. They reported that non-Indigenous children who participated in immersion programs gained a greater appreciation and acceptance of Native peoples, cultures, and communities:

The thing I saw as a change in a non-native child this year was that American

Indians are around and okay in this world too, outside the reservations: “You’re Anishinaabe and I like you.” We can make big impacts on those people who might have some negative stereotypes they are carrying around.

Immersion education is demonstrably improving intercultural competency for all students by offering strong culture and language programming. One teacher noted that students were interested and appreciative when exposed to world languages such as Spanish and Chinese.

The programs surveyed in the study are obligated to fulfill general state academic standards. Each of these schools has a set of English language testing instruments that are used as a part of standardized testing. Programs have to demonstrate that they are meeting the academic needs of students through such testing protocols. My research journal noted this challenge of practice midway throughout the study in that, “All teachers feel the stress of having to educate children in the target language only to be measured by their performance on an English-language standardized test that does not represent the way the children think or relate knowledge.”

Despite the struggles, participants reported that working in an immersion program is beneficial to creating a supportive network for practice. Immersion creates a language community that brings together people for the main purpose of using the target language and practicing cultural norms. Speaking one’s language and knowing one’s culture leads to lifelong fulfillment in terms of identity:

In knowing my language and culture I know that I am Anishinaabe no matter where I am at, and I am proud to be Anishinaabe no matter where I am. That is

something special we can give our children, that powerful feeling.

All of the educators valued having a place to go on a daily basis where they are able to converse with so many adults and children who are interested in, and value, the Native language. While not all elements of cultural and linguistic experience can be a part of school life, staff members and students benefit greatly from the rich community expression that has developed in these centers.

Indigenous Language Immersion Educator Practice Facilitates Collaborative Effort

The revitalization of an Indigenous language is a worthy endeavor that often reconnects people with a language from which they are two or three generations removed. There are many different roles that need to be played in the creation and maintenance of a speaking and learning community. Indigenous immersion educators play a lead role in these intentional communities, and often help coordinate the efforts of others such as elders, parents and community members. Participants broadly agreed that the involvement of families and community members is both important and meaningful to everyone involved, but that the burden of this organization often falls on them to arrange.

Immersion school teachers spend a great deal of time with children, often teaching both core and specialty subjects. One participant explained that immersion teacher work transcends the work requirements he had as a regular teacher in the state system. This is particularly true in that there is more than academic content that we are trying to get across in our practice:

I want to see them stand strong as Anishinaabe people. I really do care a lot

about those children that I instruct. I don't think of it as just teaching those children, they also teach me about the way that I am as an Anishinaabe person and how I must continue to be a kind and good individual.

Time is not necessarily the critical variable in establishing meaningful relationships; rather, it is the care, attention, motivation, and effort that children observe and experience that helps make the practice of Ojibwe language immersion educators so extraordinary.

Requisite Skills of Effective Immersion Language Immersion Teachers

Immersion teaching work is necessarily complex due to the unique intersection of language, culture, and academic content objectives. A shortage of individuals who are highly proficient speakers, knowledgeable of traditional Native culture, and either licensed or trained as classroom teachers has been a limiting factor in either the opening or growth of each school:

It is not just the language; there is a reason why they must be taught about cultural ways. Like the drum or the pipe, there is a reason why they must know about these things. It is not enough to speak the language well as one must know how to use it. The language is a spiritual language, you have to know about it, and what the language means.

Indigenous language immersion teacher practice is dependent upon a proficient knowledge of the language and cultural skill. Having a rich cultural base ensures that the language continues to be spoken with its original quality and repertoire of meaning: this is especially important at the present when so much innovation and change is required for linguistic and cultural survival.

Given the present climate of standardized testing and required content standards, mastery of Western or mainstream knowledge is a significant part of immersion school life and practice today. Schools are mandated to procure highly qualified teachers, so licensure is increasingly important. All participants asserted that licensure should not be the determining or primary qualification for being able to work in an immersion school:

It was almost as if I could not trust myself to be of any help as I lacked a teaching license. I was only able to speak the Ojibwe language well. This was all that I felt I knew, that Anishinaabe Ojibwe language. This was all. I didn't have an understanding of teacher training, and I didn't have any professional experience. I went ahead and did my work there well though.

Immersion schools have responded to the need for professional teacher skills by bringing in professional presenters and encouraging staff members to seek relevant in-service opportunities. While there seems to be broad agreement that language and cultural skills are important and should be increasingly recognized, professional teacher programs can help educators meet the unique challenges of working with children in school-based settings.

While each of the Ojibwe language immersion schools offer in-service opportunities for staff members throughout the year, the responsibility of acquiring necessary core skills rests with teachers themselves. None of the individuals interviewed in the study felt fully prepared for the diverse set of responsibilities and duties in Ojibwe language immersion work at the onset of their careers. Participants commented on the need for increased language, culture, or pedagogical knowledge. Even after many years in the field, teachers still felt they only

knew a little about how to best do immersion instruction.

Participants agreed that finding the right Ojibwe words, or words that children can make sense of, is an ongoing task in every subject area they teach. Consulting with teammates, elders, and other immersion professionals is a useful means of finding a way forward in these circumstances, but this requires that Indigenous immersion teachers be active in their pursuit of knowledge. One participant noted that something as basic as knowing how to ask for information and navigate one's way through the cultural matrix of a community is a learned skill that takes perseverance and determination.

The Teaching of Language and Culture within School-based Structures

The difficulty of transforming mainstream school-based programming into a culturally and linguistically Indigenous - oriented system has been taken on by a number of dynamic teams working in Ojibwe language immersion. Elders and first speakers work alongside language learners to create spaces where the Ojibwe language is used to describe all school-based routines and activities in an Indigenous way. All participants felt that the cultural value of mutual collaboration and cooperation is at the heart of every Ojibwe language immersion classroom. While Ojibwe language immersion programs are using many of the same physical and organizational structures as other schools, the way that educators feel they are using them is fundamentally different. Wrote one participant, "We don't just learn about culture in our classroom, we live culture."

Over the course of research-based discussions, participants identified several limitations to school-based programming. However, immersion educators focused more on the possibilities for cultural growth

and awareness than the limitations. Almost every classroom begins each morning with a thanksgiving speech and an offering of tobacco. Entire programs come together for this event, and children share the responsibility of helping start the day. Children spend a lot of time outdoors, and most programs have an environmental focus that ties in strongly to Indigenous life-ways. Field trips, visits from community members, and an attempt to link cultural themes to academic content are important ways through which immersion teachers feel they are staying true to the program mission in their practice. Participants note that children commonly learn about practices such as drumming, singing, offering tobacco, harvesting wild rice, making maple syrup, trapping, beading, and dancing. One teacher related that the children learned to treat the drum respectfully once they better understood how it was to be used and a little about how it is made.

Culture, Language, and Academic Objectives

Defining and balancing cultural, linguistic, and academic objectives in Indigenous language immersion education is a vital point of practice. All teams felt that academic content standards or language objectives were available to them. For Ojibwe language immersion teachers to act as true cultural workers, clarifying what is meant by culture determines whether or not students learn about simple artifacts or are ultimately exposed and encouraged to adopt authentic perspectives and worldviews. Decisions about culture also have direct implications for what is taught, particularly if a school or language immersion practitioner is observant of an Indigenous epistemology. The broad sentiment was that it is better to be clear about what can and will be accomplished rather than teach culture in a mitigated and indiscriminate manner.

Culture is often framed in terms of products, practices, and perspectives within second language and culture pedagogy. These designations have been helpful to some participants in creating learning standards or goals that can be achieved within a school-based context such as lesson or unit planning. One participant related it in the following way:

I try to use that approach when we talk about culture. There is an object that is used, there is a thing you do, and then there is a certain belief you have associated with that so that is what I try to do as I am teaching. And you can do a lot with that by having the actual objects in your classroom, making the objects yourself, and talking about how those three bigger ideas are interrelated.

A common theme for all participants is that language and culture are mutually dependent, and ultimately inseparable. Language immersion systems explore each of the three main facets of culture:

If we have an immersion program, we know our teachings and where our language came from and that is one of the most sacred and holy experiences of ours. How powerful that is. I mean we always say, "You can't take the culture out," but you literally can't. To try to pull that out and take pieces and parts of it out won't work anyway, so culture is going to find a way in.

A number of participants described their belief that many aspects of culture cannot or should not be talked about using English. The Ojibwe language is the natural form of expression for Ojibwe culture and is inherently oriented to teaching all aspects of cultural and community life. Challenges present themselves in the transition to school-based systems of teaching and learning and the Western knowledge-based

academic standards upon which the majority of the instructional program is based.

Each teaching team noted that academic content, linguistic, and culture-learning goals are not always mutually supportive. Quite often the words required to talk about a modern-day concept are not readily available. Participants believed there is a beneficial thrust to invent new words and uses of the language to ensure future viability. While all participants noted it is exciting to be at the forefront of such a movement, it is also a profound responsibility to be shaping the way the language will be spoken in the future: "I work with my classroom elders the best I can in this regard, and modern dictionaries are helpful. It is worrisome though that what I teach my students may shape the future of how our language is spoken." The teaching teams consulted in the study endeavor to achieve content and language learning objectives through a cultural framework of practice. This requires considerable planning work to ensure each goal is evenly represented.

Rewards and Challenges of Indigenous Language Immersion Teaching Experience

One of the most striking features of each teaching team interviewed was how resolute and committed they each are to fulfilling language and content goals in a way that is culturally authentic and adaptive. The resultant work responsibilities are far beyond what might be expected of a regular classroom teacher:

- translating content standards and concepts;
- determining cultural inclusiveness and appropriateness;
- researching and developing requisite vocabulary;
- authoring curriculum units;
- developing comprehensive assessments;
- learning the local language and culture of the community;
- gaining the trust of elders and the community; and
- serving as a role model for culture and language.

The exhausting regimen of language immersion instruction work is not for everyone. All of the teaching teams represented in this study have experienced significant attrition with the high workload being a suggested contributing factor:

Language preservation efforts place tremendous pressures on teachers of language. The pressures of setting and students affect who will teach and the skills that are needed... This is true in all teaching fields, but even more of an issue in Native American language owing to the small numbers of fluent speakers, the task at hand, and the lack of clarity in the field. (Silverthorne, p. 106, 1997)

It takes a remarkable individual with the required skill set for the job as well as the ability and determination to handle a demanding work assignment. A special resilience might be necessary given the number and type of criticisms that participants described over the course of the study.

Ojibwe language immersion teaching work is a challenging profession. Serving such a broad range of stakeholders often means being subject to multiple criticisms. Participants identified a number of criticisms that make their jobs difficult. These range from concerns about materials or assessments, the quality of dialect or language used by staff members, to the authenticity of cultural expression. The use of print and audiovisual multimedia resources in schools continues to be perceived as a threat to the oral tradition by many community

members. Further community concerns reported by participants included the quality and limitations of student language use. What is important, participants believe, is that students are learning the language and finding enough value to want to use it every day. Ensuring that children authentically adopt a comprehensive Indigenous perspective is much more complex than simply gaining an appreciation of worldview. While language immersion teachers do their utmost to maintain a Native perspective in their practice this can be difficult given the limitations of available resources:

Say we are talking about the solar system and we have come to a discussion of what we are going to say about this. What are our teachings about this? Our elders say we don't know anything about that. Where do we go? That is when we reach out. That takes time. We must be careful to design lessons so that whatever we put forth is accurate.

Earning the respect, trust, and support of the community is both an associated responsibility and a reward for an Ojibwe language immersion educator. The active role an immersion teacher plays in revitalizing Indigenous culture through language fits well with Nieto's description of an "agent of culture" (2010, p. 136). Immersion programs and situations are intentional ones. A conscious decision has to be made to both create and maintain a speaking environment that would not otherwise exist for students. The goal of the efforts is for the intentionality aspect of speaking to one day become unnecessary:

It is like what was said about speaking our language, where it just becomes the norm of behavior again instead of the extraordinary where our Anishinaabe life would just be there. It's a part of our lives and it's expected, you know?

Many participants described how fulfilling it was to see children take the lead on ceremonial protocols that were needed in the school and community. It is through the voices of the children that classroom practitioners can hear the words of school elders, or perhaps one's own parents or grandparents, continue on. Being an immersion teacher is a tremendously challenging, important, and yet rewarding position. As noted by one participant,

It makes those difficult moments worth it when you get those affirmations from elders, or the moments when the children go and use the language all on their own. There is something about that sound. Maybe we are lucky that we get to see stuff that maybe most people don't get to see? We are unbelievably lucky.

Connecting with the Past and Present for the Future

As a system of education that is founded on culture and language, it is essential that traditional ways of speaking the Native language form the basis for new innovations. While new linguistic forms and meanings are an inevitable part of language change (Llamas, Mullany, & Stockwell, 2007), underlying meanings, or the spirit of the language, should be preserved throughout surface changes. Immersion school practitioners rely heavily on the contributions of elders and master speakers to achieve the best quality of language in the classroom. Written resources are useful sources of language samples and vocabulary choices. It is the attendant elders and master speakers, however, who give each program the context for how to interpret and use language. This is particularly important when increasing numbers of language teachers are second language learners themselves.

The team approach to classroom instruction is an effective way of capitalizing on the collective skills of staff members. Younger staff members noted how working with elders is a rewarding and fulfilling experience. One of the young participants shared that being involved in language immersion has been powerfully reconnecting for herself and her family:

My grandmother went to boarding school so did not feel comfortable passing on the language... When I had this opportunity given to me I just said that this was something I was passionate about for her and for my family and my community and for myself. I thought that it was something that needed to be done.

Another team member affirmed that working with elders on a day-to-day basis is a valuable way to receive ongoing guidance, particularly about developing words and learning how to use them:

This is a discussion that we started to have with the elders, and what we are after is what are the true Anishinaabe ways of doing and when is it appropriate to talk about x, y, or z. I don't know if anyone has ever made any serious study of this, but I think it's something that we are very interested in doing to get back to how we should be.

The work between classroom elders, master speakers, and younger or second language learner teachers is a mutually rewarding partnership that strengthens the program for everyone involved.

Ojibwe language immersion educators are on the cusp of creating a meaningful future for the culture and language through the dynamic work of the present. Indeed, Indigenous immersion schools are a cynosure where traditional concepts and beliefs

meet the demands of new categorizations and definitions of knowledge. Cultural and linguistic practices can be adapted to fit the routines and structures found in schools. All participants affirmed how some creative effort can find the application of Western concept knowledge standards in traditional activities such as the moccasin game, maple syrup gathering, or snowshoeing. Connections have to be thoughtfully made to ensure that authentic cultural perspectives remain a part of the instruction and approach. Learning what the past and present have to teach in preparation for the future is the best means of creating a system of education that is culturally sustainable and authentically Indigenous no matter what surface changes arise.

Leadership, Nationhood, Spirit, and Hope

Participants summarized the concept of language revitalization for Indigenous people as the restoration of identity through culture and language. A school-based language immersion approach takes advantage of contemporary organizational systems to teach children in a culturally and linguistically rich environment. The intention is not to replicate English language education within a Native language, but rather to create a broad reinterpretation that is consistent with an Indigenous understanding of the world:

The whole reason for doing this isn't just about helping kids be successful in school. This is a nation-building project. This has to do with more than just learning your academics and being able to go to college and having a successful career later, this has more to do with waking our people back up again and realizing that our language and who we are is at the root of everything that gives us a right to claim to be Anishinaabe.

Indigenous language immersion work was described as a part of the larger movement to restore a broad sense of identity such that Indigenous nationhood critically means something in the future. Nationhood and identity are more than a tribal membership list or blood quantum calculation. Language and culture must be at the heart of an education system that has identity restoration as a goal. One participant asked a profound question in this regard: “How could I be Anishinaabe if I did not know the language and culture?”

The language teachers in the three schools surveyed for this study are at the forefront of a bigger movement of self-determination and empowerment through education. Participants shared that starting each school was at times a slow and difficult process. The process of creating the schools took great acts of courage, faith, and leadership. I reflected in my hermeneutic journal about leaving Canada because of the leading efforts of Native language educators in the United States.

For Ojibwe Anishinaabe people in Canada it seemed there had been a lot of discussion for a long time, but nothing ever happened. When I was asked to go work for this new, small program in the U.S. I was hesitant but intrigued. Here was an opportunity to do something I had dreamed of for years. When I visited the school, and saw the incredible potential that was there to actually make a real and lasting difference, I knew what my decision must be.

Being a leader in the Indigenous language immersion movement has meant enduring challenges and in some cases personal sacrifice. But the tremendous sense of belief in what is being accomplished is a powerfully motivating force for Ojibwe immersion educators. It also inspires hope in the

communities that benefit from the existence of one of these school-based programs.

Hope for a positive future is at the very core of Indigenous language immersion educator practice. Hearing the Native language spoken openly by children after decades of silence is a goal all teaching teams aspire to achieve. In the teaching of culture with and through language there is the hope that Native children will develop a deep sense of traditional identity and values. Some of the traditional perspectives study participants desire for students to develop include (a) kindness, (b) strength and resilience, (c) mutual cooperation, (d) self-reliance, (e) respect for one another, (f) diversity, and (g) belief in oneself. Learning these values is meant to strengthen the sense of nationhood over the long term and to help children develop resilience to some of the negative stresses of community life:

These are the kind of things that we need to get back to - the days when our people had better manners and self-awareness. Of course math and reading are important, but nothing is so important as cultural understanding. That is what is going to give the children deep roots so when the winds of drugs and alcohol and identity start blowing they're not going to be so shaken as if they weren't so deeply rooted.

For non-Native children and families who participate there is the hope of developing long-term mutual respect and appreciation of both languages and cultures. Hope of a better future is at the root of immersion practice and implementation.

A significant theme that characterizes Indigenous language immersion practice is the belief in the role of the Spirit. The Ojibwe language is a highly spiritual one that is recognized as both a special gift and a responsibility by the community. Spiritual

leaders believe that this is a time of sacred prophecy when things that have been lost or stolen throughout history will be renewed for the benefit of humankind in the future (Benton-Banai, 2010). Language is a key to cultural learning, and it is within the spiritual teachings of the language that Native identity exists. While individual stories differ, Ojibwe language immersion teaching practice is powerful spiritual work that is deeply reconnecting and grounding:

This entire journey of learning language has been more of a spiritual thing for me too. It's not just going and learning a new word. It is a spiritual process for me, so I know what you mean when you say having a spiritual connection is important.

The elements of leadership, hope, and spirit are important in the practice of Indigenous language immersion educators. These educators are proving that while school-based learning is a compulsory activity, it is not necessarily one that is devoid of connection to language, culture and identity.

We want students to come away with a real sense of who they are and a real sense of pride that we have something beautiful to offer to the rest of the world. We are part of this for a reason; we were put here for a reason to maintain balance in the world. We need to reclaim it and remember what that is and when it comes time to share it we need to be ready to do it - and to have a good sense of who we are as a nation and that we are a distinct people on this earth. We are beautiful and just as valuable, and our gifts are as valuable as anything else that is on this world.

As Native peoples continue to define and redefine education systems, the role and place of language immersion education will become increasingly important. A genera-

tion of children who are empowered with their culture, language, sense of identity, and belief in their place in the world speaks to a future led by strong leaders. Indigenous language immersion education is about nationhood, and as the experience of Ojibwe immersion educators suggests, it is about hope.

Conclusion

The study was born out of a personal desire to better understand the experience of a small but extraordinarily committed group of Ojibwe language immersion educators. The research helped define many of the elements of Ojibwe language immersion educator practice, but moreover framed the unique purpose and benefits of such efforts in teaching content and language framed by culture. The hermeneutic phenomenology of practice included the voices of several leading Ojibwe language immersion educators, and drew upon my own experiences in the field. As we examined our thoughts, feelings, understandings, and perceptions about our practice through text, a number of unique revelations emerged from both our collective and unique individual experiences. The research protocol did not represent a "step back" or separation from the busyness of such intense practice; rather, it was a profound opportunity for deeper engagement with our respective thoughts and our community of practice and support.

The practice of Indigenous language immersion educators committed to the teaching of culture and language within school-based systems is an important, challenging, and rewarding experience. In a time of rapid cultural and linguistic change, language immersion teaching teams endeavor to create a positive future that is grounded in traditional cultural perspectives while meeting contemporary information needs. The knowledge requirements of Native language immersion educators are great and

in continual need of advancement. The dynamic synergy of culture, language, and content that occurs on a daily basis in schools requires competent and creative educators. While a difficult and profound responsibility, these educators are rising to the challenge of the experience with integrity, respect, honor and dedication. The collaborative efforts that are led by these talented educators in their community and school-based programs is ensuring that future generations of Ojibwe children will be proficient in their language and confident in their cultural identity and place in the world.

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