Language as a Link to Wellness

Many thanks to the Hawaiian People for welcoming us on this beautiful land.

Introduction

• When a language faces challenges to its vitality, it is the modes of communication, the knowledge, the worldviews, and the cultures related to that language that are also facing these challenges.
• Much evidence supports a correlation between language and wellness. (Hallett et al., 2007; McIvor [Swampy Cree] & Napoleon [Northern Cree], 2009; McKay, 2011; Whalen et al., 2016).

Research Question

• How does language contribute to the wellness of individuals and communities?

Methodology

• A review of the literature, particularly by North American Indigenous writers.
• Interviews with Indigenous experts who speak or are learning an Indigenous language.
• Grounded in an Indigeneity Paradigm (Wilson 2007), the research used Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2009; Schwandt, 1994) and Feminist Methodology (England 2008).
• The authors of this research are settlers (Laurence Godard, Québécoise of French descent; Ewa Czakowska, Polish descent) who live on the territories of the Straits and Coast Salish peoples.
• This research aims to stand alongside those who view language and language revitalization as important to their wellness. Following Land’s (2015) framing of ‘solidarity’, it has also aimed to contribute to increasing the awareness of non-Indigenous peoples, including ourselves, to the importance of Indigenous languages, particularly for the well-being of Indigenous communities and individuals. In this sense, this research ‘…acknowledges the Indigenous project to restore Indigenous well-being.’ (Land 2015: 30)

Identity

“Language is at the core of our identity as people, members of a family, and nations; it provides the underpinnings of our relationship to culture, to the land, spirituality, and the intellectual life of a nation.”

(First Peoples’ Cultural Council (FPCC), 2014: 87)

Health

“Indigenous language use, as a marker of cultural persistence, is a strong predictor of health and well-being in Canada’s Aboriginal communities.”

(Hallett et al. 2007: 398)

“Only Indigenous language knowledge was a significant predictor of diabetes in simple linear regression.”

(Oster et al., 2014: 8)

Social Relations

“Language is one of the main instruments for transmitting culture from one generation to another and for communicating meaning and making sense of collective experience.”

(RACP, 1996: a.)

Wellness

“Aboriginal concepts of health and healing start from the position that all the elements of life and living are interdependent. By extension, well-being flows from balance and harmony among all elements of personal and collective life.”

(Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCPAP), 1996.a.)

“Land, language, culture and identity are inseparable from spirituality; all are necessary elements of a whole way of being, of living on the land as Indigenous peoples.”

(Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), 2015: 225)

“Positioned around the medicine wheel, are social determinants of health that include, but are not limited to, connection to language and culture, land and resources as well as environmental stewardship.”

(Liebenberg et al, 2015: 108)

“From a Cree perspective, health has as much to do with social relations, land, and cultural identity as it does with individual physiology.”

(Adeleke, 2000, in Brant Castellanos, 2006: 132)

“…among the many effects of residential schools was the loss of language and culture, which involved the loss of identity and continuity of culture.”

(Little Bear [Blood Tribe], 2000: 79)

“…”

(Onowa McIvor [Swampy Cree], Interview January 6th 2016)

Worldview

“Indigenous languages are the basic media for the transmission and survival of Aboriginal consciousness, cultures, literatures, histories, religions, political institutions and values.”

(Battiste [Mi’kmag], 2000: 199)

“…”

(Oscar Kiskistah/Oxizima as cited in RCPAP, 1986: 470).

Impacts for Language Revitalization

• As language is connected to the other components of wellness, revitalizing one’s language contributes to strengthen links to all these components, and in turn can increase the overall well-being of individuals and communities participating in language initiatives.

• “At the heart of my language learning are the relationships that I engage in to recover language. So when language revitalization is supporting intergenerational relationships and knowledge transmission, I think that also contributes to the wellbeing of individuals and communities.”

(Trish Rbosborough [Kwakwak’wakw], Interview, January 6th 2016)

“The promise tribal language revitalization offers is reconciliation: a renegotiation of reality and a restoration of an intellectual beauty possible in the ocean of tomorrows.”

(Trish Rbosborough [Kwakwak’wakw], Interview, January 6th 2016)

“…”

(Onowa McIvor [Swampy Cree], Interview, February 18th 2016)

“We began to understand the remarkable relational aspects that are built into the language. The language is constantly situating the speaker in physical relation to the earth. The intrinsically non-hierarchical nature of the Yuchi language trains us to live within a Yuchi understanding that does not have a separate word to refer to animals, making it hard to elevate humans above the beasts of the field.”

(Grounds & Grounds [Wadhi], 2013: 19)

“If you start something, whatever is the thing that you start, whether you start a language nest or a dictionary or whatever, the thing that you start is that you are building that community and that you are drawing people into the cause.”

(Onowa McIvor [Swampy Cree], Interview, February 17th 2016)

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