

The Implications of Oneida Language Learning on Human Services

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Abstract

The Oneida Nation is one of the many indigenous nations in the United States that reflect the impact of detrimental policies and initiatives that have threatened the survival and/or health of many indigenous languages and cultures. This article looks at a qualitative, phenomenological research investigation that utilized face-to-face interviews and photovoice as a dissertation study. This study was designed to explore the impact Oneida language learning had on the preservation of the Oneida culture. The study targeted 7 to 10 graduates from the Oneida Nation High School from two selected graduating classes to obtain the data. Criteria for the selection of the graduates were that they had gone to the Oneida Nation High School at least one full year, ranked high by language and culture teachers for their Oneida language proficiency, and were enrolled Oneidas of Wisconsin. The intent of this article was to focus on the benefits of indigenous language learning found in the dissertation study and the implications on Human Services.

Background of the Oneida

Prior to the European contact within North America, the Oneida people confederated with the Mohawk, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca nations under the Great Law of Peace to become the Five Nations (Parker & Fenton, 1968). Although they were confederated, each of these five indigenous nations maintained sovereignty over their own affairs (Jennings, 1985). According to Gibson and Goldenweiser (1992), the Peacemaker and his principal disciple, known as Hayawatah, or Haiwatha, brought the Great Law of Peace to the Five Nations. Sometime in the early 1700s, the Tuscarora joined this confederacy and they became known as the Six Nations Confederacy (Graymont, 1972).

According to Graymont, while the Six Nations were all different nations, their languages were similar, which gave reason for their classification as Iroquoian languages. Graymont described the similarities as fraternal twins between some, and as remote as fifth cousins between others. Upon European contact these nations would endure cultural transformation that would force them to become assimilated into the European culture thus impacting their language and culture.

The Six Nations endured many attacks before the Europeans were successful in gaining dominance (Parker & Fenton, 1968). The authors stated that although the French began attacking the Six Nations' vast agricultural resources in 1615, it was the English, under the Sullivan/Clinton Campaign, that were finally successful in their attacks. The authors described this campaign as one that burned the Six Nations' villages, cornfields, orchards and their large

warehouses. Although warfare was not the only factor influencing assimilation into the English culture, Christianity was also a strong contender.

According to Hauptman and McLester (1999), the Oneida had adopted Christianity prior to when they began relocating from their homelands of Oneida, New York to Wisconsin in the 1820s. Along with this adoption of the European religion came the adoption of European education and language, which was often provided through boarding schools (Hauptman & McLester, 2006). Unfortunately, there have been many negative consequences of the Native American boarding schools, in particular, the loss of the indigenous or Native American languages and cultures (Brave Heart, 2001; Churchhill, 2004; Hauptman & McLester, 2006; and Reyhner & Eder, 2004).

In order to counter the language and cultural loss, the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin became invested in the preservation, maintenance and revitalization of their indigenous language and culture. Towards these ends, the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin began their tribal school system in 1979 with a mission statement that addressed the revitalization, preservation, and maintenance of the Oneida culture in effort to develop patterns of thinking and of feeling, which would foster a positive self-image, reflective of the Oneida culture, thus assuring the ability to plan and design a future life, where the Oneida way is reflected and cherished (Espino, 2005).

The Importance of Language

In 1998, Anna John, a 90 year-old Oneida native speaking elder, was interviewed by the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin in attempt to get feedback regarding the identified problem and a proposed solution for the restructuring of the Oneida Nation (John, 1998). She was selected because of her long standing participation in the economic and community development of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin. During the interview, John was not interested in answering questions, instead she wanted the interviewer to listen to what she thought was the problem and solution.

John (1998) described the problem as a clash of cultural values between those who left and those who stayed in the Oneida community. John believed those who left to the “outside world” valued independence more so than community. John also outlined how the cultural clash had a strong impact that devalued the following Oneida ways: (a) researching Oneida culture and history, (b) giving back, (c) the responsibility of caring for the children, elders, family, and community, (d) open communication, (e) listening, and (f) alternative problem solving methods. John then proposed that Oneidas should learn their language.

While interviewing John (1998), the question came up as to why learning the language was so important? John, after great frustration of trying to describe why it was important, came to the conclusion that it is “our identity” (p. 20). This discussion initiated the study in attempt to examine how identity relates to indigenous language and the benefits that result from learning one’s indigenous language as a second language.

Background of Indigenous Language Learning

It has been estimated that when the Europeans arrived in America there were 300 indigenous languages; today less than half remain (Indigenous Language Institute, 2005). Unfortunately, it appears as though this is a worldwide trend. Ostler (2000) predicted that by the year 2050 at least half of the world languages would be dead or dying with the remaining languages threatening

extinction because of the fact that the language will not be transferred to new speakers as a first language.

The Six Nations Confederacy has 0.1%, or seven, of Ethnologue's estimated 6,912 living languages in the world (Gordon & Grimes, 2005). According to Gordon and Grimes, living languages are those where there is one native speaker for whom the language is their first language. Hauptman and McLester (1999) recognized three Oneida communities in the U.S. and Ontario, Canada. According to Lewis (2009) only the older adults speak the Oneida language in these communities. Unfortunately, when only the adults speak a language, the language falls into the threatened extinction category because of the inability to transfer the language to new speakers as a first language (Ostler, 2000).

Learning one's language is important. According to the literature, benefits accrue in three areas. The first was the correlation of indigenous language to identity development. The second was improved family ties and healing. The last one was higher educational success. Upon the consideration of these benefits, what became apparent was the strong suggestion of how indigenous languages may have strong implications in the development of effective human service programs for indigenous populations.

Identity Development

Maria Hinton, an Oneida speaker, who was a linguist and Oneida language teacher of 25 years in the Oneida Nation school system, stated that knowing the language gives a strong sense of identity (personal communication, June 10, 2005). Whitright-Falcon (2004) supported this statement further in that indigenous language defined and strengthened identity and also built confidence among indigenous children and their families. Walters and Simoni (2002) defined identity attitudes as the extent to which one internalizes or externalizes attitudes toward oneself and one's group. Walters and Simoni also found that identity attitudes are important in enhancing self-esteem, coping with psychological distress, and avoiding depression.

Ethnic identity is a subset of identity. It is an individual's self-identification as a group member with a sense of belonging to an ethnic group, attitudes toward ethnic group membership, and affiliation to an ethnic group (Phinney, 1990). Furthermore, it responds to developmental and contextual factors, thus making it a constantly changing dynamic. Phinney (1996) went on to report a study that found a secure ethnic identity in adolescence contributes to the psychological wellbeing.

It has been found that ethnic identity tends to be more prominent in groups that experience more discrimination (Phinney & Alipuria, 1990). Phinney, Romero, Nava, and Huang (2001) also found characteristics that correlated with ethnic identity when they studied adolescent immigrants and the importance of language, parents, and ethnic peers to ethnic identity. Their findings indicated language proficiency had a positive impact on ethnic identity.

Although identity formation appears to be a stage of adolescence, Erikson (1968) clarified that identity formation is a lifelong development, even if it remains unconscious to the individual and his or her society. This developmental process recognized the support of the various contexts of the community, family, neighborhood, and school, which provides contact and experimental identification, regardless of the age. Both Erikson (1968) and Phinney (1990) recognized the importance of the context and the individual.

Family Ties

Mary McDonald, a Native American linguist hired by the Oneida Language Charter Team to help revitalize the Oneida language, described indigenous language as the symbolic representation of valuable relationships, therefore establishing a path of where one may have come from and where one may be going (personal communication, June 10, 2005). According to McDonald, the foundation for learning the Oneida language requires learning the kinship terms and how one relates to their family and the world around them. Pease (2004) supported McDonald by describing how indigenous cultures recognize family ties that include the extended family and intergenerational relationships between the elders and the children in order to strengthen the community.

Ostler (2000) recognized the importance of maintaining a healthy language and stated that a language is considered healthy when the language is transferred to new speakers, thus also recognizing the importance of the intergenerational experience. Fishman (1994) stated, when a language is lost, the whole culture is lost. Fishman regarded language as the method of communicating the culture, the representation of the relationships and kinship known and found within the culture, and the medium, which implicitly allows community individuals to identify with one another, thus perpetuating a sense of belonging. In reverse, a culture without its native language may suffer from ineffective methods of communicating and educating their original kinship relationships resulting in broken bondages within the family structure and culture.

Educational Impacts

Hakuta (1986) discussed how native language provided an impact for a strong academic foundation for those going to school in a second language. Eichstaedt (2006) found that Hawaiians fluent in English and Hawaiian who studied their indigenous language exceeded in state and national academic standards. Furthermore, Pease (2004) found that students in language immersion programs out-performed public school native students on standardized tests. Some examples supporting this would be the following schools, Aha Punana Leo schools of Hawai'i, the language nest schools of New Zealand, and Akwesasne Freedom School. These schools all have had high rates of graduation and post-secondary acceptance (Redwing Saunders & Hill, 2007). Thus, as language immersion improves, educational achievement and retention rates increase (Pease, 2004). Thomas and Collier (1997) found that the most powerful predictor of academic success were students who had studied at least four to seven years in their heritage language.

Indigenous language learning appears to be a strong factor in identity development (Phinney, 1990), strengthening of family bonds (Whitright-Falcon, 2004), and increased success in education (Pease, 2004; Redwing et al., 2007; Thomas & Collier, 1997). The Oneida language recognizes relationships within all of creation (M. McDonald, personal communication, June 10, 2005). On a more immediate level, right now it is one of the links left to the principle centered Six Nations' way of life. The principles can be found in the Great Law of Peace as the good words, peace, and power (Gibson & Goldenweiser, 1992). There are many stories that are in the language that only when one uses the language to tie all of the relationships together does the multidimensional paradigm become evident (Porter, 2008). Furthermore, Porter emphasized that the principles of the Six Nations are needed today, they are not something old and of no use, they acknowledge relationships within all of creation. Working toward the principles of the good words, power, and peace are all about globalization. The literature makes it evident that

someone's quality of life can be greatly improved through the knowledge of knowing who you are in relationship to the world and using your voice and language to say it.

Synopsis of the Benefits of Oneida Language Learning Study

The dissertation was proposed to examine Oneida Nation High School graduates' perceived experiences of Oneida language learning while attending the Oneida Nation High School (House, 2010). In attempt to understand the context, it was imperative for the literature review to cover various factors that have threatened the Oneida culture before examining factors that would preserve the Oneida culture. Because the Oneida people and their culture and language are indigenous to North America, it was imperative for the literature review to begin with the very beginning oral history of the Oneida before going into the eras where European contact began. Once European contact and the origins of how the U.S. was established within the territories of the indigenous people of North America, the central focus shifted to U.S. policy that became increasingly oppressive toward the indigenous people in the way of the U.S. development and growth as a nation. The focus then shifted to the Native American activism that finally got the U.S. government's attention long enough to change policy in a way that would empower the indigenous people of North America. After outlining the activism, various definitions of racism were explored and related to the impact on the indigenous languages and cultures. From here, various theories of identity development were explored. These theories were then linked to the benefits of indigenous language learning and more specifically Oneida language learning. Finally, the preceding information was interwoven in a way that provided strong support for the rationale of the proposed qualitative research in the form of Participatory Action Research with photovoice.

Methodology

The main research question guiding the study was: What is the impact of Oneida language learning on the preservation of the Oneida culture? There were also three sub-questions: (1) What values emerged for Oneida Nation High School graduates of year A and year B from learning the Oneida language? (2) What benefits emerged for Oneida Nation High School graduates of year A and year B from learning the Oneida language? And (3) what motivated the Oneida Nation High School graduates of year A and year B to learn the Oneida language?

There were five proposed phases to the study. Phase 1 — general informational meetings, Phase 2 — face-to-face interviews, Phase 3 — photovoice training and photo gathering, Phase 4 — focus groups for processing photo gathering, and Phase 5 — planning and implementation of how to share the findings of the study with the community and policymakers. At this point, the study could have changed to a mixed method study or remain as a qualitative study dependent upon what was decided by the participants (House, 2010).

Part of Phase 4 and the final phase were not completed in the study (House, 2010). This was where the graduates would have come together to process the photographs gathered and then put them into themes and an action plan of how to present the data to policy makers and community leaders in the Oneida community. Even though the study was incomplete as proposed, all of the research questions were answered on a broad level.

Data Collection

Overall, the data was collected from the questionnaires completed at the introduction meetings,

face-to-face interviews, and the photographs collected from the photovoice portion of the study (House, 2010). The photovoice portion asked the participants to take pictures with the provided disposable cameras that would portray the answer to the following question: What have you experienced as a result of learning the Oneida language while attending the Oneida Nation High School? Only four cameras were collected, it was at this point the targeted population for the study was lost. The photos that were developed were selected and captioned by the four remaining graduates of the study. All of the pictures portrayed the Oneida Longhouse traditions and way of life. This portion of the data collection was done independently with each of the graduates because of the inability to gather the graduates back together as a group. Thus also eliminating the opportunity for the proposed group processing of Phase 4 and the planning and implementation of sharing the findings of the study with the community and policymakers of Phase 5. Furthermore, this required the data to be categorized into themes by the researcher.

Findings and Results

The main themes that emerged consistently throughout the data were: The Oneida Longhouse culture, ethnic identity, self-concept, and family, respectively (House, 2010). The impact of Oneida language learning on culture, the benefits and values that emerged from Oneida language learning, and the motivation for Oneida language learning also evident throughout the data. Unfortunately, the inability to bring the co-researchers together to process the collected data and photos limited the depth of how the research questions were answered. Furthermore, the whole section that incorporated participatory action research never occurred, again limiting the depth of the study and also the opportunity to share the results of the study with the Oneida policymakers and the community leadership.

The photographs that illustrated and described feelings that emerged as a result of Oneida language learning would have been an opportunity to take the data to a greater depth of understanding through group discussion (House, 2010). House noted that throughout the analysis of the data, it was difficult to define the feelings completely and then categorize them. The feelings presented themselves in various capacities that could be categorized as identity, ethnic identity, self-esteem, self-concept, and finally as Oneida principles consistent with the Oneida Longhouse culture. It was reported that after several rounds of analyzing the data, it appeared to fit best with principles of the Great Law of Peace, the good words, peace, and power (House, 2010).

The benefits that emerged for Oneida Nation High School graduates from Oneida language learning fit within the themes of family, ethnic identity, and Oneida Longhouse culture (House, 2010). In turn, the themes appeared to fit with the principles of the Great Law of Peace. In the Great Law of Peace, family is represented by the good words, in that one is intended to treat all people as family (Gibson & Goldenwieser, 1992). Increased positive ethnic identity appeared to fit with peace, in that there is peace of mind in knowing who you are and your roles and responsibilities. Knowledge of the Oneida Longhouse culture empowers people to live according to the original instructions given by the Creator, thus personal power. When looking at it from this perspective, the principles become universal for all people and are not limited to an ethnic population, thus unlocking a state of mind that keeps people separated and categorized, thus weaker because of the inability to see the relationships existent throughout the Universe.

The graduates also reported that the Oneida longhouse ceremonies provided the environment to see how the language and culture went together and also was one of the few places where one could be immersed into the Oneida language (House, 2010). In turn, it was reported that the cultural teachings opened graduates' minds to think differently, and increased cognitive flexibility. Another reported benefit was the sense of balance that is taught through the Oneida longhouse way of life.

Ethnic identity was introduced through the positive experience of graduates role-modeling their knowledge of Oneida culture amongst their peers and community (House, 2010). Positive role modeling was perceived by the graduates through the experience of reciting the opening in the Oneida language during community events, thus a positive increase in ethnic identity. The Thanksgiving Address, derived from the Longhouse Creation Story in response to fulfilling the Creator's original instructions of always giving thanks, is done prior to all gatherings, meetings and ceremonies (Cornelius, 1999; Porter, 2008). The opening or Thanksgiving Address illustrates the direct link of the importance of relationships by recognizing creation as familial relationships. Furthermore, these relationships are directly related to learning the foundation of the Oneida language (M. McDonald, personal communication, June 10, 2005).

The findings of the study also found that the perspective of the Oneida family is different than the Euro-American traditional nuclear family; it is an extended family support system (House, 2010). The Oneida follow a matrilineal clan line, where one's family is defined as all of those with the same clan as their mother's, not just the nuclear family (Cornelius, 1999). This perspective could be perceived as the opportunity for increased family bonds. Furthermore, the graduates stated that their family became closer through learning the Oneida language together (House, 2010).

It appeared that the perceived benefits of learning the Oneida language fit into the following themes of learning the culture, thus increasing ethnic identity, positive peer role-modeling, and a stronger family bond. Phinney, Romero, Nava, and Huang's (2001) supported these findings regarding the significant correlation between ethnic language, parents, and ethnic peers to higher levels of ethnic identity amongst adolescent immigrants. This study implied that increased ethnic identity has a strong relationship to the learning of ethnic language, parental support, and peers. This information could be utilized as strong indicators of success to keep in mind when designing indigenous human service programs.

Summary of the Data

The overall benefits that Oneida language learning had on the cultural preservation were captioned by House (2010) as, "teaching and learning the Oneida language and culture simultaneously, presented the good feeling of Oneida identity for Oneida Nation High School graduates while also inspiring them to look deeper into their relationship with the Oneida language and culture" (p. 135). The study of the impact of Oneida language learning on the preservation of Oneida culture was instrumental in assisting Oneida Nation High School graduates to confirm that the Oneida culture is preserved through language learning and identified the benefits of Oneida language learning.

Application of Indigenous Language Learning in Human Services

A portion of this study was modeled after Dungy's (2005) study addressing how Khmer youth

perceived their heritage language and culture. The 10 themes that emerged from the Khmer youth included (a) respect, (b) cultural awareness and preservation, (c) strong family and community relationships, (d) positive solutions to current reality, (e) future purpose, (f) education, (g) Khmer history, (h) Khmer language and communication, (i) high self-esteem, and (j) gang prevention. Of the ten themes that emerged, only gang prevention was not directly identified in House's (2010) study of Oneida Nation High School graduates.

Although an ethnographic study, McCarty, Romero, and Zepeda (2006) were able to report similar themes with their preliminary findings of 46 Navajo youth that were interviewed in the U.S. Southwest regarding indigenous language shift and loss. Their findings shared expressions made by Navajo youth regarding their indigenous language and the threat of language loss in relationship to the role of the Navajo language in their lives, their identity, family and peers, school achievement, and the future of their people. Many of these youth spoke their native language. In comparison, the Oneida language is not the Oneida Nation High School graduates' first language, whereas the Navajo language was the first language of many of the Navajo youth. With this big difference in mind, the youth from both Native American nations identified similar concerns of indigenous language loss.

In conclusion, this study adds to the field of scholarly research because the findings of the study reflected perceived experiences indicating the relationship of indigenous language to identity development, family ties and healing, and higher educational success. According to the evidence, if indigenous human service programs focused on indigenous language learning, it appears as though increasing positive identity development, strong family bonds, healing, and academic success could be the positive outcomes, thus producing excellent coping mechanisms to real life situations. Furthermore, it appears that this study has supported that the outcomes of indigenous language learning not only gives to the individual, but to the overall society as well.

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