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Waadookodaading Ojibwe Language Immersion School of Lac Courtes Oreilles: A Case Study in Perpetuating Culture Through Language

Introduction:

Language shapes knowledge. Every piece of information every person has ever gained or shared has been shared in a specific language. These languages, then, inherently change the ways in which things are known. This is why teaching Native culture using Native language is crucial to the complete understanding of that culture. This idea has come to fruition in the form of the Waadookodaading Ojibwe Language Immersion School. The school, located on the Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation in Wisconsin, was founded in 2001 with the intent of emphasizing the Native culture that was compromised when Native American children were taken away from their families and sent to boarding schools in the mid-1800's.[i,ii] While Native people attempt to re-instill their culture in the younger generations through language, the state of Wisconsin is working to make this same culture known to non-Native children through Act 31. This 1989 act mandates that children are exposed to lessons regarding Native history, culture and sovereignty at least three times during their K-12 education.[iii] This school offers valuable insight into how Native language and culture can be successfully taught in a formal academic setting, and also how bilingualism can benefit children cognitively. This model could then be used to teach non-Native children about Native history, culture, and sovereignty in Wisconsin through sharing the importance of language.

Background:

The Lac Courtes Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa has 7,275 members, the majority of which are between the ages of 18 and 64.[iv] The tribal governing board consists of seven members, with elections held in June every two years. The Lac Courtes Oreilles Reservation was established with the Treaty of LaPointe in 1854 which reserved Lac Courtes Oreilles territorial rights for Ojibwe people included the right to hunt, fish, and gather in the northern third of Wisconsin. At the time the Lac Courtes Oreilles reservation was established, Tribal elders set out to protect culturally significant natural resources. This same desire to sustain the resilience of Ojibwe culture can be seen throughout the history of education on this Reservation.

In the mid-1800's, Native children were taken away from their families and placed in government-run boarding schools at a young age, and were not allowed to return to their homes until they had graduated around age 16. As a result, family ties were weakened, intergenerational gaps were created, and cultural knowledge that would have been passed on from elders to children during these formative years was essentially lost. Instead, these children learned the essentials one would expect to learn in a western primary school for half of the day, and during the other half they were trained in some sort of skill (cobbling shoes, mending clothes, etc.) that would prepare them for life as a working-class citizen in an urban setting.[v,vi] This separation from family and culture created what is academically known as 'historic trauma'. Also seen in survivors of the Holocaust, traumatic events that are focused on a dominant culture stripping away the cultural identity of those individuals who are not a part of this culture can cause negative psychological effects in the decedents of those individuals. When communities are subjected to traumatic events such as massacres, pandemics, and forced removal of children, the

result is often a continuous cycle of traumatic events such as interpersonal violence, child abuse, and neglect.[vii] An effective solution to this community trauma is reinstating traditional social structures, such as teaching the traditional language to the youth of the community.

The Waadookodaading Ojibwe Language Immersion School was founded with the intent to stop this cycle of negative social effects that plague the Ojibwe community specifically. As early as 1856, Ojibwe children were taken from their families and placed in government boarding schools.[viii] Ojibwe parents had no control over which schools their children attended, and most Ojibwe children went to government-run boarding schools in either Hayward, Tomah, or Lac du Flambeau (see Figure 1). These schools followed the model of the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, which adhered to a quasi-military model of instruction and provided a half-day of academic instruction and a half-day of manual training. Even though the education Ojibwe children received at these schools was deemed extremely poor, some Ojibwe were able to use this education to enter professional fields. Throughout these centuries of forced assimilation, the Ojibwe were still able to maintain their identities and preserve their language in such a way that allows them to formally teach Ojibwe language and culture in an academic setting today.[ix] In 2001, Waadookodaading, which means "a place where people help each other," in Ojibwe, was publicly chartered by the Hayward Community School District, and was therefore allowed to design its own instructional program centered around Ojibwe culture and building community

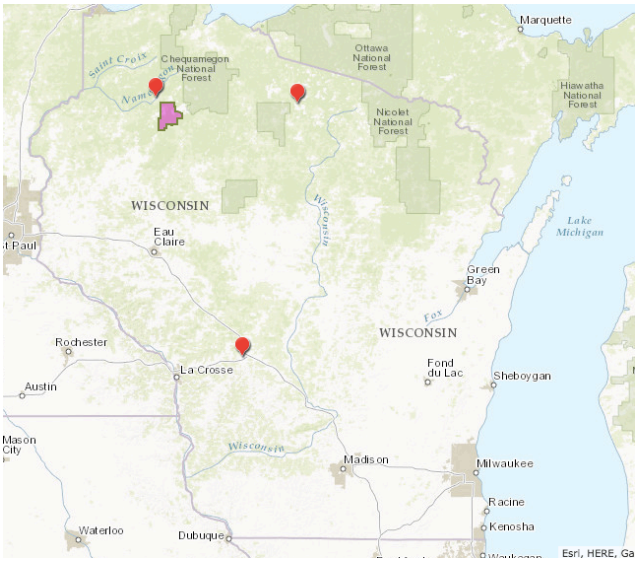

Figure 1: The current Lac Courtes Oreilles reservation is highlighted in pink, while the three locations of boarding schools are marked by red dots.

while adhering to Wisconsin educational performance standards.[x] As of 2015, the 28 students were enrolled in the school.[xi]

Policies affecting the case:

Western educational policies have played a large role in suppressing tribal identities and creating the need for policies that instead highlight these cultures and allow them to thrive in contemporary society. The creation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs within the Department of war in 1829 began the systematic process of assimilation and stripping Native people of their cultures. In the early years, this governmental entity worked primarily to negotiate treaties with Native Tribes that would ultimately challenge many Tribes' rights to ancestral land.[xii] In 1830, the Indian Removal Act was signed into law by President Jackson which forced Native Tribes to move from the land they not only had spiritual connections to, but had learned over thousands of years how to extract resources from, to places that were completely foreign.[xiii]

In 1887, the Indian General Allotment Act was passed with the intent of improving the lives of Native people and their children. This was done though the allocation of funds to churches that had missionaries living among and teaching Native people.[xiv] For these missionary teachers, converting Native American Tribes into "civilized societies" was the main goal, and this was done primarily through establishing boarding schools.[xv] From this point on, there were many fluctuations in bureaucracy that led to Native communities having their rights to self-govern and teach their children stripped away.

With the Indian Education Act of 1972, public schools with 10 or more Native students were granted funding for supplemental programs to meet the needs of these students. Additionally, the Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 promoted self-

governance by tribes and allowed them to contract with federal agencies to control their own programs and services.[xvi]

A bill passed in 2015 entitled the "Native Language Immersion Student Achievement Act" was a progressive act that consciously addressed the problems associated with forced assimilation via boarding schools, and called for the promotion of academic achievement of Native children through funding the establishment of Native language immersion schools. With grant money allocated specifically for the creation and maintenance of these schools, it is likely that schools like Waadookodaading will continue to open and thrive.[xvii] The ongoing success of this initiative will depend on ongoing federal support, however.

Though steps have been taken to ensure that Native communities can exert sovereignty with regard to how their children learn about their languages and cultures, there was no mandate for how non-Native children were exposed to these same cultures that the Federal Government tried their best to eliminate. In Wisconsin, Act 31 attempted to address this issue. According to Act 31, every child attending a Wisconsin public school should be exposed to Native culture, history and sovereignty at least three times throughout their K-12 education. As a result of a lack of funding and enforcement, however, this act has little to no 'teeth' and non-Native children in Wisconsin are essentially ignorant to the cultures of the peoples' lands on which these public schools most likely sit.

Analysis of environmental and social implications:

The Ojibwe specifically reacted to their culture being stripped away and the subsequent lack of community members that spoke the native language by creating the Waadookodaading Language Immersion School.[xviii] According to a Wisconsin Media Lab video that features the Waadookodaading Language Immersion School, continuing to teach the Ojibwe language is

crucial to maintaining cultural practices. In some cases, only Ojibwe words are able to completely and accurately describe how to properly do cultural activities, such as making maple sugar. According to Keller Paap, an Ojibwe teacher featured in the Wisconsin Media Lab video,

> "Language has a specific vocabulary and teachings that are associated with each activity within that [culture]. So, for instance, all the words about boiling sap – the way that it boils – have specific terms that describe it very very accurately that allow you to develop a deep comprehension of the activity and why you do it and how you do it."[xix]

This outdoor, hands-on learning that is incorporated into Wadookodaading's curriculum allows students to be exposed to their natural environment while learning traditional cultural practices. This, combined with the environmental stewardship practices that are built into Native languages through the words that are used to describe resources and the cultural practices regarding them, allow Native children to learn the importance of environmental sustainability just by learning the language.[xx] Additionally, bilingualism allows children to "flex their cognitive muscles" and actually improves overall cognitive ability.[xxi] Therefore, not only are Native language immersion schools beneficial for maintaining a culture, but they provide children with a unique, bilingual environmental education experience that simultaneously benefits them on a deep, neurological level.

Lessons learned/applications

Maintaining language and culture is useful in attempting to reverse the trends of abuse that were started by sending Native American children to boarding schools, and also plays a key role in building strong communities. Education arguably plays a pivotal role in cultivating a general sense of acceptance and understanding of cultures that are different from one's own. In the case of Native children, it has proven difficult for them to maintain their culture and language

while also attending a westernized public school. Native American children who have been taught their language and consider English their second language may be placed in remedial programs and ostracized because they are different, and their culture is not understood by non-Native children.[xxii] This is why creating standards-based curriculum for elementary, middle, and high school using the Mounds and Cultural features in Monona Parks as teaching tools is important. Following the protocol of Waadookodaading, our project will involve working with Ho-Chunk elders to incorporate Native ways of knowing, culture, and language into the curriculum regarding this group of people. As the case of Waadookodaading has shown, closing intergenerational gaps and emphasizing the importance of language in regard to cultural activities is crucial when working to share these knowledge systems with others. Working with Ho-Chunk elders to share Native cultural knowledge, history, and concepts of sovereignty with both Native and non-Native children will contribute to a more inclusive environment based on a common paradigm of respect and understanding.

Conclusion:

The Waadookodaading Ojibwe Language Immersion School is a successful example of how traditional languages and culture can be used as a teaching mechanism in contemporary society. Additionally, this type of cultural education offers valuable insight into how Native cultures and traditions could potentially be taught to Native and non-Native children in Monona, Madison, and other schools. By celebrating different cultures and teaching the histories that fuel current paradigms, a more inclusive community can be cultivated and Native history, culture, and sovereignty can be something that is eventually infused into all curricula in the state of Wisconsin.

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