

“Ma’iingan Is Just a Misspelling of the Word Wolf”: A Case for Teaching Culture through Language

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Framed by the English language and positioned as a distinct subject, Ojibwe culture and language are often appreciated by students rather than taught for a deeper understanding or fluency, or used as the language of instruction in tribal schools. Ojibwe culture and language have been “added on” to existing school curriculum, an approach that changes the meaning of culture. In this article I critique the add-on approach and propose that teaching through the Indigenous language (immersion) supports cultural and language revitalization in a more fundamental way. [Native American culture-based curriculum, Indigenous-language immersion, Ojibwe, tribal schools]

Culture-based schools have been an important initiative in Native American education for more than 30 years (Swisher and Tippeconnic 1999). Historically, the United States government sought to control Indigenous people through schools under a policy of coercive assimilation (Lomawaima 1995). In many ways the culture-based movement in Native American education is a direct response to these policies of cultural genocide. The era of self-determination in Indian education (1975 to the present) has emphasized policies in support of Native cultures and languages, and many tribal schools are attempting to base schooling on local languages and cultures. This political landscape of American Indian education, demarcated by a “tug-of war” between tribal sovereignty and federal power (Lomawaima 1995; Lomawaima and McCarty 2002), provides the context for this critique of culture-based schooling, which I hope will propel the culture-based movement forward (McCarty and Watahomigie 1998).

The era of self-determination for American Indian education has also been a time of extreme regulation for American schools (Forbes 2000; Ladson-Billings 1994; Lomawaima and McCarty 2002; Tippeconnic 2000). Attempting to base an entire contemporary institution on an Indigenous cultural system within the physical boundaries and structures of a Western nation is a challenging task, requiring a major paradigm shift to an Indigenous system that has not yet been fully developed. Adding to this challenge, in many cases, tribal schools are funded by the federal government and held accountable to both federal and tribal agencies, as well as to state and national standards. Given these challenges, there is little evidence thus far that the culture-based movement has produced fundamental and widespread shifts in approaches to schooling. According to Swisher and Tippeconnic (1999:44), “Despite these exemplary efforts, the overall effort to integrate American Indian culture and language into school curricula is piecemeal and has realized marginal degrees of success.” One tribal elder, Mistaken Chief, expressed his concerns this way: “At the present time, our educational systems are almost identical to the mainstream. We don’t have a choice, we must deconstruct our colonized thinking” (Boyer 2000:14).

Why hasn’t culture-based schooling produced greater academic success? Why hasn’t it produced a greater number of speakers of Indigenous languages? What could bring about a radical shift in approaches to Indigenous schooling? In this article I present findings from research on these questions conducted at Ojibwe

tribal schools in Wisconsin and Minnesota from 1991 to 2001. Using critical conceptions of culture, I focus on how culture has been incorporated as a subject into schools and on parents', students', teachers', elders', and administrators' perceptions of culture-based curriculum. I describe how Ojibwe cultural knowledge has been added on to a postcolonial institution and question the effect this may have on student identity and academic "success." At the Ishpaming School in Minnesota, a group of elders proposed that teaching *through* the Ojibwe language (instead of *about* Ojibwe culture) would be a more effective approach. In light of the growing language revitalization movement, this evolution in thinking about culture-based teaching is especially timely. As Lanny Real Bird pointed out, "I cannot teach you culture. Culture is something you have to live. Through the language we can give a part of the culture that can be lived" (Boyer 2000:14).

Reconsidering Culture and Class in Culture-based Curriculum

Recent critiques of multicultural education point out that the strategy of "celebrating" diversity, or adding on culturally relevant curriculum, tends to focus on material culture or renditions of culture that may be essentialized (Erickson 2000; González 1999). As Erickson explains, "Focusing mainly on explicit culture can be misleading. Even when we do this respectfully of the lifeways of others, focus on visible culture easily slides into too comfortable a stance for considering other people—a stance of cultural romance or cultural tourism" (2000:44).

This type of representation of diversity is not only shallow but also sidesteps crucial issues of oppression—colonialism, socioeconomic inequality, and racism—that can lead to a critical consciousness and social justice (Hermes 2004). McCarthy and Dimitriadis contend, "At the heart of its achievement, multiculturalism has succeeded in freezing to the point of petrification its central object: 'culture'" (2000:70). Native American postcontact history has been rife with cultural appropriation. Fighting Sioux and "tomahawk chops" are easily recognized American sports symbols. Packaged, animated, and marketed, Native American culture comes pre-petrified into mainstream American schools. For Native peoples, images of frozen culture are already abundant in mainstream society (Hirschfelder et al. 1999).

This critique of multicultural education grows out of a larger critique of the concept of culture both within and outside of the field of anthropology (see, e.g., Anzaldúa 1987; Hall 1989; hooks 1994). As the practice of culture-based curriculum has been evolving in American Indian country for the past 30 years, so too has the theoretical understanding of culture been evolving within anthropology. Notions of culture have shifted from something knowable and contained to practices that are fluid and complex (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Eisenhart 1999, 2001; Erickson 2000; González 2004; Levinson et al. 1996). Lesson plans, subject areas, and course content all attempt to act as containers for culture-based curriculum. Could this have something to do with the culture-based curriculum movement's failure to radically reform schools in Native America?

Like Hoffman's analysis of the use of "culture" in comparative education, culture in Native culture-based curriculum has been under-theorized, resulting in "see[ing] cultures as distinct, bounded and incommensurable entities with controlling power over individuals and groups. . . . One consequence is that the level of explanation and assessment of potential for change and transformation in human lives is reduced" (Hoffman 1999:465). The conception of culture as fluid and living shifts the practice of culture-based curriculum from searching for the most authentic ("pre-contact") cultural skills and ways to teach, to understanding "how cultural meanings are actively used, transformed and politically situated. . . ." (Hoffman 1999:476). An understanding of how cultural meanings are made in tribal schools allows us to reconsider current assumptions upon which cultural curriculum is based.

Much research on culture-based schooling has been subsumed under the rubric of "school failure" (McDermott 1974, 1987). Attention has focused on two divergent explanations and approaches: microethnography and macrolevel socioeconomic

analysis. Is home-school discontinuity the problem or are larger socioeconomic factors responsible for school failure (Deyhle and Swisher 1997; Erickson 1987; Foley 1991, 2000; Jacob and Jordan 1993)? Much work in Native culture-based education relies on the former idea and advises that cultural continuity (between home and school) increases school success (Erickson and Mohatt 1982; Lipka 1991; Lipka et al. 1998; Lipka and McCarty 1994; Lipka and Stairs 1994; McCarty 2002; McCarty and Zepeda 1995). In an extensive literature review of Native culture-based education, Demmert and Towner (2003) search for quantitative data to uphold this theory. Although they find few studies using experimental or quasi-experimental designs, the ethnographic or qualitative studies number more than 100.

My research builds on these studies of cultural discontinuity, with one important distinction. Although the theory of cultural discontinuity offers a powerful starting place for research and practice, the debate between macro and microforces has created artificial boundaries that can conceal some challenges for Native students while prioritizing other challenges (Hermes 2005; see also Erickson 1987; McCarty et al. 1991). As the boundaries around the concept of culture tend to fragment the practice of culture-based curriculum, similar artificial boundaries employed in research also have a tendency to be limiting, making findings less useful for transforming schools (Levinson et al. 1996; Limerick 1997). While focusing on a critique of culture-based curriculum, I continue to invoke practice and am reminded that many interrelated systems are simultaneously at work in schools. Mohatt says,

For too long the debates in anthropology and education concerning Indigenous and minority schooling have been postulated in dichotomous terms. These arguments have been stated in the either/or terminology of culture versus power and microanalysis versus macroanalysis. These bifurcated ways of conceptualizing the problems long associated with schooling in Indigenous communities result in unfortunate typologies Our theories need to transcend overly simplistic explanations of school failure. Theory must be derived from the experiences of real people in real places. [1994:181–182]

Methods and Communities

Created by the treaties of 1837, 1842, and 1854, 12 Ojibwe reservations occupy the woodlands of northern Minnesota and Wisconsin. Stretching around the Great Lakes in both the United States and Canada, these are but a small part of the Ojibwe Nation. One of the most populated of all Indigenous nations within the United States, the Ojibwe Nation is divided into more than 19 reservations and communities, each with its own tribal government and sovereign relationship to the federal government. Each reservation or community has a few hundred or a few thousand members, generally about two-thirds of whom live off the reservation.

Within the rural and impoverished areas of the United States, reservations are among the poorest. For example, Lac Courte Oreilles (LCO) is situated within Sawyer county, one of the poorest counties in Wisconsin, where median income is 20 percent below the state average. In 2000, the median income for families in the Hayward School District (which includes the reservation) was \$39,026. On the reservation, families contribute disproportionately to low statewide household income and unemployment rates. In 2000, on the reservation, the median family income was \$26,759 (United States Census 2000). In 2002–2003, the graduation rate for white students in Hayward was 94.78 percent, whereas the rate for Native American students was only 70.37 percent.

In this context, I conducted research at four school sites from 1991 to 2001. Table 1 outlines those sites and key participants. (The names of all participants and schools except LCO are pseudonyms.) Between 1999 and 2001, I conducted postdoctoral research that allowed me to revisit the findings from an earlier long-term study conducted at the LCO Ojibwe school in northern Wisconsin (Hermes 1995). In the original case study, I interviewed more than 33 teachers, students, parents, and elders. I worked at the school for two full academic years, student-taught for one semester, and conducted research for a full year. I had ample opportunity for

Table 1.
Schools, years, and place

Year and place	1991–1995 Wisconsin	1999–2001 Minnesota	1999–2001 Minnesota	1999–2001 Minnesota
School	LCO Ojibwe School (K-12 tribal school)	Ishpaming School (K-12 tribal school)	City School (K-12 charter school)	Big Lake School (K-12 tribal school)
Primary interviewees	students, teachers, elders, and parents (all Ojibwe)	Mike (non-Native), Henry (non-Native), Nellie (elder)	Agnes (non-Native), Doreen (Ojibwe)	Joe (non-Native), Dan (Ojibwe), Tom (Ojibwe)

participant observation, although I assumed numerous roles in my time there. I found that although the tribal school had successfully added the teaching of Ojibwe language and culture to the curriculum, this did not necessarily produce any greater academic success than the counterpart public school, which did very little Ojibwe language and culture teaching. For example, there were no more students going on to two- or four-year colleges. Grades, attendance, and test scores were not significantly better. No student gained Ojibwe language fluency from either the tribal or the public school's Ojibwe language program (Hermes 1995). However, self-esteem, self-confidence, community empowerment, and dropout prevention are all rightful successes the culture-based school does claim, and they were observed, although not quantified (Hermes 1995).

I focused on academic identity versus ethnic (Ojibwe) identity because academic identity surfaced as a problem during the research. Some students and staff discussed how they perceived the teaching of academic subjects to be at odds with teaching culture (Hermes 2005). This became an identity dilemma for some students, as they interpreted academic success as tantamount to assimilation (Fordham and Ogbu 1988; Hermes 2005).

In a postdoctoral study, I collected ethnographic data from three other schools in northern Minnesota and Wisconsin. Two are located on Ojibwe reservations and one is an urban culturally based school in Minneapolis-St. Paul. Under the policy of self-determination, these are all schools that are federally funded but locally run. In this study, I compared and expanded findings from LCO. At each site, I was given a contact from a community member at a previous research site. I interviewed a cross-section of culture teachers, classroom teachers, students, and administrators at the schools over the course of two school years (1999–2001). After general observing, I focused on one teacher at each site because that teacher was described as "successful" by at least two other sources, such as other teachers, parents, or administrators (Hermes 2004). I conducted a series of three phenomenological interviews and observed on numerous occasions in their classrooms and on field trips. Twenty interviews were transcribed, coded, categorized, and analyzed for recurring themes and disconfirming cases. Although this methodology does not necessarily emanate from all of the theory framing this research, these tools represent some of the most promising ethnographic strategies to date (Eisenhart 2001).

I asked research participants about teaching culture-based curriculum, wanting to know if a split between academic learning and cultural learning had occurred at these schools as well, how Ojibwe culture was implemented in the curriculum, and what school staff, elders, and community members thought about it. In short, I wanted to offer a constructive critique of culture-based curriculum that would generate strategies to improve both academic *and* cultural competence for Native students without posing an identity choice (Ladson-Billings 1994).

Researcher Position

I am both an insider and outsider in the Ojibwe communities with whom I work. This position speaks of both my epistemology and the methods utilized in this work. I am a woman of mixed Native heritage and have lived near the LCO reservation with my family for the past 10 years. Although I am a community member, I am not an enrolled tribal member at this reserve. And, although I am a woman of mixed Native heritage (Fort Peck Dakota, Chinese, adoptee), I am not from the Ojibwe Nation, where I currently reside, nor was I raised in a reservation community. I do have family connections to the Ojibwe Nation through ceremony, marriage, and residence. Both of my children were born there and are enrolled in a nearby Ojibwe band, as is my partner. Elsewhere I have written about how my considerations of what is important in the community and what is culturally appropriate have guided my research (Hermes 1998).

At each of the research sites outside LCO, I was not a local community member or even someone with whom students were familiar; therefore, I did not have the same “insider” status afforded to me at LCO, where I had been a community member and teacher. Although I was easily admitted to all three of the other schools and received full cooperation once I stated my purpose, I found myself following more traditional ethnographic methods, with one significant difference. I told interviewees about my research, as well as about my concurrent work to initiate an Ojibwe language immersion school (Hermes 2004). I believe this influenced their responses. I was not simply a researcher, but a researcher and an activist—in some sense, a colleague. This often sparked a flurry of questions about my work on participants’ part. Interview questions were embellished by conversation. Two-way dialogues, as opposed to one-way interviews, emerged. A great deal of useful data was generated in this way, and I adhered to the principle of reciprocity often found in Native communities and important in my research (Hermes 1998). Many who work in Native education reject the idea that theory and practice need to be separated (Archibald 1990; Urion 1991, 1992), continuously looking for solutions in our research while generating the research questions over again from the practice (Lather 1991). This type of reciprocity requires the research to have a practical application while forcing practice to be informed by research.

Findings

I begin by describing how cultural systems and knowledge were manifest, at least in their most visible forms, in the schools at which I conducted this research. Next, I describe respondents’ statements about culture-based curriculum, highlighting the discomfort about compromising culture to fit into the school structure. Building on my respondents’ personal analyses, I discuss the positioning of Ojibwe culture as a subject inserted into an alien cultural context. Finally, I present the strategy one school has taken: to teach the culture solely through the Ojibwe language. I conclude by recommending teaching through the Ojibwe language (immersion) as a way to promote both academic and cultural competence.

Fitting Culture into Schools

In my visits to all three tribal schools, I found many overall similarities in the approaches to teaching or incorporating Ojibwe culture. The schools began the week with some kind of all-school gathering—a pipe ceremony or drum circle, for example. This special time framed the week, and the rest of the days were organized around math, reading, science, social studies, and culture classes. Core academic subjects were taught in a way similar to that of area public schools. Closing circles or powwows on Fridays also were common. In addition, all schools offered Ojibwe culture and language classes throughout the day and scheduled similarly to other academic subjects. Typically, students could sign up for these classes as electives. Joe, a non-Native teacher at Big Lake, said,

I was really impressed with how it was more of a culture experience than I thought it would be. I remember being very impressed with the singing and the drumming. It was the first time I'd ever been close to that . . . when I got to the school the students were drumming and it was in a small little commons right there and it was loud and I was very impressed. I thought this would be a good place for me, I'll learn a lot. My first day we played softball and hung out at the park; the kids were just like any other kids, so I remember that first time I heard them singing and drumming, it was a very powerful experience.

Cultural instruction was implemented in the schools in a variety of ways, some of which focused more on integration into academic areas or existing school structure, whereas others simply provided a context in which educators hoped culture would "happen." Earl, a non-Native math teacher at Ishpaming, said,

I'm not the expert, but I will try to bring in aspects of that [culture]. I might say instead of buying apples and oranges, maybe we're going to go buy beads and kinikinik [red willow] or something and just try to tie it in that way. I think they appreciate, I hope that they appreciate that at least you're making an attempt to do something more relevant.

During a high school science class, I observed an integrated lesson in which plants were identified from two perspectives: traditional Ojibwe and mainstream scientific. The teacher taught both the Ojibwe and the Latin plant names, the traditional Ojibwe medicinal use and the scientific identification through specific, named parts. This kind of integration was considered ideal by many participants in this study; however, the research, funding, and staff to develop such a curriculum were lacking. Agnes, a non-Native teacher at City School, commented,

What happens in schools is you don't find people competent in a specialized area that are also strong in that culture. So I've been put in the position of not being Native and trying to incorporate some of the culture of which I know just a very limited amount into my science classroom, and that's really difficult. I mean I shouldn't be doing this; really it should be a Native person.

A teacher at the LCO school echoed these sentiments: "This school is supposed to be about culture-based curriculum, but it seems there is none at all, and that is depressing. If I had the curriculum materials I would be glad to go through them during social studies or reading time."

Scheduled as a course, cultural content became problematic as it was more specifically defined. Content for culture classes tended to focus on what could be carried out within the scheduled period. Inserting cultural content into a class schedule overemphasized aspects of material culture that could be scheduled. Although the overarching political goal of culture-based education supports self-determination and community empowerment, added on as material culture only, Indigenous cultural knowledge and practices have not deeply influenced the structure of schooling. Much of the structure of the institution remains similar to that of most public schools, in which the regulating forces of the state (certification, benchmarks and standards, teacher training, state accreditation and evaluation) remain firmly in place.

Naming the Discomfort

Participants in this study described their discomfort with the lack of cultural integration; others articulated an intuition about how culture was being changed to fit into schools. One community member, Tom Peacock (not a pseudonym), summarized his feelings this way: "We've institutionalized culture. Where is the meaning? The greatest error in Indian education is that we've institutionalized that stuff. Culture is just what we do" (personal communication, June 11, 2000).¹

Respondents talked about culture outside of school in a global way, often including a reference to language. They often said culture “is just what we do;” it was understood as “the way we live, the things we do everyday, everything we do from the time we wake up until the time we go to sleep” (Hermes 1995). Ojibwe culture was described across communities as all-encompassing and often invisible. Overall, this description of culture stands in stark contrast to the way cultural content is taught as a subject in schools.

To me, it’s a way of life—you have to live it. Just talking about it or reading about it, that’s not enough. I see that academics could be taught differently at the school but I don’t know exactly how. My kids . . . have a hard time. I know they have to learn that stuff [academics], but I believe there is definitely a different way to teach it. I mean math and science, reading. They could integrate it with culture. [LCO parent and elder]

Some culture staff, elders, and teachers expressed the uncomfortable feeling that something was lost when culture was prescribed for schooling. Mike, a non-Native administrator at Ishpaming, said,

We have a dish once a month and a pipe twice a month, that’s the cultural part of it, but it’s all done in Ojibwe language so the Ojibwe language is where it all comes from, it’s all based out of that. I just quite frankly despise that conversation [about culture] around here. I really am uncomfortable when I hear talk about culture because I don’t know if anybody really knows what the culture is.

Henry, another non-Native administrator at the same school, described traditional knowledge this way: “In 1994 I started an advising board, an elders board. I could call them traditional, and what does that mean? They grew up in the old ways but *they don’t wear it on their sleeves*” (emphasis added). Henry’s reference to elders who do not “show off” their cultural knowledge is important. Like the descriptions of Ojibwe culture as shared, invisible, and everywhere, cultural insiders may or may not be fully conscious of living their culture. In many responses there was a sense of not wanting to make a big deal out of culture, or of wanting it to be normalized. Some staff discussed the ceremonies that were incorporated into the schools. They liked the opening feast for the school but resented the analysis of these events at faculty meetings (Hermes 1995), again reinforcing the notion that Ojibwe culture should be so pervasive as to be a part of the fabric of the school—not made into a “big deal.”

I interpret these descriptions as a desire to establish Ojibwe culture as the norm. Staff reflected positively on those times when Ojibwe culture was the unspoken norm. Mike’s reflections were typical of those times:

Well, it’s just what we do, we know what’s going to happen, it’s just what we do. We know that we’re going to have teachers out preparing food, and that’s how it is. When the thanking feast comes up, everybody will be fed, they’ll get there before the feast and they’ll go out and do the fishing and wild rice and for anybody who’s lost their way, it’s just what we do.

Within these descriptions is an analysis that Ojibwe culture in tribal schools has become something other than what participants understand culture should—a sense that importing it into schools becomes something other than ordinary, daily lived Ojibwe cultural practice. Adding Ojibwe culture onto existing school structures without radically altering those structures redefined Ojibwe culture in ways that fundamentally changed it. A culture teacher at LCO said, “We come to walls. We say culture-based school, but we come to walls. If we get beyond that, we do it once in awhile, we jump over them [obstacles], once in awhile.” Once institutionalized, the omnipresent power of culture is distorted and diminished into small bits of information, necessarily detracting from the ability to constantly co-create culture in the context of purposeful social activity. Particular ways of

creating relationships, values, and webs of meaning and contextualized ways of teaching can easily be lost in the homogenizing and controlled environment of the school.

Essentialized notions . . . stuck places, institutionally cemented and accepted unquestioned. That is the system. The places of possible change are the cracks that appear within it . . . in those spontaneous moments where no one is in control, in those relationships that have the feeling like family, kinship. [field notes (Hermes 1995)]

Ojibwe Language at Ishpaming

Hinton states that “despite the wonderful successes in such places, the classroom alone is insufficient for the goals of language revitalization and can in fact be detrimental in certain ways . . . there is a culture of the classroom itself that differs fundamentally from any Indigenous community’s traditional culture of learning” (1999:57). What shifts within cultural systems when they are taken out of everyday contexts and inserted into schools? What has occurred to the Ojibwe language provides a glimpse of what may be happening to Indigenous cultural systems when taught in a foreign institution. Based on years of working with the elders council, Henry surmised,

I think the elders are misheard when they say, “If we have language, we are going to have culture.” It is the thought that connects the language that is so important. We are currently teaching Ojibwe language through English thought. We say *ma’iingan* is equal to wolf, but it is not. They [the students] think *ma’iingan* is just a misspelling of the word wolf.

Henry emphasized how Ojibwe language is taught in English-speaking schools. Students understand Ojibwe using the language they already have: English. Ojibwe words, fragmented from complete thoughts or sentences, can be appropriated into an English or Western meaning system. Henry went on to say,

I asked them [the elders], “Is a *ma’iingan* in a zoo a *ma’iingan*?” They said, “No, it is a wolf.” Because *ma’iingan* requires a context. I can’t take it out of its context without changing the meaning. Everything in English is taken out of context. *Everything taught about Indians taken out of context is really in English—or in that way of thought.* [emphasis added]

For example, although the Ojibwe language, like certain other Native American languages, emphasizes verb structures, it was common practice across the research sites to teach lists of nouns in language classes. At Big Lake, lists of animal names were the primary content for kindergarten and first grade. It becomes obvious that students are thinking in English when they pluralize Ojibwe words as they would a word in English. Thus *ma’iingan* becomes *ma’iingans*, although the correct plural would be *ma’iinganag*. Ojibwe language was taught as a foreign language, through the vehicles normally applied to teach English. Although these practices seem to be changing, they reflect the influence of English on Ojibwe cultural teaching and the consequences of teaching Ojibwe language as a course separated from the broader cultural context.

Relationships, Context, and Creating Meaning

Language is the culture; there is no culture without the language because culture is living. The culture is not separate from language. [LCO language teacher]

Ojibwe language, used as the medium of instruction in school, provides context and gives students the opportunity to be creative participants in making meanings. Ojibwe cultural practices cannot be taken out of the context of relationships, shared ownership, and history without stripping or changing meanings (Larose 1991). One direction that could be taken from the verb-based Ojibwe language is that emphasis

should be on doing and the process of creating and sustaining relationships. In Ojibwe, the specific word used depends on who is doing the action, to whom, and what the specific context is. This speaks directly to interactions among people and between people and the environment. A curriculum and school focused on relationships would emphasize making meanings (e.g., relationships) rather than the final product (e.g., test scores).

Henry explained: "For example, if I put *asema* [tobacco] out, in English I would be putting a thing on the ground. But in Ojibwe, it is an event, a relational event." The reference to "a relational event" is marked by the relationships the actors have with one another and the process of establishing and maintaining those relationships. It is an event specific to a time, place, and people connected to past and future events through the language and the meanings people make of the event. The "cultural context" does not refer to a specific place or individuals, both of which change over time. Rather, it refers to the deeper processes of negotiating relationships and webs of meaning in a specific situation. In the traditional way of teaching, reciprocal relationships (rather than exploitative ones) create the learning context (Urion 1991).

In Ojibwe oral tradition, learning is embedded in relationships. Learning is not anonymous, free from responsibility, or abstracted from the knower and the seeker. A seeker of knowledge must be able to articulate the request, know whom to ask, and accept responsibility for the answer (see also McCarty et al. 1991). In this way, knowing and learning are not easily extracted from a richly relational context (Archibald 1990; Sheridan 1991; Urion 1991, 1992).

In the example of the wolf (*ma'iingan*), the context seems to refer to the place (return the wolf to the woods and it turns back into *ma'iingan*). The implication for schools, however, does not easily follow, unless we are to abandon the context of schooling and embed learning in everyday life. However, I believe the context actually refers to how a person makes or understands his or her relationship to the wolf and the meanings implicated in that understanding. Language can restore cultural context in schools, providing a lens for understanding relationships. Seeing academic subjects through a cultural lens could dramatically change the school. The medium of instruction can either support or constrain the way students see themselves as Ojibwe people, how they relate to others, and how they participate in co-constructing Ojibwe culture.

Henry referred to the context of the Ojibwe tribal school as being "in English." Here, he again refers to a key role of language in the construction of meaning:

Meaning is more important than words. When the elders say, "Keep the language," what they mean is, "Keep the thought," because language is the clearest representation of that way of thought. For English doesn't equal Ojibwe, we don't have a shared understanding . . . English is noun-based, but all Indigenous languages are action-based. They are all defined by relationships to the thing. In essence, in thought . . . that's the problem. When we try to teach Ojibwe culture in an English context, lots of things become pretty shallow.

Language Immersion as a Direction

At the Ishpaming school, elders recognized a problem with the way culture was being taught. They did not approve of a separate Ojibwe culture class taught in and through the English language. They interpreted the add-on approach as taking culture out of context—and in some ways using it as an excuse to fail students academically. Mike, the administrator at Ishpaming, said,

We should teach the language, and the culture should be learned through the language. They wanted to take them [students] three hours a day doing deer hides and drumming, and Nellie [Ojibwe elder] was just adamantly against that. Because she felt it was really dysfunctional what was happening, lowering the expectations for kids; they were using the cultural activities as the way of sending the wrong message to kids. She sat down and said, "Mike, don't make a big deal out of it, it's just what we do."

This elder believed it was dysfunctional to teach cultural activities such as drumming and ricing (gathering and processing wild rice) as a class delivered through English. She saw that students could be failing math and reading but passing "culture." I interpret her idea of "sending the wrong message" as meaning that the school legitimized passing culture classes, whereas academic subjects were failed. As a result, the elders council decided to drastically change how culture classes were being taught. Instead of directly teaching culture through additional classes or adding Ojibwe cultural content to mainstream courses, they decided not to teach "culture" directly at all. Their vision was to emphasize Ojibwe language and to teach culture solely through the language. At Ishpaming, elders clearly said that the school's responsibility was to teach Ojibwe language; through the language, students would come to learn the culture. Mike understood their direction in this way:

So when people come to me and say, "What are you doing here culturally?," I really don't have a clear answer for them, because it's just what we do. You know Nellie [Ojibwe elder] brings in what she does and Tammy [Ojibwe elder] brings in what she does, and what they've been doing all their lives because they're right in this community and it's just what we do. And there's nobody on our teaching staff that knows it as well as the Ojibwe language staff. And the other message we get from the elders is we want our kids to be able to write and read and we want them to be able to survive in the world. So language is how we support culture if that makes sense.

The Ojibwe language, like all Native North American languages, is endangered. Many Ojibwe reservations in the region have less than 50 speakers, most of whom are older than 60 years (see also Krauss 1998). On the LCO reservation, out of a population of more than 2,000, less than 10 are first speakers of Ojibwe (Paap, personal communication, May 12, 2004). Treuer writes:

The grammar, syntax and structure of the language are complete. The oral tradition and history of the Ojibwe are still with us. Yet in many areas fluency rates have plummeted to unprecedented and unsustainable levels. Especially in the United States, most speakers are more than forty-five years of age. We are not losing our language. Our language is losing us. [2001:5]

Although the situation across reserves varies, the Ojibwe language may die out in this area unless its use is revitalized and expanded. In short, the language once again needs to become "just what we do." The direction of the elders from Ishpaming is an important one, not only to advance culture-based education but for the revitalization of the Ojibwe language.

Heritage language immersion is quickly becoming an important strategy in Indigenous education; more than 50 Native groups within the United States are currently engaged in immersion planning or operation (Hinton and Hale 2001; Hornberger 1996; Watahomigie and McCarty 1998). Academic benefits are often cited as a by-product of second-language learning (Baker 1993; DeJong 1998; Genesee 2000). Some research in psychology suggests that categories for understanding the world may exist prior to language development (Hespos and Spelke 2004). Linking language revitalization and culture poses a tremendous opportunity for revitalizing the culture-based education movement, whereas allowing two disconnected movements to develop (culture-based and immersion approaches) could have devastating effects for Indigenous languages (Henze and Vanett 1993).

Conclusions

The narrowing of culture to fit into existing school frameworks can be clearly understood through the example of language. In the cases presented here, the Ojibwe words themselves began to change as a result of being taught through the English language. Without the complete meaning-making context, or the entire language,

much of the original meaning is lost. In the case of cultural systems as wholes, the effect is more diffuse. Although culture classes taught through English may have some benefits, at least at the Ishpaming School, elders believed that teaching culture through the Ojibwe language was the next step—a deeper evolution of culture-based curriculum.

If culture-based schools were to become language immersion schools, would the effects of narrowing culture be reversed? One teacher voiced her concern this way: “How do we know we are not just teaching white kids to speak Ojibwe?” Even though her entire class was made up of Ojibwe students, this teacher was worried that without cultural context, even fluent Ojibwe could be appropriated to reflect an English way of thinking. This suggests the need for deeper structural, institutional changes in schooling. If Ojibwe language is crammed into a 50-minute period and taught only two times per week, it is instruction for language appreciation, not language proficiency. If direction in culture-based curriculum is taken from the language itself, the integration of the Ojibwe language could restructure schooling as it has in other Indigenous communities (King 2001; Wilson and Kamana 2001).

Language has the potential to bridge the artificial gap between academic and cultural curriculum. Students grounded in their heritage language will be able to learn other course content without fear of assimilation. The reclaiming of language could propel the gains of the culture-based movement far beyond superficially adding fragmented pieces of cultural knowledge to the existing structure. Schools based on Indigenous languages create a cultural context—a filter through which any content can be viewed.

Language is an equalizer, not a prize for competition. Students who are successful in learning their Indigenous language will not be competing against those who do not learn the language. Our languages must be shared in order to survive. All Ojibwe people should have the opportunity to learn the Ojibwe language. Language makes students feel a part of, rather than apart from, their culture. Language has a generative, creative power that is currently missing from the teaching of culture in schools. The example of the Ojibwe language as based on relationships calls for radically altering the school institutional structures to support processes and relationships rather than products.

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Notes

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1. It is not my intent to advocate against incorporating or adding cultural instruction in schools. In many instances language and culture staff members do an excellent job of sharing their knowledge, but I believe they do this despite the positioning of culture in schools, not because of it. The add-on strategy has, in a sense, been the affirmative action of Native education. It is not a perfect solution for change, but it is a step in the right direction. It is my hope that through discussion and investigation of this popular model, a variety of new strategies for restructuring schools to deeply represent and support Indigenous cultures and revitalize Indigenous languages will emerge.

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