

Testimony for Senate 575
Native American Languages Act Amendment 2003
Prepared for the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

Submitted by Mary Hermes, Ph.D.
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Boozhoo Anishinaabedog, nindinawemaganidog!
(Hello everyone, my relatives.) Thank you Senator Inouye for the opportunity to testify on behave of Senate 575.

My name is Mary Hermes, I am an assistant professor of education at the University of Minnesota Duluth. My expertise is in educational research and teacher education. I am a founding board member and proud parent at the Waadookodaading Ojibwe language immersion charter school in Hayward Wisconsin. I will make three main points today: 1) the need for language immersion schools in the upper Great Lakes area 2) Research which suggests language immersion as the key to academic success in schools 3) The need for alternative teacher training and certification programs for our immersion teachers.

I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with two language activists in the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojbiwe community who realized the urgent need for an immersion school. Through research funded by the ANA (Administration for Native Americans), Lisa LaRonge and Keller Paap came to the conclusion that language immersion was the only viable strategy to revitalize Ojibwe in this community.

Ojibwe Language in the Great Lakes Area

In the 1990 census there were an estimated 4,000 speakers of Ojibwe in the United States (we believe there may be only half today.) In Wisconsin, there were only 458. For most reservations, less than 1% are first speakers. In 1999 at Lac Courte Oreilles Keller Paap found

there were only 15 native speakers of Ojibwe, today there are less. Further, there are only two speakers in the area who have attained native-like proficiency as a second language, both of these individuals are employed at Waadookoodaading as teachers. To put it mildly, our language resources are sparse. Keller once describe it as having a pad of butter to spread on a football field – this is why immersion is the really the only option. Many of the 13 Ojibwe reservations in the Great Lakes region are in a similar position – some have more speakers, some have none. Many would like to start immersion schools, but lack the funding.

Culture-Based Research

In 1999, I was also conducting research. Sponsored by the National Academy of Education and the Spencer Foundation, I was asking of tribal and public schools in the area, “why hasn’t culture based curriculum produced more academic success?” What I found was that cultural curriculum tends to be “added-on” (to the academic curriculum) and taught through English (Hermes, 1999). The result is two, often competing academic streams: one cultural and one academic. Students can read this as a choice: academic success means assimilating and culture-based success means being Indian. Students can choose: Being smart *or* being Indian. Teaching rigorous academic content **through** our indigenous languages poses no such a dilemma. Ample evidence shows the many academic benefits of learning a second language. Learning an indigenous language also has the affective benefits of positive self-esteem and identity, intergenerational connectedness and appreciation of different world views. In my opinion, language immersion should be the next evolution of culture-based curriculum. It would be a real break-through for all of American Indian education.

Teacher Education

One of the main reasons for two different curriculum tracks in tribal school is the teacher certification requirement. An estimated 80% of the teachers in tribal schools in our area are non-Native. Only 38% of teachers in BIA/tribal schools and 15% of the teachers in high Indian

enrollment public schools are American Indian (Pavel, 1999). The culture teachers, non-certified are Native.

I take the job of making teachers very seriously. I have been doing it professionally for 7 years. We have visited and consulted with teachers and administrators in New Zealand, Hawaii, Akwasasnee and Montana in order to research what the very best immersion strategy is. While in New Zealand this spring I was advised by administrators there not to let our speakers slide into teaching un-trained. I strongly agree with this, and yet we cannot afford the time of a traditional 4 year program – especially not when it takes between 5-10 years to learn the Ojibwe language as a second language. Until we can make our own teacher training programs available through the language, we must develop alternative means for training teachers on-site. On-site, hands on teacher training is a more ideal model of training teachers than in a removed University setting. With our small numbers, I am sure we can provide this kind of training.

In conclusion, Waadookodaading means the place where we help each other. We have excellent dedicated teachers, committed parents, enthusiastic learners and the support of many non-native allies. We work with the public school, tribal government and tribal school, the community college and the University. All we really need is secure funding.

Miigwech biizindawiyeg, mii sa l'iw,
(That is all, thank you for listening.)

Hermes, M. (1999) *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, Special Issue, 2000 “The Scientific Method, Nintendo, and Eagle Feathers: Rethinking Culture-Based Curriculum at an Ojibwe Tribal School.”