First Peoples Child & Family Review

Moving Towards a Language Nest: Stories and Insights from nk̓maplqs

Natalie A. Chambers and Danielle Saddleman

See table of contents

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Article abstract

A language nest is an early language learning program for young children from infancy to five years of age. Language nests have the potential to reconnect young Indigenous children to their languages and cultures within the heart of their communities. The first author, a settler scholar and mother and grandmother of language nest children, shares some insights and experiences from her doctoral research with community members who have been involved in developing a language nest in nk̓maplqs, the Head of the Lake Okanagan Indian Band community in Vernon, British Columbia. The second author, an Okanagan Indian Band community member and Language and Culture Lead for her community, describes the language nest in the present day. We offer these stories and words of language nest development to encourage other Indigenous communities who are engaged in their own journeys of reclamation.

Moving Towards a Language Nest: Stories and Insights from nk̓maplqs

Natalie A. Chambers[a] and Danielle Saddleman[b]

a PhD, Assistant Professor, Indigenous Studies, University of British Columbia Okanagan
b Language and Culture Lead, Okanagan Indian Band

Corresponding author: Natalie Chambers at natalie.chambers@ubc.ca

Abstract

A language nest is an early language learning program for young children from infancy to five years of age. Language nests have the potential to reconnect young Indigenous children to their languages and cultures within the heart of their communities. The first author, a settler scholar and mother and grandmother of language nest children, shares some insights and experiences from her doctoral research with community members who have been involved in developing a language nest in nk̓maplqs, the Head of the Lake Okanagan Indian Band community in Vernon, British Columbia. The second author, an Okanagan Indian Band community member and Language and Culture Lead for her community, describes the language nest in the present day. We offer these stories and words of language nest development to encourage other Indigenous communities who are engaged in their own journeys of reclamation.[1] [2]

Keywords: Indigenous language revitalization, language nests, Indigenous families.

Introduction

In many regions of the world, Indigenous early language learning programs for children from birth to five years of age are commonly known as *language nests* (First Peoples' Cultural Council [FPCC], 2014). Language nests have been well established in New Zealand and Hawai'i since the 1980s. By contrast, in British Columbia (BC) in Canada, the concept is not commonly known and in 2018 there were just 10 language nest programs serving 119 children across 203 communities (FPCC, 2018). Over the past 10 years, we have been involved in supporting the development of a language nest in one of these communities in nk̓maplqs in Syilx Okanagan territory in the interior of BC. In keeping with Syilx Okanagan ways, we begin by sharing who we are and our kinship relationships to the nk̓maplqs community.

Danielle: way̓ x̌ast sx̌lx̌alt, iskʷíst x̌iyálnxʷ. kn tí̓ nk̓maplqs ul kn səxʷkʷul̓m kl nsilxcn. inmistm twi Albert Saddleman, naʔl mistm Gene Joe, naʔl intum Mabel Saddleman, naʔl Sandra Saddleman. Hello, my Okanagan name translates to Sun, and my English name is Danielle Saddleman. I am from the northern end of Okanagan Lake, and a member of the Okanagan Indian Band. My father is the late Chief Albert Saddleman, and my mother is Mabel Saddleman. I come from a blended family, and my co-parents are Sandra Saddleman and Gene Joe. My partner is Shane Miller, and we have three beautiful children.

For the past year, I have worked as the Language and Culture Lead for my community. Prior to this I worked for four years as a Coordinator for our Language Nest. My 13-year-old son attended our language nest when he was a baby in the Infant/Toddler room at our daycare, and later when he was five years old. Both of my children attended nk̓maplqs i snmamayatn ikl sqilxwtet, the Okanagan Indian Band's Cultural Immersion elementary school from Grades 1 to 7. In Grade≈7, both of my children shared their language with the language nest program through our school Buddy Program. My son continues to take language in the public high school in town and he continues to be mentored in the language and culture in his role as a Language and Culture Youth Worker in our community. As a family, we continue to encourage using and having fun with the language in our home on a daily basis.

Over the past five years, I have been harvesting local foods, plants, and medicines. I first began working for my community as a Cultural Assistant to support our traditional foods program. I have continued this work in my roles at the language nest and as a Language and Culture Lead. We harvest our foods in the spring and summer months and share the food with our children in the language nest. Being on the land and harvesting, I am reminded of and I am grateful for the Four Food Chiefs: Chief skmxist, Black Bear; Chief siyaʔ, Saskatoon Berry; Chief spiƛ̓əm, Bitterroot; and Chief ntitiyix, Spring Salmon.

I have always been inspired by our sqilxʷ[3] ways, and even more so after attending the University of British Columbia Okanagan, where I obtained an undergraduate degree in Indigenous Studies and

---

3 Sqilxʷ means human in the nsyilxcən language. Cohen (2001) has also described the conceptual meaning of sqilxʷ as "the

History. While there, I had the opportunity to learn from three local sqilxʷ scholars, Dr. Jeannette Armstrong, Dr. Bill Cohen, and Dr. Marlowe Sam, whose teachings widened and deepened my lens on our sqilxʷ worldviews. While taking their courses, I learned the oral story *How Food Was Given*, and the knowledge of the teachings that are embedded in the story. The story tells how Black Bear, Chief for all creatures on the land, gave his life for the coming People.

> All of Creation gathered and sang songs to bring him back to life. That was how they helped heal each other in the world. They all took turns singing, but the bear did not come back to life. Finally, it came to Fly. He sang, "You laid your body down. You laid your life down." His song was powerful. Bear came back to life. (Okanagan Tribal Council, 2004)[4]

How Food Was Given is one of my favourite captikʷł (oral stories). It reminds me, in my work as Language and Cultural Lead, that we all have gifts, skills, and perspectives, and that all of our voices are needed for us to help one another. The story also reminds me of our natural laws and responsibilities as Syilx peoples to the tmixʷ[5]. As a passionate leader for language and culture, I will continue to learn and to pass on the teachings to our future generations.

Natalie: way̓ x̌ast sx̌lx̌alt, iskʷíst Natalie Chambers. Hello, my name is Natalie Chambers. I am a first-generation immigrant and a settler scholar. I have lived in Syilx communities with my partner, Syilx educator Bill Cohen, and our blended family for the past 19 years. I am a parent of two sons who have attended language nest programs in nk̓maplqs. My 13-year-old son attended the language nest for two years when he was a baby in the Infant/Toddler room in the community daycare, and when he was in kindergarten he attended a small stand-alone nest that was operated for six months in a trailer beside the elementary school. Now that he is in Grade 7 at nk̓maplqs i snmamayatn ikl sqilxwtet, the Okanagan Indian Band's Cultural Immersion elementary school, he visits the language nest to share stories and to play in the language with the younger children as a part of the Buddy Program. My 10-year-old attended the language nest for two years between the ages of three and five when the program began operating out of its present location in a small home in the community.

In 2009, I was in the first year of my doctoral studies when the first language nest program in Snc'c'amalta?tn Early Childhood Education Centre ended prematurely. I was disappointed that our youngest child, who had just been born, would not have the opportunity to be immersed in the language of fluent Elders during his early years. I wanted to learn more about language nests in Canada, but at that time the only information that I could find was in Dr. Onowa McIvor's master's thesis (2005). I wanted to learn how language nest programs feel, sound, and look through the eyes of fund administrators, language nest coordinators, fluent Elders, nest staff, and parents, so that

---

dream in a spiral," and "the dream or vision unravelling, coming to be" (p. 141).

4   Dr. Jeannette Armstrong included a translation of the oral story told by Martin Louie, along with this children's book version by Okanagan Tribal Council, in her doctoral dissertation on Syilx Okanagan oraliture (2009).

5   Armstrong (2009) stated that captikʷł expresses tmixʷ as "life-force" (p. 2).

perhaps we could develop another language nest in the community. It was for this reason that I decided to focus my doctoral research on Indigenous language nests in the early years of program development and in children's earliest years of life.

In the spring of 2012, I received approval from the Chief and Council of the Okanagan Indian Band and the Research Ethics Review Board at the University of British Columbia Okanagan to start my research. Over the next two years, I engaged community members in conversations about their visions for a language nest, and their perspectives on the successes, challenges, promising practices, and lessons learned in program development. All of the participants included in this paper were contacted to confirm their continuing consent in my work. I am thankful for all of the encouragement and time that was shared by each and every person who contributed to my doctoral research, and I share their voices and perspectives here so that other communities may benefit from their insights and experiences.

In the present day, I continue to support fund development for our language nest. In 2018, our grandson was the first baby to attend the language nest program. His mom visited the language nest during her pregnancy, and over the next few months, his baby brother will join the nest. Having grandchildren in the language nest gives me a new lens through which to appreciate this program, and the dedication and work of everyone whose contributions have made it what it is today. limləmt.

The Emergence of the Language Nests in the Interior of British Columbia

The Syilx Nation is made up of seven communities in Canada and one in northern Washington in the United States (Okanagan Nation Alliance [ONA], 2018). nsyilxcən, an Interior Salish language, is the language of the Syilx peoples. According to the First Peoples' Cultural Council's (FPCC) Framework for Defining and Measuring Language Vitality, nsyilxcən is "severely endangered" (FPCC, 2014, p. 14). This criterion describes languages that are "very rarely/never learned as mother tongue by children," are primarily "spoken as mother tongue by the grandparent generation and up," and are "not normally spoken by adults and children except for those who are learning" (FPCC, 2014, p. 14). In 2020, the youngest fluent speaker of nsyilxcən is in the 60+ age range (Ragoonaden et al., 2009).

Severe or critically endangered languages correspond with Stages 5 to 8 of Fishman's Reversing Language Shift (RLS) and the Graded Intergenerational Dislocation Scale (GIDS) (Hinton, 2001). According to Fishman (1998), reversing language shift at these stages of endangerment requires a focus on language acquisition in schools, intergenerational home-family-neighbourhood transmission, adult acquisition, and, in some cases, language reconstruction. In British Columbia, developing an Indigenous intergenerational home-based total immersion language nest for young children led by fluent speakers and adult learners invariably entails attempting all of Fishman's suggested activities simultaneously.

Developing a language nest presents a significant number of challenges for endangered language communities who have very few remaining fluent speakers. To put this in the context of the Syilx Nation, the number of fluent speakers of nsyilxcən has dramatically decreased by 52% in the past eight years (FPCC, 2018). In 2018, the seven communities in BC reported that there were just 132 fluent speakers remaining (FPCC, 2018), which is a sharp decline from the 194 fluent speakers reported in 2014 (FPCC, 2014), and 255 in 2010. In 2018, fluent speakers comprised 2.3%, semi-speakers 1.1%, and active learners 12.2% of the total reported population of 5,717 (FPCC, 2018).

In the present day, there are now three language nests in the eight Syilx communities in BC and the United States. Since 2012, the nk̓maplqs language nest has been located in a small home in the community and serves 10 children. Prior to this, two language nest projects ran from 2011-2012 and 2007-2009. In Spokane, Washington, Sx̌ʷx̌atkʷ N̓səɬx̌čin̓ Sn̓ma?máya?tn̓ (Salish School of Spokane) opened its doors in September 2010 with six students. The program now serves 63 students, aged 1 to 17 years. The lead founder is nʔiy̓sítaʔkʷ (LaRae Wiley – snȼay̓čkstx), and her co-founders were Danica Parkin (snȼay̓čkstx), Stevey Seymour (snȼay̓čkstx), Michelle Wiley-Bunting (snȼay̓čkstx), and the late Trina Ray (smɬqmix; ʕAn̓n̓ Christopher Parkin, personal communication, February 2020). In 2019, Krista Lindley and

sʔímlaʔxʷ (Michelle Johnson) also opened a language nest in the Westbank First Nation community that serves a group of four children of adult language learners (st'a7qwalqs Hailey Causton, personal communication, February 2020). In addition to these three language nest programs, young children in the seven communities in BC are receiving approximately four hours of language instruction per week through early childhood education programs and Head Start (FPCC, 2018).

The language nest in nk̓maplqs was inspired by Kyé7e̓s House language nest in the Secwépemc Nation in Adams Lake, BC and the Te Kōhanga Reo in New Zealand. Dr. Kathryn Michel (2012) decided to move home to her community in Adams Lake to develop a language nest after she witnessed a delegation of Māori share the successes of Te Kōhanga Reo at a conference in Vancouver, BC. She founded the Secwépemc Ka language nest in 1987 with Dr. Janice Dick Billy. The nest recently changed its name after participating nest children repeatedly referred to the program as Kyé7e̓s House (Kathryn Michel, personal communication, February 2020). In the present day, Kyé7e̓s House is the longest running language nest program in BC.

Although there are now language nests all over the world, the majority of the published literature on language nest development has emerged from the Te Kōhanga Reo in New Zealand (Fleras, 1987; Hohepa & Smith, 1982; King, 2001; Lee et al., 2013; McClutchie, 2007; Reedy, 2000; Ritchie & Rau, 2006; Stiles, 1997) and Pūnana Leo in Hawai'i (Cowell, 2012; Iokepa-Guerrero & de France, 2007; Kimura, n.d.; Stiles, 1997; Wilson & Kamana, 2008; Yamauchi & Ceppi, 2006). Both movements began in the 1980s (Chambers, 2015).

The Māori language is the only Indigenous language in New Zealand. When a National Māori Language Survey conducted in the 1970s reported that there were just 70,000 remaining fluent Māori speakers, the Te Kōhanga Reo concept was developed shortly afterwards in response to the growing awareness that the language was in decline and that the majority of fluent speakers were between the ages of 40 to 80 (King, 2001). Over the next 15 years, the movement exploded and 767 language nest programs were developed in home environments, large daycare centres, and other spaces (King, 2001). By 2001, Te Kōhanga Reo was reported to be "the most popular early-childhood care option for Māori children" (King, 2001, p. 122).

Just one generation following the start of the Te Kōhanga Reo movement, the evidence suggests that the total immersion language nests and schools have been successful in arresting the decline of the Māori language (Statistics New Zealand, 2002). In the 2001 Survey on the Health of the Māori Language, higher proficiency language skills were more common among the youngest age group, who ranged in age from 15 to 24 years, than the next group, aged 24 to 34 years (Statistics New Zealand, 2002). More recently, the Māori language appears to be undergoing "a state of renewed decline" (p. 6) as the number of children attending Te Kōhanga Reo has reportedly declined by one third, and the number of fluent speakers has dropped to 3% of the population (Te Puni Kōkiri Ministry of Māori Development, 2018). Consequently, the Māori language is at Stage 6b on Fishman's graded scale and is still considered to be in trouble (Te Puni Kōkiri Ministry of Māori Development, 2018).

In 1987, Fleras commented on the potential for the language nest concept to be replicated in Canada "were more aboriginal leaders aware of this experiment in language retention" (p. 23). Indeed, Dr. Kathryn Michel noted a lack of awareness of the language nest model as a barrier in her initial efforts to develop Kyé7eʼs House in Adams Lake over 30 years ago (Chambers, 2015). However, many other challenges exist in efforts to explore Māori and Hawaiian language revitalization movements in Indigenous communities in North America. In particular, Māori and Hawaiian peoples comprise a significant proportion of the population in the respective colonial nation states of New Zealand and the United States. As a result they have greater access to government representation, funding, resources, and higher numbers of fluent speakers than many Indigenous endangered language communities across Canada and the mainland United States (Cowell, 2012; Stiles, 1997).

British Columbia is home to 203 Indigenous communities and 34 Indigenous languages (FPCC, 2018). In 2007, the FPCC, a First Nations-run Crown corporation in BC, launched a competitive multi-year funding opportunity to support the development of language nest programs. Informed by the successes of Te Kōhanga Reo in New Zealand and Pūnana Leo in Hawaiʼi, the ambitious goal of the new Pre-School Language Nest funding program was for participating nests in BC to reach 100% full immersion within one year of operations. FPCC launched their pilot program by funding seven language nest projects, one of which was for a pilot in the Infant/Toddler and Head Start rooms in Snc'c'amala?tn Early Childhood Education Centre in nk̓maplqs. Seven years later, in 2014, only three additional language nests were funded, bringing the total of funded programs to 10. By 2018,

the number of participating programs grew to 21 nests. In 2019, increased federal and provincial government funding for Indigenous language revitalization doubled FPCC's funding capacity and they planned to support an additional 19 language nests. However, only 33 communities applied for the funding. The slow uptake in applications for the Pre-School Language Nest funding stream suggested that communities may have required more time to engage in strategic planning and to build the capacity for program delivery (A. Parker, personal communication, June 21, 2019). The sheer diversity of Indigenous languages in BC presents unique challenges related to "economies of scale" (Cowell, 2012, p. 176), including limited access to economic infrastructure and human resources.

Instead of being deterred by these many challenges, it may benefit small endangered language communities to consider language nest development from a more holistic perspective in relation to community wellbeing, resilience, and cultural continuity. Indeed, in BC the development of a language nests involves reclaiming intergenerational home, family, and community relationships that have been deliberately disrupted by four generations of colonial policies that were intended to separate children from the heart of their kinship networks and knowledge systems.

Looking Back, Looking Forwards in nk̓maplqs

The roles and responsibilities of Syilx families and communities in caring for children have shifted dramatically over the past seven generations in the Syilx Nation. In the mid 1800s, the arrival of the fur trade and the gold rush in the Interior region brought socio-economic and political changes, followed by the smallpox epidemic that devastated Syilx families and communities. In the 1880s, extended families began moving out of large pit houses into smaller log cabins (ONA, 2014). Nonetheless, families remained large, with couples having eight to 12 children, and siblings and cousins of all ages would gather in the homes of grandparents, aunties, uncles, and other older family members, while their younger parents worked to support their families (ONA, 2018).

In the 1920s, more dramatic changes began to impact Syilx family and kinship relationships when the Canadian government mandated the removal of children from their families and transported them across large distances to spend nine to 12 months of the year at St. Eugene Residential School in Cranbrook or Kamloops Indian Residential School (KIRS) in Kamloops. Three or four generations of Syilx children attended the Indian residential schools where they were prohibited from speaking their mother tongue and punished if they were caught doing. Many survivors have shared their experiences of mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, and sexual abuse at the schools (Baptiste, 2000; ONA, 2018; SCES, 2000). Fifty survivors and intergenerational survivors of St. Eugene and KIRS have shared their testimonies in *Take the Indian Out of the Child: Syilx Okanagan Experiences in the Violent and Forced Assimilation of Indian Residential Schools*, a book that was written and published by the Okanagan Nation Alliance to ensure that "the darkest chapter in our collective story [will be] rooted in our Syilx collective memory" (ONA, 2018, p. 23). Some survivors also shared their stories in *Behind Closed Doors: Stories from the Kamloops Indian Residential School,* published by Secwépemc Cultural Education Society (2000).

By the 1950s, the Indian residential school system began to lose the support of senior officials in Indian Affairs who considered continued operations to be too costly given the failure of the schools to achieve the complete erasure of language and cultural identity and to facilitate assimilation into Canadian society (Miller, 2001). As a result, Indian Affairs was tasked with responding to the recommendations of a special joint committee of the House of Commons and the Senate to integrate children with Indian status into the public school system (Miller, 2001; Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC], 2015). These developments led the Department of Indian Affairs to temporarily expand the Indian day school system (TRC, 2015). Similar to Indian residential school policies, parents who refused to send their children to the day schools were penalized (ONA, 2018). Indigenous languages were also prohibited in the day schools and many families stopped speaking nsyilxcən to their children as a way to protect them (ONA, 2018). With the 1960s, a new wave of child abductions brought Syilx children into the child welfare system. In the 1970s, St. Eugene and KIRS finally closed their doors. However, by this time many families were "heartbroken for losing their reason for living" (p. 35) and the schools had created destructive personal cycles and relationships within families and communities (ONA, 2018).

In sharing this dark history, it is important to remember the resilience and resistance of Syilx peoples. Some families managed to keep their children out of the Indian residential and day school systems, and against all odds, to raise their children in the language. Syilx scholar Cohen (2001) reminded us that "Indigenous reality is one of resilience, refusal to disappear; It is a reflection of the strength and beauty of peoples who have lived here since humans existed on this land, and will continue to be so" (p. 147).

In the 1990s, the roles of older extended family members shifted once again with the launch of the First Nations Inuit Child Care Initiative that created 6,000 new childcare spaces in Indigenous communities (Greenwood et al., 2007). The development of early childhood education centres and daycares in Indigenous communities shifted the care of young children from older men and women to classroom spaces where infants, toddlers, and young children are separated by age group, and are cared for by a younger generation of adults, often younger women (Chambers, 2014). In 1998, the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve (Head Start) program in British Columbia was implemented (Terbasket & Greenwood, 2007). The Head Start program was based on six program components that were intended to reclaim a holistic approach to early learning for Indigenous children including "culture and language, education, health promotion, nutrition, parent and family involvement, and social support" (Terbasket & Greenwood, 2007, p. 75). Cohen (2001) has described the reclaiming of children's education by Syilx peoples as "an act of love" (p. 144) that creates hope for the survival of sqəlxʷɬcawt or *the Indian way*, "the dream way in a spiral way, the coming to pass or realization of dreams or visions" (p. 144). Indeed, in the 1990s, the development of the Snc'c'amalaʔtn Early Childhood Education Centre and the Aboriginal Head Start program were bold acts of love and reclamation.

Developing a Language Nest in nɬ́maplqs: The Early Years

A Language Nest in the Daycare

When Syilx educator Bill Cohen visited the Te Kōhanga Reo in Aotearoa as a part of his Master's in Education program at Simon Fraser University, he noted the wide diversity of approaches that were taken to program delivery.

> Some of them were like our daycare, except the whole staff was speaking in immersion. Some of them were in people's garages with a little playground outside. Some were little language nests where the staff was not fluent but they were doing their best. (B. Cohen, personal communication, August 27, 2013 in Chambers, 2014, p. 103)

Visiting Te Kōhanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa Māori (Total Immersion Schools) and Chief Atahm School and learning about the successes of Indigenous language renewal initiatives sparked Cohen's dream of developing language immersion schooling in his home community in nɬ́maplqs.

Ramona Wilson, a Syilx early childhood educator who worked in the Snc'c'amalaʔtn Daycare in nɬ́maplqs, had a similar experience after she visited the Kyé7eʼs House language nest in Adams Lake, BC (Chambers, 2014). In 2007, FPCC's launch of the Pre-School Language Nest funding program created an opportunity to start a language nest, and Cohen wrote a proposal for the Okanagan Indian Band to support a pilot language nest project in the Infant/Toddler room in which Wilson was a supervisor. The project had the full support of the manager, Lorraine Ladan, who had also visited the Kyé7eʼs House language nest in Adams Lake.

Full language immersion turned out to be an incredibly challenging and overambitious vision for everyone involved in Snc'c'amalaʔtn Early Education Childhood Centre. The early childhood educators who staffed the program were busy caring for the children, and the additional expectation that they would learn nsyilxcən alongside the children while doing their jobs was an overwhelming and unrealistic goal. The large physical space and large numbers of children, combined with supporting the participation of older fluent Elders with health and mobility challenges, created obstacles that were difficult to navigate. Consequently, after two years of dedicated efforts, Laden made the very difficult decision to inform FPCC that they would not continue with the project.

A Kindergarten Language Nest

In spring 2010, the author (Chambers) was one amongst a group of parents who applied to FPCC for funding to create a stand-alone language nest project in nɬ́maplqs. Late in August 2011, FPCC informed us that a small amount of funding had become available to support us to run a language nest project until March 2012. Suddenly our small group of nest advocates were tasked with finding a space in which to run a nest, and individuals who were available to work for just five months. Seeking inspiration and ideas on how to move forward, a small group of us visited Kyé7eʼs House language nest.

Since a whole year had lapsed between the original application and the funding opportunity, the children of parents who had supported the nest proposal were already attending kindergarten by the time the program opened its doors in November 2011. Our children were five years old and had fully developed verbal skills in English. The rapid start up and delivery of the program resulted in the team being unsure of the program goals and their roles and responsibilities, and had the unfortunate effect of negatively impacting the kindergarten program (Chambers, 2014).

A portable classroom on the school grounds next to nk̓maplqs i snmamayatn ikl sqilxwtet Cultural Immersion School was the only physical space that was available to run the nest project. Since funding was so limited, there was no time for team meetings or lesson planning, and no adult language learning supports were available for staff. As the coordinator, Rachel Marchand drew from her training in early childhood education to create a program that would support our kindergarten-aged children to adjust to the partial language immersion program at the Cultural Immersion School and to become familiar with the school setting (Chambers, 2014). To support this goal, Marchand arranged for school buddies from nk̓maplqs i snmamayatn ikl sqilxwtet Cultural Immersion School to pair up with and mentor the young children during their play time (Chambers, 2014).

Figure 1

x̌astsalx I? captikʷt : snk'lip na?t kakw̓p

Note. Illustration courtesy of s?ímla?xʷ Dr. Michele K. Johnson (Chambers, 2014).

Activities were led primarily by younger workers, with the fluent Elders in a support role that entailed them sharing words and phrases with staff and correcting their pronunciation. Within the four months that the project ran, all three staff members described the children learning and speaking the language, growing in confidence, and feeling excited about attending the program. The younger women engaged the children in activities that were enjoyable and stimulating, such as storytelling, circle time, and games. Language nest worker s?ímla?xʷ Dr. Michele K. Johnson depicted her storytelling circle in a drawing that is shared below (Figure 1).

Goals for the program were to maintain total immersion in the language for the duration of the three-hour sessions, to use nsyilxcən names for children, staff, and fluent Elders in the nest, to support the children to learn more language, and to prepare the children to transition to the nk̓maplqs i snmamayatn ikl sqilxwtet Cultural Immersion School (Chambers, 2014). These ambitious goals were accomplished within four months as a result of the commitment and hard work of the staff.

At Home in the Language

Since 2012, the language nest has operated in a small rental house in the community that looks and feels like a regular home. Operating the nest in a homelike environment has enhanced the connections between the Elders and the children. In 2013-2014, the nest program consultant, Eric Mitchell, noticed that having fun, laughing, and singing with the children in the language nest had encouraged the Elders to "become gentle again" (Chambers, 2014, p. 126). The Elders also described enjoying their work in the nest. Fluent Elder k'i'səmtkʷ Pauline Archachan described being in the nest as good work: "It's a lot of work. It's good work. We feel good, we get tired, but we feel good after we leave from here. I do anyway. We have a good time with the kids" (personal communication, October 14, 2013 in Chambers, 2014, p. 125). Elders and staff also observed the children increasing in confidence, learning to relax, and beginning to understand the language within just a few months of going to the nest (Chambers, 2014).

In the present day, the language nest in nk̓maplqs operates three full days a week. Five infants and toddlers attend in the mornings, five preschool- and kindergarten-aged children attend in the afternoons. Offering two half-day sessions enables us to deliver a program to 10 children, as we have learned the children become disruptive and do not listen to the Elders and staff when there are more than five in one session. This arrangement also creates an opportunity to offer more advanced language and activities to the preschool and kindergarten children.

The language nest in nk̓maplqs is modeled on the extended family and the intergenerational sharing of language and culture. Over the past few years, our nest team has been comprised of fluent Elders, silent speakers[6] of a middle generation, younger workers, and sometimes, youth workers who are either alumni from nk̓maplqs i snmamayatn ikl sqilxwtet Cultural Immersion School or other youth from the community who know their language. We also continue to implement a program to bring children from nk̓maplqs i snmamayatn ikl sqilxwtet Cultural Immersion School to the nest to share their language through stories, drumming, and Total Physical Response activities.

The language nest home includes comfortable chairs for our Elders and a large table where the Elders eat with the children at meal times. The children engage in activities with the Elders during the sessions, and the Elders like to tell stories and talk to the children in fluent nsyilxcən. The nest workers are all adult language learners, and they work with the Elders to sing songs, do circle time, Total Physical Response activities, stretch, and do arts and crafts. The children also go outside every day.

Since 2015, the language nest has had multi-year funding which has enabled us to transition from the development phase into a stable and sustainable program. We provide adult language classes to nest workers and families, along with a supper and child minding to make it more accessible for them to attend. For those who cannot make it to class, we also offer online language learning.

---

6   The FPCC describes a Silent Speaker as "someone who has a good understanding of a language but does not speak it" (Gessner, 2017, p. 2).

Our program makes an enormous effort to connect with the larger community. Our annual Baby Welcoming Ceremony enables us to reach out to new parents. We are also working with our Elders to create a Syilx name giving ceremony for the community. This is an opportunity to nurture relationships with the Elders and the younger generations, and to keep the old Syilx Okanagan names alive into the future.

Whenever possible, we support and inspire our staff and fluent Elders by creating opportunities for professional development. Over the years, the language nest team has traveled to many places, including the Salish School of Spokane in Washington and the Nuu-chah-nulth Nation on the West Coast of BC. These experiences were very inspiring for everyone involved as we were able to share our stories, language and culture, and our successes, challenges, and promising practices with one another. Opportunities such as this remind us that we are not alone on this revitalization journey.

Conclusions

Over the past eight years, the Language Nest program in nk̓maplqs has grown into a team of 17 dedicated and passionate staff and Elders who deliver a broad range of language and cultural programs. Our team includes a Language and Culture Lead, a Language Nest Coordinator, three Fluent Elders, two Language Nest workers, a Youth and an Adult Language Instructor and two Co-Teachers, two Language Technicians, and five Youth Workers. The enhanced capacity of our team means that we are now moving forward with supporting our youth and adult language learners, including our silent speakers, families of our nest children, and our youth alumni of nk̓maplqs i snmamayatn ikl sqilxwtet, the Okanagan Indian Band's Cultural Immersion elementary school. We are also moving forward with our long-term goal to provide our language workers with increased opportunities to progress in their own language learning. They currently receive two to three hours of Paul Creek Curriculum language instruction per week, with a goal of this increasing to four to six hours in the future. These new initiatives will support our nest children to use their language outside of the nest program in their homes and in the community. Building the capacity for intergenerational transmission of language in our homes, families, and communities means providing safe spaces and many avenues for learning and practicing language.

Our experiences of language nest development demonstrate Navarro's (2008) assertion that "there is no clearly defined roadmap to follow" (p. 155) when it comes to language immersion.

> Every tribe's native language situation is unique and what works for one group may not work for another. Simply stated, there is no one fool-proof method ... There are no pedagogical materials ready for purchase or trained language instructors who know how to create curriculum that is useful for teaching children a new language ... You start from scratch and work from there. You have to be creative and willing to adapt to whatever situation you find yourself in. Above all, one must be completely devoted. (Navarro, 2008, p. 155)

Indeed, we have been overcoming challenges, learning lessons, and moving towards a language nest since the first nest project in 2007.

In the early years of language nest development in nk̓maplqs, there was very little published research on language nests in BC or Canada. We were fortunate to receive guidance from Dr. Kathryn Michel, who generously hosted multiple visits to Kyé7e's House and answered many questions by e-mail and telephone. In addition, Language Program Coordinators at FPCC provided continued support and encouragement through site visits, e-mail correspondence, and telephone discussions. FPCC has since developed a *Language Nest Handbook* (2014), created a media resource with Dr Kathryn Michel (2014), hosted annual Language Nest training workshops, and, more recently, hired Language Nest Coaches to provide increased direct support.

Newer language nest programs have access to a marked increase in the academic literature on language nests. Researchers working in and with language nests have made many resources available to support language nest development in BC and Canada, including Dr. Kathryn Michel's doctoral research on the development of Chief Atahm School (Michel, 2012), as well as research on Tahltan language nests (Edōsi, 2012; Edōsi & Bourquin, 2016; Edōsi et al., 2018; Morris, 2017, 2018), Secwépemc language resource development in Little Fawn Nursery (Arnouse, 2007), case studies on SENĆOŦEN and Mohawk nests (Okura, 2017), and, more recently, research on language acquisition in Haida language nests (K'uyáang Young, 2019). On a global scale, research is now available on language nests in Estonia (Brown & Faster, 2019) and Finland (Okura, 2017; Olthuis et al., 2013). By sharing our own stories of language nest development in nk̓maplqs, we hope to contribute to this growing body of literature and to encourage other communities to keep moving forward on their own journeys of reclamation, reconnection, and renewal.

References

Armstrong, J. (2009). *Constructing Indigeneity: Syilx Okanagan oraliture and tmixʷcentrism.* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation] University of Greifswald.

Arnouse, J. (2019). Me7 Tslxemwílc-kt es Secwépemctsném-kt! Secwépemc language resource development for Little Fawn Nursery–An early years language immersion program [Unpublished master's thesis]. Simon Fraser University.

Baptiste, V. (Director) (2001). *Survivors of the red brick school* [Film]. Shenandoah Film Productions.

Brown, K. & Faster, M. (2019, December). Language nests on the move: The case of Võro pre-primary education in Estonia. *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education, 5*(3), 29–48. https://doi.org/10.32865/fire201953145

Chambers, N. (2014). *"They all talk Okanagan and I know what they are saying." Language nests in the early years: Insights, challenges and promising practices.* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation] University of British Columbia.

Chambers, N. (2015). Language nests as an emergent global phenomenon: Diverse approaches to program development and delivery. *The International Journal of Holistic Early Learning and Development, 1,* 25–38.

Cohen, B. (2001). The spider's web: Creativity and survival in dynamic balance. *Canadian Journal of Native Education, 25*(2), 140–212.

Cowell, A. (2012). The Hawaiian model of language revitalization: Problems of extension to mainland Native America. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language, 218,* 167–193. https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2012-0063

Edōsdi/Thompson, J. C. (2012). *Hedekeyeh Hots'ih Kāhid –"Our Ancestors are in us": Strengthening our voices through language revitalization from a Tahltan worldview* [Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation]. University of Victoria.

Edosdi/Thompson, J. C., Bourquin, M. (Producers), & Bourquin, M. (Director). (2016). *Dah Dẕāhge Nodeṣidē: We are speaking our language again* [Film]. Tahltan Central Government.

First Peoples' Cultural Council [FPCC]. (2014). *The language nest story: As told by Kathy Michel* [Video]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffUTiwsRlag

First Peoples' Cultural Council (2018). *Report on the status of B.C. First Nations languages.* (3rd edition). http://www.fpcc.ca/files/PDF/FPCC-LanguageReport-180716-WEB.pdf

First Peoples' Heritage Language and Culture Council (2014). *Report on the status of B.C. First Nations languages 2014* (2nd edition). http://www.fpcc.ca/files/PDF/Language/FPCC-LanguageReport-141016-WEB.pdf

First Peoples' Heritage Language and Culture Council (2010). *Report on the status of B.C. First Nations languages 2010. http://www.fpcc.ca/files/PDF/2010-report-on-the-status-of-bc-first-nations-languages.pdf*

Fishman, J. A. (2013). Language maintenance, language shift, and reversing language shift. In T. K. Bhatia, & W. C. Ritchie (Eds.) *The handbook of bilingualism and multilingualism*, (pp. 466–494). Blackwell Publishing.

Fleras, A. (1987). Redefining the politics over Aboriginal language renewal: Maori language preschool as agents of social change. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies, 7*(1), 1–40.

Gallegos, C., Murray, W., & Evans, M. (2010). Research note: Comparing Indigenous language revitalisation: Te reo Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand and Mapudungun in Chile. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint, 51*(1), 91–104. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8373.2009.01418.x

Gessner, S. (2017). *Reclaiming my language: A course for silent speakers*. FPCC.

Greenwood, M., de Leeuw, S., & Fraser, T. (2007). Aboriginal children and early childhood development and education in Canada: Linking the past and the present to the future. *Canadian Journal of Native Education, Vol. 30*(1), 5–18.

Hinton, L. (2001). Language revitalization: An overview. In L. Hinton, & K. Hale, (Eds.), *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice* (pp. 3–18). Academic Press.

Hohepa, M., & Smith, G. H. (1992) Te Kōhanga Reo Hei Tikanga Ako i te Reo Māori: Te Kōhanga Reo as a context for language learning. *Educational Psychology, 12*(3–4), 333–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/0144341920120314

King, J. (2001). Te Kōhanga Reo: Māori language revitalization. In L. Hinton & K. Hale, (Eds.), *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice* (pp. 119–128). Academic Press.

K'uyáang Young, B. (2019). *K'wáa gyáak̓id G̱áagaay hl kı´nsälang: Emerging X̱aad Kı´l (Haida language) use in a preschool setting* [Unpublished master's thesis] Simon Fraser University.

Lee, W., Carr, M., Soutar, B., & Mitchell, L. (2013). *Understanding the Te Whariki approach: Early years education in practice*. New York: Routledge.

McClutchie, M. D. (2007). Māori language revitalization: A vision for the future. *Canadian Journal of Native Education, 30*(1), 101–107.

McIvor, O. (2005). *Building the nests: Indigenous language revitalization in Canada through early childhood immersion programs* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of Victoria.

McIvor, O. (2006). *Language nest programs in BC: Early childhood immersion programs in two First Nations communities. Practical questions answered and guidelines offered.* Onowa McIvor.

Michel, K. (2012). *Trickster's path to language transformation: Stories of Secwépemc immersion from Chief Atahm School.* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation] University of British Columbia.

Milloy, J. (2001). *A national crime: The Canadian government and the residential school system 1879 to 1986.* Winnipeg, MB: The University of Manitoba Press.

Statistics New Zealand. (2002, May). *2001 Survey on the health of the Māori language.* Stats NZ. http://archive.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/people_and_communities/maori/2001-survey-on-the-health-of-the-maori-language.aspx

Morris, K. J. A. (2017). *K'asba'e T'oh: Sustaining the intergenerational transmission of Tāɫtān* [Master's thesis, University of Victoria]. UVicSpace Electronic Theses and Dissertations.

Morris, K. J. A. (2018). Using language nests to promote the intergenerational transmission of Tāɫtān. In J. Markides, & L. Forsythe (Eds.), *Looking back and living forward: Indigenous research rising up* (pp. 73–80). Brill.

Navarro, B. M. (2008). *Southern Ute language revitalization: A case study in Indigenous cultural survival and decolonization.* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation] University of Oregon.

Okanagan Tribal Council. (2004). *Kou-Skelowh/we are the People: A trilogy of Okanagan legends.* Penticton, BC: Theytus Books Ltd.

Okanagan Nation Alliance [ONA]. (2018). *Take the Indian out of the child: Syilx Okanagan experiences in the violent and forced assimilation of Indian Residential Schools.* Okanagan Nation Alliance.

Okanagan Nation Alliance. (2014). *Syilx Child & Family Plan.* Okanagan Nation Alliance.

Okura, E. K. (2017). *Language nests and language acquisition: An empirical analysis* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Hawai'i.

Olthuis, M. L., Kivelä, S., & Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2013). *Revitalising Indigenous languages: How to recreate a lost generation* (Vol. 10). Multilingual Matters.

Parker, A., & Gessner, S. (2014). *Language nest handbook for B.C. First Nations communities.* First Peoples' Cultural Council. http://www.fpcc.ca/files/PDF/Language/Language_Nest/FPCC_LanguageNestHandbook_EmailVersion2.pdf

Ragoonaden, K., Cherkowski, S., Baptiste, M., & Després, B. (2009). Sntrusntm i7 captikʷlh: Unravel the story, the Okanagan way. *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 55*(3), 382–396.

Richards, M., & Burnaby, B. (2008). Restoring Aboriginal languages: Immersion and intensive language program models in Canada. In T. W. Fortune, & D. J. Tedick (Eds.), *Pathways to multilingualism: Evolving perspectives on immersion education* (p. 221). Multilingual Matters.

Ritchie, J., & Rau, C. (2008). *Whakawhanaungatanga: Partnerships in bicultural development in early childhood care and education.* Teaching & Learning Research Initiative. http://www.tlri. org.nz/pdfs/9207_finalreport.pdf.

Secwépemc Cultural Education Society. (2000). *Behind closed doors: Stories from the Kamloops Indian Residential School.* Secwépemc Cultural Education Society.

Soberanes Bojórquez, F. (2010). Noam Chomsky and Indigenous education in Oaxaca, Mexico. In L. Meyer, & B. Maldonando Alvarado (Eds.), *New world of Indigenous resistance: Noam Chomsky and voices from North, South, and Central America* (pp. 101–113). City Light Books.

Stiles, D. (1997). Four successful Indigenous language programs. In J. Reyhner (Ed.)*, Teaching Indigenous Language* (pp. 248-262). Northern Arizona University.

Te Puni Kōkiri Ministry of Māori Development. (2018). *Literature review: Perceptions of the health of the Māori language 2015.* https://www.tpk.govt.nz/documents/download/4769/ Literature%20Review%20-%20English.pdf

Terbasket, K., & Greenwood, M. (2007). British Columbia First Nations Head Start Program: An overview of policy development 1998-2007. *Canadian Journal of Native Education, 30*(1), 75–82.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC]. (2015). Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future. Summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

Utumapu, T. L. P. (1998). O le poutu: Women's roles and Samoan language nests. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation] University of Auckland.

Warner, S. L. N. (2001). The movement to revitalize Hawai'ian language and culture. In L. Hinton and K. Hale (Eds.). The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice (pp. 133–146). Academic Press.