Back to the Future:
Recreating Natural Indigenous Language Learning Environments Through Language Nest Early Childhood Immersion Programs

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Back to the Future: Recreating Natural Indigenous Language Learning Environments Through Language Nest Early Childhood Immersion Programs

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Abstract

For a language to have a stable future, children need to be learning it. Immersion for young children is the best method for rapid language regeneration as it can produce new proficient speakers within a few years. Although early childhood language immersion programs, commonly known as language nests, have been recognized internationally as the most successful means available today for language revitalization, this method is not yet well subscribed to in Indigenous Canada. This paper provides a picture of early childhood Indigenous immersion language programming and presents it as one viable solution to the challenge of Indigenous language loss in Canada. In addition, it is hoped that this paper can be a starting point for Indigenous community members interested in immersion early childhood approaches to their children's health, identity development, and overall wellbeing.

While there are complex factors as to whether early childhood is "the best" time for language learning (Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam, 2009; DeKeyser, 2013; Lightbown & Spada, 2006), it is difficult to argue against the belief that it is children who keep a language vibrant. For a language to have a stable future, the children need to be learning and ultimately speaking it. While the research on optimal second language learning environments varies (Dixon et al., 2012), what is clear is that in order for children to learn an additional language they must have many hours of exposure to that language. Barón and Celaya (2010) observed an increase in children's practical language skills directly correlated to an increase in the number of hours of language skills instruction, even when the time spent was on language exposure and not explicit teaching of the language. Therefore, second language learning research, along with reports from Indigenous communities, show high-quality immersion programs for young children is one of the best methods for rapid language regeneration as it can produce new proficient speakers within a few years (Chambers, 2014; Hinton, 2001; King, 2001; Wilson & Kamana, 2001). Although early childhood language immersion programs have been internationally recognized as the most successful means available today for Indigenous language revitalization (Cooper, Arago-Kemp, Wylie, & Hodgen, 2004; Iokepa-Guerreo & de France, 2007; McClutchie, 2007; Wilson & Kamana, 2001), this method has not yet been widely implemented in Canada. Yet French Canadians, the Māori, and Native Hawaiians have all successfully implemented immersion programs over the past 20 years with early childhood initiatives as the foundation (Cooper et al., 2004; Iokepa-Guerrero & de France, 2007; McClutchie, 2007; Wilson & Kamana, 2001). While these examples have certain geo-political advantages in comparison to the Indigenous language situation in Canada, including a singular language focus and (eventual) state-level support for the language, they nonetheless model the potential for successful revitalization through language immersion.

This paper presents early childhood Indigenous immersion language programming as one viable solution to the challenge of Indigenous language loss in Canada. It is hoped that early childhood practitioners, caregivers, researchers, policymakers, advocates, and the general public in any country with an interest in Indigenous children's wellbeing will find this topic of interest. In addition, it is hoped that this paper will provide a starting point for Indigenous community members interested in immersion early childhood approaches to their children's health, identity development, and overall wellbeing. This paper may assist communities to overcome fears and barriers and provide inspiration and hope for an achievable and effective solution towards the optimal development of their children via revitalization of their language. We begin with an overview of the global and Canadian contexts of Indigenous language shift and loss, then provide the history of and rationale for the language nest model. We go on to describe some of the practical realizations of the model within one Canadian province, British Columbia, providing examples of how language immersion programming for young children is successfully implemented there.

Language Context

The context of language shift and loss has been well documented internationally (Crystal, 1997; Dixon, 1997; Krauss, 1992). This documentation attests to the current context of Indigenous languages, which represent 96% of the world's languages but are spoken by only four percent of its population (Crystal, 1997). This leaves most of the world's language diversity in the stewardship of a very small number of people (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003).

Prior to contact with Europeans, Indigenous languages flourished across North America and were naturally continued from generation to generation. Following contact, warfare and the introduction of new diseases, both incidental and intentional, dramatically reduced Indigenous populations (Boseker, 2000). Colonial legislation aimed to assimilate Indigenous people into the developing Euro-Canadian culture. The most damaging policies for Indigenous languages were the reserve system and the residential school system along with the prohibition of traditional practices such as potlatches, and the loss of land through settlement, treaties, and destruction of natural habitat. These policies severely disrupted intergenerational language transfer (Stikeman, 2001; Warner, 2001).

The residential and day school system, which children were legally forced to attend, largely forbade the use of Indigenous language (Milloy, 1999; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). Penalties for children caught speaking their languages included harsh punishment and public humiliation (Boseker, 2000). Indigenous people across Canada have shared their experiences of the tactics used to extinguish their languages. One Tlingit man commented, "Whenever I speak Tlingit, I can still taste the soap" (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer, 1998). It is no wonder that language recall and regeneration of use for some Indigenous people is so difficult.

All Indigenous languages in Canada face significant threats to their vitality, as there is very little political or economic support for these languages. Unlike other minority language groups, Indigenous people cannot rely on new immigrants to maintain or increase the number of speakers (Norris, 1998), nor is there a "homeland" of speakers somewhere else in the world that they can visit if the language ceases to be used in Canada. There are now 60 Indigenous languages across 12 language families still spoken in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011). The province of British Columbia (B.C.) has the greatest diversity of Indigenous languages in Canada with 34 languages belonging to eight distinct language families (First Peoples' Cultural Council, 2014).

Many linguists agree that the average age of language speakers largely indicates a language's health and predicted longevity. UNESCO's "Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing" (Wurm, 1996) noted that at least one-third of the children should be learning the language to maintain its vitality. This is not the case in Canada, where:

> According to the 2006 Census, 18% of First Nations children across Canada had an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue (or first language learned), down from 21% in 1996. Older generations of First Nations people are generally more likely than younger generations to have an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue. (Bougie, 2010, p. 75)

However, more encouraging statistics report that those aged 34 and under "were more likely to report speaking an Aboriginal language at home that was different than their mother tongue. More specifically, it was more common among school-aged children" (Statistics Canada, 2011, p. 7), indicating a trend toward learning Indigenous languages as additional languages in childhood.

As B.C. is home to 60% of Canada's First Nations languages and most have the smallest number of speakers in Canada, the situation here is even more challenging. The *Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages* (First Peoples' Cultural Council, 2014) explained only one percent of the proficient speakers of First Nations languages are under the age of 24, and proficient speakers make up only four percent of the total population. Therefore, it is crucial to concentrate Indigenous language learning efforts on the young children of every Indigenous Nation.

What are Language Nests?

Language nests are places for young children that provide an immersion environment in their Indigenous language. A language nest creates a space where young children can be "raised" in the language through meaningful interaction with proficient speakers, often Elders. The immersion environment of the nest supports natural language acquisition instead of conscious language instruction, with the goal of facilitating first language acquisition of Indigenous languages.

The uptake of the language nest model in B.C. has occurred somewhat differently from how it was implemented in New Zealand and Hawai'i. While the first language nest in B.C. was started in the late 1980s, the model is still quite new or even yet unknown to the majority of our First Nations communities in the province. The reasons for this include the context of high language diversity, limited resources (including funding, education levels, and state support for this model), and the low numbers of proficient speakers in most communities. Nonetheless, awareness of the model is growing and more communities are seeking to develop a language nest-like program, particularly as it becomes increasingly apparent that the classroom-based approaches to language learning that have been implemented for the last 30 years in the province have had little success in creating new proficient speakers.

The diversity of First Nations languages and cultures in the province, as well as the relative newness of the model, have resulted in a diversity of approaches to language nests in B.C. spanning a spectrum from tiny, home-based, family-centered programs to more structured preschool programs operating within schools. For example, one language nest program in a Syilx community has rented a small house complete with living room, kitchen, and bedrooms. A small group of three to six children attends with four Elders and an assistant for five to six hours per day. They eat lunch together and then spend the afternoon in semi-structured play activities that allow the Elders to interact with the children in much the same way that they would at "Granny's house." Alternately, a language nest program in a Gitxsan community operates as the preschool in a classroom of the band-operated school. Attendance ranges from eight to 12 children with three to four proficient staff and Elders. Children attend for the full school day and all typical preschool activities are conducted in the language.

While a language nest may operate similarly to a preschool or Head Start, unlike other programs, the driving purpose of the nest is language transmission. The language immersion environment is the defining characteristic. While other programs may involve a language component, such as having an Elder speaker attend the program or providing language during circle time, it is *full immersion* that creates a language nest. As Johnston and Johnson (2002) defined in their useful article on language nests, a nest "offers intensive exposure to only one language, focuses on learning the language through meaningful content, and is aimed at the youngest members of the community, who are best equipped to learn the language" (p. 108). It is this full immersion that makes language nests a very challenging program to implement in B.C. due to the low numbers of fluent speakers. As described in the *Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages* (First Peoples' Cultural Council, 2014), almost 60% of all fluent speakers of First Nations languages are over the age of 65 and only one percent is under the age of 24. Most communities in the province have few, if any, younger members who speak the language fluently, so they are dependent on Elders for the majority of their language programming. As a result, all language nests in B.C. rely on Elders to come into the nest on a daily basis to speak the language with the children. Anyone familiar with B.C. communities will attest to the astounding energy, commitment, and determination of First Nations Elders for The

sharing their languages. Having Elders over 70 years of age contributing daily to early care and learning programs is a common occurrence throughout B.C.

An important caveat in any discussion of language nests is that they cannot be relied on as the sole mode of language transmission in the community. Ideally, the language nest will inspire parents and community members to learn and use the language for daily life. "Children alone should not have to shoulder the responsibility for revitalizing the language; they require active support to practice their language skills and to see the value of the language and its relevance in daily life within their own homes" (Chambers, 2014, p. 43).

History of Language Nest Model

The history of language nests in Indigenous communities dates back to the early 1980s. The model has gained international recognition through its implementation in the Māori and Hawaiian language revitalization efforts. The Māori have had the most success in revitalizing an Indigenous language, in part due to their Te Kōhanga Reo or 'language nests' program (McClutchie, 2007). This early childhood immersion program, which began in the early 1980s, exclusively uses the traditional language for interaction and instruction (Cooper et al., 2004; King, 2001). Te Kōhanga Reo has gained international recognition for its success and has been an inspiration to efforts both within Aotearoa-New Zealand (NZ) and across the globe (King, 2001; McClutchie, 2007).

After hearing about the language nests in Aotearoa-NZ when they first began in the early 1980s, a small group of Native Hawaiian educators and community members adopted the model in Hawai'i (Warner, 2001). The resulting successful 'Aha Pūnana Leo (Hawaiian language nest) programs have made Hawai'i a leader amongst endangered language groups with aims to revitalize their languages ('Aha Pūnana Leo, 2014; Wilson & Kamana, 2001). While they also now have K-12 immersion schools and university-level programs in the language, the 'Aha Pūnana Leo preschools remain the foundation of Hawaiian language revitalization (Wilson & Kamana, 2001).

Interestingly, before implementing their own immersion programming, both the Hawaiian and Māori language leaders studied the French immersion model in Canada (Benton, 1996; Warner, 2001). Canada has had successful French immersion programming for nearly 20 years, which has significantly contributed to the vitality of the French language in eastern Canada (Warner, 2001). Krashen (1984) states that Canadian French immersion models are some of the most successful programs in heritage language teaching. Yet today, Indigenous people now look to their peers in Aotearoa-NZ and Hawai'i to draw inspiration and gather ideas about how to revitalize language through immersion.

In Canada, the first language nest programs also began in the 1980s, both in the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk community and in the Secwepemc community of Adams Lake, B.C. Chambers (2014) noted, "The language nest movement in Canada appears to have been led by Dorothy Lazore and Kahtehrón:ni Iris Stacey as in the Mohawk community of Kahnawake in the early 1980s" (p. 23). Richards and Burnaby (2008) reported that more than 25 years later that program is still running and anecdotally (though not well documented) there are others of the same language group operating in the region. Much the same as the programs in Aotearoa-NZ and Hawai'i, these initiatives were inspired by the urgent need to pass the language on from the Elder speakers to the children. Some key defining characteristics for all of these early languages nests were the immersion environment, the culturally based program design and a high level of family and community involvement.

Making a Case for Language Nests

Early Childhood Language Learning

Early childhood is a critical time for the development of cognitive and social skills, as well as cultural and personal identity. A language nest is an excellent place to grow and nurture these aspects of a child's development. Language nests offer an effective means for language revitalization as well as an opportunity to raise children with the strong identity and cultural grounding that will support their future success. Māori language program leaders acknowledge that raising children with two languages ensures that children can be comfortable in two cultures, have good interpersonal and problem solving skills, be creative thinkers, and have a strong sense of belonging in their own community (Murphy, Tahau, & Moala, 2005). Studies from the Mi'kmaq immersion programs in Nova Scotia showed that students in the immersion programs also attained high academic achievement (Tompkins & Murray Orr, 2011).

Early Childhood Immersion Practices

Next to the most obvious and preferable option of raising children at home in the language, which is no longer possible for the majority of Indigenous families in Canada, immersion programs are so far proving to be the most effective method for creating proficient language speakers in a relatively short time period ('Aha Pūnana Leo, 2014; Chambers, 2014; King, 2001; Murphy et al., 2005). Of course, if parents or caregivers are willing to learn alongside their children and reinforce the language at home, this will only increase the chances for language growth and maintenance beyond the language nest program. Nevertheless, an extensive review of foreign language learning studies has shown that it is possible for children to achieve a high level of proficiency in a language that their parents do not use (Dixon et al., 2012).

The Government of the Northwest Territories in northern Canada, which provides support to early childhood immersion programs, reports the positive impact that language nests have had on heritage language acquisition in young children there, such as noticeable improvements in comprehension in the first year, and "overall gains [in Year 2] were substantial" (Hume, Rutman, & Hubberstey, 2006, p. 24). Communities in Eastern Canada have also noticed that children in immersion programs relate better to family and community members as they learn the positive facets of culture, traditional spirituality, and respect for teachers and elders in addition to the sounds and phrases of the language (Jacobs, 1998).

Current Programs

In her doctoral work, Chambers (2014) reported that in Canada "there are few such programs [as language nests] and the concept is not commonly known in Indigenous communities" (p. ii). In 2014, the First Peoples' Cultural Council (FPCC) identified 10 language nest programs in B.C. funded by their organization (FPCC, 2014). By contrast, the Australian government announced funding for five new language nests in various regions throughout the country (NSW Government, 2014). Given the geographical range and linguistic diversity in both Canada and Australia, these numbers fall far short of the ideal number of programs needed to support language revitalization.

Building on the earlier work of McIvor (2005), Chambers (2014) expressed that "today the situation has barely changed, and information on language nests remains largely inaccessible at

the community level" (p. 97). As awareness of the language nest model spreads, more and more communities are looking to develop their own programs; however, many more dedicated resources, information, and training opportunities are needed to support these efforts.

Practical Strategies and Essentials of a Language Nest

This section describes some of the essential components and characteristics of language nests as they are being implemented in B.C. The description not only provides a detailed understanding of what language nest programs look like, but may also be a useful guide for Indigenous communities wishing to undertake language nest programming. The strategies shared here are largely compiled and adapted from the authors' own direct interaction with successful language nest programs across the province, as well as their collective research and resources developed for language nests in B.C. over the past 10 years (McIvor, 2005, 2006; Parker, Gessner & Michel, 2014). The following section of the paper draws mainly from the original work of the authors, or with permission from their coauthors, and therefore is only cited when it is important to note a specific source.

Achieving Language Immersion for Young Children

The single most important characteristic of a language nest is the immersion environment, which, in the context of Western Canada, means that no English may be used within the nest. (Other parts of the world can equate this to any dominant language that has overtaken the original language of that territory.) This is the very definition of heritage language immersion programs – that *all* communication be carried out in the "target" language. For language nests in B.C., the no English rule is probably the most difficult to follow, as it is the lingua franca and typically the primary mode of communication in almost all areas of community daily life. Moreover, most communities rely on Elders to be the primary language speakers in the program. While many Elders are enthusiastic about passing on the language to young children, it can be challenging for some language nest programs to recruit and retain Elder participation, partly due to the advancing age and physical challenges faced by Elders, but also due to many Elders' negative experiences with their heritage language. It can take much courage for some Elders to take up the role of language teachers.

As the vast majority of children attending nests in B.C. are second language learners, staff and Elders need to be diligent to speak and respond to children in the target language, even if the children still rely heavily on the dominant language to respond. While it can be challenging to eliminate the dominant language from the nest, it is an essential aim for children to effectively acquire the language. The reason for this is that the children in these programs are absolutely immersed in English environments at home, and in all the public spaces they visit. This is the reason it is an immersion program rather than bilingual, as they are already receiving an abundance of exposure to the non-target language. Therefore, there are a variety of strategies that can be used to maintain the immersion environment.

When the children first enter the nest, they are generally not able to communicate in the language, so they will use the dominant language (unless they are preverbal) to express their needs. This is not a problem in itself but rather requires staff and Elders to be diligent in responding in the language, even if the children do not understand. Teaching the children some simple "survival phrases" and responses that they can use in the language, such as basic greetings, yes/no answers, and simple requests like "I am thirsty" or "I need to use the bathroom"

can mitigate this challenge. These memorized "survival phrases" will help the nest maintain the immersion environment while the children acquire more language.

Elders and staff must model the language for the children by speaking a lot. Even the most basic tasks and activities can be "narrated" to increase the quantity of language input for the children. (It is important to acknowledge, however, that this kind of constant narration is highly unusual in traditional Indigenous ways of being.) In addition to attention to quantity, quality of speech is also critically important. As much as possible, speakers use whole language for the children by speaking in full sentences and using complete grammar. Beyond quantity and quality of language, the frequency and number of hours needed to have a meaningful impact on a child developing language is important to understand. It is well documented that it requires thousands of hours of high quality, meaningful exposure in any language in order for a human to successfully acquire a language (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). We also know that the gaps between exposure cannot be too long or the gains may be lost and daily language input is best over sustained periods, such as the majority of the school year in the case of young children (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). The number of years it will take a child to become proficient in a language depends highly on a combination of these factors: quality and quantity of input; meaningful input; and sustained exposure over a critical period of time.

It is important to have patience with the children as they begin to acquire the language, allowing them to advance at their own pace and to make mistakes. Mistakes are a natural part of acquiring a language and are valuable to the learning process. In the same way that we celebrate an infant's first words, any and all language that the children produce should be celebrated. Children's mistakes (when they eventually begin using the language) can be gently corrected by "recasts" or modeling the correct language for the children, just as parents do when their children learn their first language.

Speakers and staff members should strive to maintain positive and active interaction with the children. The children will learn better if they are having fun and are engaged in the activities. A language nest is not meant to be a dull classroom but a place where the language can be lived in all its forms. It may be useful for teachers and staff to have multiple backup plans in case the children do not connect with a particular activity or if a change in weather prohibits the planned activity. The dominant language may begin to creep in as the children become bored, distracted, or disengaged from their play. Having several other options ready will help maintain the positive energy and keep the children focused.

The dominant language in all of its forms is ideally eliminated from the physical and well as the auditory nest space. This includes colorful posters written in the dominant language such as alphabets or weather charts that undermine the immersion goal. Since dominant language posters are so much more prolific and available, language nest programs often print words in the Indigenous language and paste over the dominant language on posters and signage, or simply create their own posters. These act as visual cues to help staff and Elders remember to stay in the language, and also aid non-fluent staff with their language learning. Using traditional names for staff and children is another way to remove the dominant language and increase the language in the nest. "It set[s] the tone for heritage language learning and remind[s] the children that when they walk through the doors into the language nest, it is time to speak the language" (McIvor, 2006, p. 22). If the children do not come into the nest with a traditional name, staff can ask Elders for assistance in how to get names for all the children in an appropriate way.

Finally, there may be times when the dominant language is needed to communicate to parents or staff that are not yet proficient in the heritage language. Nests often designate a space away from the children, such as a storage room, office, or outside the building, where the

dominant language can be used when necessary. (See McIvor, 2005 for one such example where language nest staff would step outside onto the front steps to speak to the parents at pick-up time to pass on important information). The dominant language is only used in those designated indoor spaces when the door is closed or outside when the children are not present. Some nests even post signs (in the heritage language) to remind everyone of the "No English[1]" rule. All of these strategies help maintain full immersion in the nest.

The Language Nest Team

A dedicated team of people is what makes a successful language nest possible. Raising children in an additional language, especially when there are few proficient speakers, is a challenging task that requires commitment, patience, and a strong, shared vision. Programs where only one or two staff members are committed to the goal of language transmission may struggle to maintain the immersion environment. Determined and unwavering leadership is also essential in developing and maintaining language nest programs. Participants in one study emphasized that it takes strong leadership to get language nest programs started in Indigenous communities (McIvor, 2005). In one community, initiation of the program was basically the will of one woman; in the other community, a strong group of determined parents founded the program (McIvor, 2005).

The language nest team is made up not only of Elder speakers but also teachers or other staff. Depending on the particular iteration of each program, parents, community members, and certified early childhood professionals may also be involved. Different members of the team handle administrative tasks as well as managing the daily operation of the nest and providing childcare. Due to the minority language status of many Indigenous language communities, it is essential that each staff member be committed to the immersion environment. Without this commitment, s/he becomes the "weakest link," allowing the dominant language to creep in to the nest. Each team member must be dedicated to the vision of the nest and commit to actively learning the language if s/he is not yet proficient. In ideal language nests the environment is supportive, inspiring, and encouraging to all parents and staff members in their language learning journeys. The administrator or program coordinator is critical to the functioning of a language nest program so that speakers can focus on speaking and teachers and parents can focus on learning the language and caring for the children. The administrator may not be a speaker, which is not a problem if s/he is not interacting with the children in the nest environment. Often the administrator gets the program running and also takes care of fundraising and financial accountability, advocacy, and promotion of the program within and outside of the community, and facilitates positive parent-nest relationships.

Parents' Involvement

Young children do not have the ability to walk up to the doors of a language nest and demand to have access to their ancestral language and cultural heritage. It is parent's belief in language revitalization and willingness to commit to language learning in their family that makes language nests successful. There is a saying, "It takes a family to save a language." This is could not be truer of language nests. Positive involvement and support from parents and primary caregivers

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[1] English is the dominant language of Western Canada but communities from other parts of Canada and the world could replace this phrase with the dominant language in their area.

of young children is essential to the success of language nest programs. In addition, if the goal of the nest is to raise a new generation of proficient speakers, then language learning must extend to the home.

For most language nest programs in B.C., the parents do not speak their heritage language. Regular language classes for the parents can help them reinforce their child's language development at home. Classes may be offered at the nest during afternoons or evenings and can focus on teaching parents how to communicate with their children in the language. Some successful nest programs have made these classes mandatory for parents to ensure the continuation of the children's learning at home.

Most nest program administrators agree that day-to-day parental involvement is ideal, as it supports a healthy, family-based environment. However, it may take some creativity to find ways to bring non-proficient parents into the program while maintaining the immersion environment. For example, the ʔuʔuʔaałuk Language Nest in a Nuu-chah-nulth community on Vancouver Island requires parents to participate in the nest program fulltime and commit to learning the language through immersion alongside their children. This results in a mutually supportive immersion environment where Elders provide the language input and support for the parents and children; the parents learn to care for their children in the language and contribute to the operation of the nest; and the children's language acquisition is reinforced by their interactions with their parents and the Elders (L. Rorick, personal communication, May 5, 2015).

Models of Language Nests: Licensing Issues

Although language immersion is the defining factor for a language nest, a nest program may be operated in a variety of different ways. Some programs have an informal "Granny's house" style of program, with a few children coming to someone's home to receive care in the language. Other programs are based on a preschool or Aboriginal Head Start model. In these cases, the programs are typically larger and operate in a more preschool-like space, and often require formal licensing.

The decision around how to design a nest program is influenced by available resources (including funding, space, and fluent speakers), but also by licensing requirements. Some childcare licensing regulations impose challenges to operating a language nest, while at the same time they may confer certain benefits. Several studies have attested to the challenges that licensing restrictions impose on language nest programs (B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2013; McIvor, 2005). One of the primary challenges presented by licensing regulations is the staffing requirement for certified early childhood practitioners to lead the program and be on site with the children fulltime. In many communities, this results in the nest hiring staff members who are not proficient and may not have a commitment to learning the language. Other licensing regulations limit the kinds of cultural activities and traditional foods that can be incorporated into the program. On the other hand, licensing can provide benefits in terms of credibility and peace-of-mind for the parents and community members and may help the nest access more funding opportunities for long-term program sustainability. Each language nest makes its own decision regarding licensing. Some programs work with their regional licensing officer to make the regulations work for the nest, whereas other programs set up their programs in a way to avoid licensing issues.

Community Support

A continuing challenge for many language nest programs is resistance from parents and community members based on negative inherited colonial misconceptions that Indigenous languages have no value and that language immersion will hold the children back. Many communities are still suffering the negative effects of the residential school experience and may be leery of, if not outright opposed to, programs that seek to promote and teach the language. Parents still harbor fears about their children's development based on myths perpetuated by some educators and health practitioners. These myths include the idea that learning two languages will delay children's language development or that children will not learn either language properly (Abbott, Caccavale, & Stewart, 2007; Hawai'i Council on Language Planning and Policy, n.d.) Some even believe that learning an Indigenous language will harm the children's chances at academic success. Parents may also be concerned if the nest does not look or operate like other preschool programs. Continued education is necessary to promote the well-researched benefits of bilingualism and early language learning. Language nest administrators and staff should be transparent with parents about the purpose of the nest and share the benefits of learning an Indigenous language. It may take some time before community members and parents are convinced of the value of the program, but open communication and well-informed staff may assist with mitigating their fears.

Conclusion

Language nests are an important tool for language revitalization. They are also a step towards the future ideal for all Indigenous communities, in which children will be cared for and raised in the language, as it was in the time before European contact. Making the language accessible to young children not only facilitates the development of new proficient speakers, but also helps raise healthy youth with strong identities, grounded in their culture and connected to their communities (Meek, 2010; Young, 2005). Language nests are a creative solution to the current situation of language loss by creating a place for children to learn the language in a meaningful context. The language was once passed down naturally from parents and grandparents in the home, in the community, and on the land. The language nest creates a space where this can again become a reality and where the language can regain its value as the language of daily use. Language nests are not the only answer, however. They are simply one piece in an overall movement towards language vitality. The language movement is supported, reinforced by, and contributes to concurrent forces in other Indigenous movements worldwide. The *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2008), for instance, has a section on the right to educate (including early childhood education) in our ancestral languages. In addition, movements such as Idle No More (http://www.idlenomore.ca/) reinforce the continued resurgence of Indigenous people fighting for their rights and for a more just and reconciliatory path moving forward. Lastly, the recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (2015) final report contained several recommendations pertaining to early childhood health and development, as well as calls to action regarding language maintenance and revival.

These movements, including the language revitalization movement, bring us full circle, returning to the ways of the past, back to speaking our languages to the babes in the cradle swings and on the streets of our communities in order to create a future. As one language nest administrator said, language nests themselves are not the answer. Rather, returning to natural language transmission in the home is the solution:

I was going to say that language immersion is the way to do it, but that's not true. The way to do it is to raise your children in the language, very naturally, from the time they are born you speak the language to them, you speak to them in the language, and let the outside world do the English. That's the truly natural way to do it. I would have done it that way if I'd had enough language to raise my children like that but I had to set it up artificially with hired Elders to come in to do that. Even if it was my own mother cause she wouldn't have done this without a certain title to it, or whatever. Immersion is not the best way to do it, do not write that. The best way to do is to go back to raising our children in the language.

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-Participant's view
(McIvor, 2005, p. 101)

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Acknowledgement

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