

Integrity of Our Voice: Indigenous Knowledge, Language and Culture

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SUMMARY

Let me tell you a little about myself. I am a tribal leader, the first woman tribal leader amongst Native Americans in North America. Much of my work has been focused on education, the rights of women and families.

As indicated by the United Nations, there are 307 million indigenous people in 90 countries around the world and they represent 5% of the world's population. Although there are 4,000 languages spoken by indigenous people, 90% of these could disappear by the next century.

Indigenous people face discrimination and exclusion from political power. Yet given the problems we are facing with climate change and the need for biodiversity, the knowledge indigenous people possess is invaluable.

I come from Arizona and my people live in areas in two countries, in New Mexico and Arizona.

Storytelling is part of our oral traditions. Altogether there are 300 federally-recognized tribes in the United States and 21 of them are in Arizona. We have government-to-government relations as we are sovereign nations.

We are known by many names: Indians, Red Indians, Native Americans and so forth.

I am trilingual and went to a segregated school. Then in the 1960s, things changed in the country. There was a drive for civil rights and this gave birth to bilingual education. It is important for children to learn in their mother tongue and learn a second language later.

In my case, it was different. I had to learn in English. It was sink or swim. You had to learn English or not do well. I decided to swim. I learned English and Spanish.

What are the lessons learnt from the Native American experience?

There was an effort made by the American government to assimilate. They thought that if they could get rid of the language, religion and culture they could get rid of the Indian "problem". Many people suffered. But we are still here and we are getting stronger. There is now trilingual education.

What we found was the better way to teach was to teach students to be teachers. This way they were not coming from mainstream culture. We had to relearn and re-teach.

We launched our own movement and set up our own colleges and universities to validate our traditional knowhow, to recapture and revitalize, and to combat the poor policy making by the American government. We had to develop strong leadership, in which there was transformative nation building. We have done this.

In the Northern Arizona University there are a lot of Native Americans and they wanted more on nation building, how to have good governance, strong governance. We built a new degree programme. All this involved the university officials going out for consultations with the community, to find out how to do it and why it was important. If we develop better citizens, better native citizens, this will help in sustainable development.

We are in North America but we are “developing nations”. Indians are still developing in order for us to become decision makers.

I was recruited for the development curriculum. I was the first woman to lead a tribe. This was not easy, most difficult but a rewarding job. Members of our faculty include elders. There are no Ph.Ds here. We are learning to be strong. We are teaching maths and science our own way.

The Navaho tribe have found all this very useful, the history, the philosophy, the language.

The main message is that we need to learn from indigenous people.

DISCUSSION

Question: What are your languages of instruction? Are they bilingual or trilingual?

Answer: Arizona faces a difficult situation. There is a strong movement for English only. This is a conservative state. People don't want to pay higher taxes to pay for education. Spending on education is low.

With regard to native language in Arizona, because American Indians have sovereignty, they are on sovereign land and teach native language. If students go to a public school, then there may be impact. They will probably study in a transitional program.

How do we do this? We are fortunate in that we have tribal schools in the mother tongue. We have many adult education programs and family literacy programs. There is strong language revitalization.

It is up to us native people to re-teach language to our children.

We are global citizens. With indigenous people in Africa and Asia, global citizens have commonalities.

Question: is there a need for more research or is there too much research already?

In the US, we don't need any more research. I think what was happening in the past was the research was done by non-natives. That has changed and we now have Native Americans doing research. We are now clear what we need in terms of literacy and linguistic goals.

Research methodologies should be appropriate. There is strong advocacy amongst indigenous scholars.

Question: Do you use modern technology for research and collection of data?

Answer: Technology is very important if used well. We have a new application for Navaho people from a major software company. Many people are now getting involved using new technology, so we have links with Alaska, New Mexico and can share online.

We are teaching science and maths. We can use technology to enhance the teaching of science. This helps students and we can have a native science interface with western science.