A Review of the Effects of Revitalization Efforts on Alaska Native Communities

Sarah Carlson

This article is a review of previous research on language revitalization efforts in Alaska Native communities as well as other Indigenous communities across North America. While some of the research does not explicitly address language revitalization, the authors' contributions offer a great deal of value to the conversation. Despite these contributions, much work remains to be done in Alaska Native communities. Thus, ideas for further research are also suggested in order to deepen understanding of Alaska Native communities' efforts for language revitalization.

In 2010, the future of the Eyak community in Cordova, Alaska, changed forever (Jeantet, 2012). A young man by the name of Guillaume LeDuey of Le Havre, France, visited Cordova and brought hope of revival for the Eyak culture. He was one of only two fluent non-native Eyak speakers in the world, the other being Michael Krauss, a linguist who had dedicated much of his life to revitalizing Alaska Native languages. Before LeDuey's visit, descendants of the Eyak people had very little hope for the survival of their heritage. The last native speaker, Marie Smith Jones, had passed away in 2008, increasing the urgency to preserve the Eyak language and culture (Krauss, 2006; Jeantet, 2012). LeDuey assisted Krauss in digitizing previous work on the Eyak language. He aided in making dictionaries and grammars accessible to the public to allow younger generations to begin learning the language, thus reviving the heritage that many thought was unsalvageable (Jeantet, 2012). LeDuey's story captures some of the potential effects of implementing revitalization projects in Indigenous communities. However, to explore other possible effects, this article discusses the available literature concerning revitalization efforts in Alaska Native communities.

Following a brief description of the definitions of language revitalization and endangered languages, this article will be divided into three main parts. The first section will cover the effects of revitalization on Indigenous community members as individuals and will touch mainly on the issues concerning self-identity rooted in belonging to an Indigenous heritage. The second section will address revitalization efforts in the context of education, emphasizing specifically the effects observed in Alaska Native school systems. Finally, the third section will discuss how revitalization efforts affect Indigenous communities as a whole. While most studies focus on either individuals or a whole community, this article will discuss both of these concepts separately. An exploration of the strengths, limitations, and gaps of the perspectives discussed will follow each section.

## Defining Language Revitalization and Endangered Languages

The Cambridge Handbook of Endangered Languages defines language revitalization as a community initiative to expand the use of an endangered language to ensure that it continues to be passed down to new generations (Austin & Sallabank, 2011). Due to the large number of ways an endangered language can be defined, Austin and Sallabank (2011) further clarify that an endangered language is one that may cease to exist after a few more generations, because it is no longer being learned as a first language. This definition agrees with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Language Vitality and Endangerment Framework, which states that the lowest level of endangerment corresponds to a language which is no longer being learned by children (Moseley, 2010). Today, about 7,000 languages exist in the world, though linguists believe that this number will drop by about half within a few generations, making language revitalization a priority in order to maintain linguistic heritage (Austin & Sallabank, 2011). This priority is especially relevant in Alaska ("Endangered Languages Project"), as can be seen in the high levels of endangerment of several Alaska Native languages (see Figure 1).

Effects of Language Revitalization on Individual Community Members

For many Indigenous community members, a sense of belonging within their Native heritage has been threatened due to intermarriage with outsiders and loss of their mother tongue (Sprott, 1994). These influences are the most common causes of individual assimilation to a "standardized" culture, as Sprott (1994) explains. She further notes that this causes many members of Alaska Native communities to be uncertain of the survival of their language and culture. But as McCarty et al. (2006) indicate, language

Figure 1

Speakers of Alaska's Most Endangered Languages
(Adapted from "Endangered Languages Project")
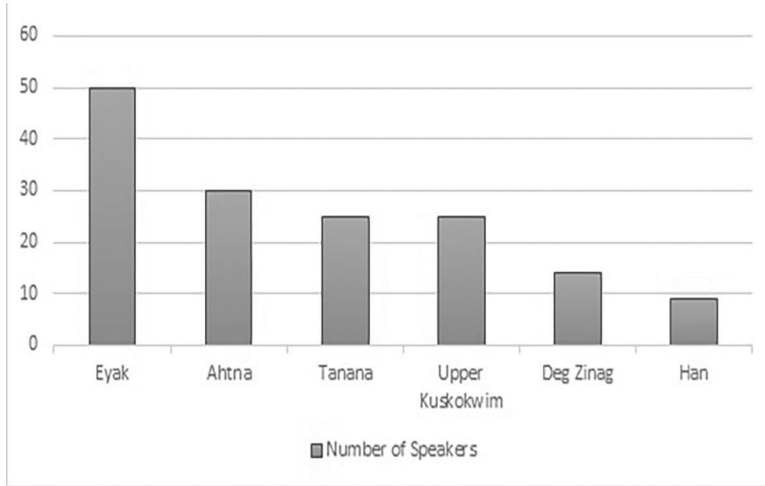
revitalization serves not only to reawaken an endangered language, but also to "reassert linguistic self-determination as an inherent human right" (p. 44). In other words, restoring an individual's identity as a member of an Indigenous community through language revitalization is a priority. As part of their study, McCarty et al. interviewed several youth of the Navajo community and found that many felt a connection between their Native language and their identity. One young man stated that being spoken to in his Native language helps him view Navajo as "integral to his identity and, moreover, as central to his ability to bring about positive change in this colonial world" (McCarty et al, 2006, p. 36).

Revitalization and Self-identity as an Indigenous Community Member

Lara-Cooper and Cooper (2016) observed the journey of Annabelle, an Indigenous schoolgirl from Northern California, as she navigated the struggles of maintaining a positive self-image regarding her heritage. The authors explain that the way people perceive themselves as an adult is largely

dependent on how they were viewed by their peers as a child. Annabelle's peers reportedly perceived her heritage as savage and uncivilized, which coincides with the stereotype for many Native American cultures. Her experiences show that such stereotyping increases psychological distress among Indigenous children, which causes them to feel pressured to abandon their heritage and assimilate with their peers (Sprott, 1994). Lara-Cooper and Cooper (2016) claim that helping individuals from dominant communities understand the heritage of Indigenous people would lead to a decrease in stereotyping and an increase in desire to preserve Indigenous cultures.

Another influence that pressures individuals to give up their heritage comes from common misunderstandings about the status of the language (Dementi-Leonard & Gilmore, 1999). Many members of Indigenous communities feel that their language is used so little because the younger generations opt to learn English as a matter of convenience, and their motivation to preserve their Native tongue decreases (Reyhner & Hurtado, 2008). They do not see any potential for the language surviving, so they choose to assimilate linguistically (Dementi-Leonard & Gilmore, 1999). This choice is a result of limitations in a community's resources to preserve their culture and language. With the help of the Tanana Chiefs Conference (a tribal consortium of forty-two Alaskan villages), Dementi-Leonard and Gilmore (1999) conducted a revitalization project for twenty Alaska Native communities in order to correct this detrimental misconception of the languages' potential. They determined that the project strengthened the overall sense of identity of individuals, as well as the unity of the communities as a whole.

Strengths, Limitations, and Gaps of Research on the Effects of Revitalization on Individual Community Members

The issue of restoring and maintaining a sense of identity in individual community members is generally well addressed, especially in the context of the younger generations

(Lara-Cooper & Cooper, 2016). Although Lara-Cooper and Cooper (2016) claim that their research can be applied to other diverse groups, their study focused primarily on one individual belonging to the younger age group, which created a limitation for their study. They do not provide any evidence that other age groups would respond to stereotyping in the same manner as children and youth do. This lack of consideration of all age groups in the community creates a gap in the context of preserving a person's Indigenous identity.

Sprott's (1994) study effectively shows how outside causes, including marriage to outsiders and language loss, push Indigenous people to assimilate to a more dominant culture. However, she mentions that, despite external influences, there is no trend pertaining to whether a person identifies with any of their cultural affiliations. She explains that, while it is necessary to ethnic identity, knowing one's ancestry does not guarantee meaningful perception of self. This observation provides an opportunity to research other reasons people may choose to maintain, obscure, or subconsciously neglect their Native identity. Future research could include how revitalization affects individuals in Alaska Native communities specifically, since most existing studies focus on Indigenous community members in general.

Effects of Revitalization in Alaska Native Education Systems

Problems in Alaska Native Education Systems

Cultural assimilation has been identified as one of the main issues arising from the education systems in Alaska Native communities (Barnhardt, 2001). Assimilation stems from implementing systems that force the Indigenous community to conform to the norms of the more standardized surrounding communities (Reyhner & Hurtado, 2008; Barnhardt, 2001). Barnhardt (2001) expands on this as she touches on several national policies regarding education for Native American students. She argues that these policies

have been effective in improving the quality of education for Native American communities but are lacking in cultural consideration for Alaska Natives. This lack of awareness creates the impression that these policies are attempting to replace Alaska Native heritage, rather than maintain it (Barnhardt, 2001).

Another inadequacy in education systems is the students' and teachers' limited understanding of the Indigenous cultures (Waziyatawin, 2004), which is demonstrated in a story recounted by Sprott (1994). She describes a situation involving a young Alaska Native child's reaction to an Easter egg hunt in a school consisting mainly of non-Indigenous children. Differences in cultural norms created a social barrier between this child and the other students when she observed the children running sporadically to find the eggs. Sprott explains that in this child's Native culture, the norms in a similarly competitive situation require a person to stand still and let others pass by them, rather than pushing them out of the way without legitimate reason. This intercultural misunderstanding resulted in the child feeling inferior to her classmates, as she was unsuccessful in gathering any of the Easter eggs.

Benefits of Embracing Native Heritage in Education

Waziyatawin (2004) points out that some educational programs encourage students to embrace their Native heritage, rather than conceal or neglect it. The effectiveness of these programs was analyzed by Morcom and Roy (2017) in their study of Indigenous language immersion programs for kindergarteners. They concluded that, because mainstream education systems can lower Indigenous students' self-esteem, incorporating the Native language into the children's learning was advantageous for the students. According to Reyhner and Hurtado (2008), if the students do not see how what they are learning will benefit them in the future, prototypical education systems can cause a lack of motivation to learn. They explain that many Indigenous communities value learning for the ways it can be used to contribute

to their society. This means that if students are being taught concepts without an explanation of how it pertains to them culturally, it is difficult to instill in them a desire to participate actively and learn in school. To illustrate this point, these researchers further reported that education systems that teach English and other academic subjects in a way that complements the learning of the Native language and culture have proven to be successful in improving the academic performance of Indigenous students.

Strengths, Limitations, and Gaps of Research on the Effects of Revitalization in Alaska Native Education Systems

The benefits of implementing Native language learning in education systems are well covered by the studies referenced above (Waziyatawin, 2004; Reyhner & Hurtado, 2008; Morcom & Roy, 2017). Problems stemming from a lack of cultural awareness in schools are also outlined, which gives a clear picture of the reasons why it is important to keep each Indigenous community in mind when creating an education system (Sprott, 1994; Barnhardt, 2001). However, any downsides to implementing this type of education are not discussed. This allows for the opportunity to do more research to explore the possibility of disadvantages that may come from this level of accommodation, such as feasibility, cost, or amount of community support.

The studies discussed are also mainly focused on children and youth, which limits the immediate application of the findings to a relatively small portion of the community (Sprott, 1994; Waziayatawin, 2004; Morcom & Roy, 2017). Future research could include exploring how teachers and other community members are affected by the implementation of culturally oriented education systems, since students were the main subjects of previous research.

Effects of Revitalization in Alaska Native Communities

As mentioned in the section relating to individuals, Dementi-Leonard and Gilmore (1999) concluded that the sense of identity in Alaska Native individuals and

communities had increased because of their revitalization efforts. Waziyatawin (2004) gives perspective to this finding by exploring how culture and language revitalization help reverse the negative effects of colonization. Concerning these revitalization efforts, she asserts the following: "The more knowledge that stays in the community, the more Indigenous or community-specific knowledge becomes an evolving, strengthening community process" (Waziyatawin, 2004, p. 367). She explains that the imposition of Western lifestyles lowered the quality of health in Indigenous communities as well as their accompanying ecosystems. Because of the destruction to their ecosystems, Indigenous communities struggled to adapt to new ways of acquiring needed supplies, which resulted in a reduction of self-sufficiency. Waziayatawin (2004) admits, however, that Western education has brought some benefits to Indigenous communities, such as learning the skills necessary to improve their quality of living. Although she remarks that these benefits would not have been possible without Western education, she claims that the way it has been implemented in certain schools has had detrimental effects on the children's sense of identity, which is felt by many members of the community.

Sociopolitical Effects of Revitalization

There are two dimensions of the culture and language revitalization process: sociopolitical and cultural (Dementi-Leonard & Gilmore, 1999; McCarty et al., 2006; Kroskrity, 2011). The first, discussed by Dementi-Leonard and Gilmore (1999), led to a project that sought to break the unproductive habit of labeling the Native language as "dying" or "moribund" in order to increase the community's motivation to preserve their culture. Their efforts led to the establishment of several successful organizations. These organizations encouraged community members to participate in cultural events, such as conferences, and improved the quality of Native language education in Alaskan school systems.

Kroskrity (2011) mentions an issue affecting the sociopolitical goals of revitalization projects in his study of linguistic racism. He explains that endangered languages are often

subconsciously seen as universal property. This means that, on occasion, people are inclined to hastily take initiative to preserve a language without the consent of the community. Kroskrity's (2011) research also explains that because this misconception is difficult to sort out, some members of a community will forcefully take control of the linguistic situation themselves. This results in a revitalization project that only serves to manipulate the community and keep the project director in control. Kroskrity (2011) concludes that great care should be taken when planning a revitalization project, since there could be irreparable damages if the right protocols are not taken.

Cultural Effects of Revitalization

The second context of reasoning for revitalization efforts is cultural heritage preservation (McCarty et al., 2006). In their study of Native language loss and revitalization, McCarty et al. (2006) point out that when even one language is lost, the world loses an enormous amount of perspective and knowledge. They add that this knowledge often includes the only means for sacred communication and traditions in a community. This point of view motivated Krauss (2006) in his efforts to preserve the Native Eyak culture to its fullest potential. Many tangible results have come from Krauss's (2006) work, including dictionaries, books, corpora, audio recordings, videos, and more. He believes that his work will allow future generations to study the Eyak language and preserve their heritage.

As Ainsworth (1997) reported, another advantage to preserving a community's heritage is that studying the narratives and traditions of a culture can help a person understand the moral values of that community. She discussed this advantage as she analyzed a compilation of Eyak narratives written by Anna Nelson Harry, a respected member of the Eyak community. She further explains that Mrs. Harry wrote the narratives in such a way that they reflected compelling moral issues, making her writings a gold mine for extracting the moral code of the Eyak community. Sprott (1994) adds even more perspective by explaining that

understanding the moral values of one's heritage increases the desire for Native language usage and self-identification as a member of the community.

Strengths, Limitations, and Gaps of Research on the Effects of Revitalization in Alaska Native Communities

These studies offer more perspective on the reasons for implementing revitalization projects in Indigenous communities (McCarty et al., 2006). The research is thorough as far as the benefits of revitalization projects are concerned. However, there is still much to be researched and discussed regarding the inherent problems in setting revitalization efforts in motion. The question of whether the benefits outweigh the issues that accompany these projects also ought to be studied. Only one article discussed above adequately addresses the negative aspects of revitalization efforts, which indicates a bias toward the implementation of revitalization projects. More research should be done on the negative effects of revitalization in order to understand the holistic nature of similar projects. Additionally, research in the context of sociopolitical issues focuses mainly on Native American communities outside of Alaska (Kroskrity, 2011). This gap could be filled by future research on the sociopolitical dynamics within specific Alaska Native communities, as there could be some differences from the research done on Native American communities due to the uniqueness of Alaska Native cultures (Sprott, 1994).

Overview of Future Research on the Effects of Revitalization

Research on the effects of revitalization has great potential for expansion, specifically in the context of older community members. A study could be done observing how implementing revitalization efforts in a community affects the attitudes of older generations, as well as what some of the drawbacks would be from such efforts. There is also a need to explore how revitalization affects Alaska Native communities, as

opposed to other Native American groups. The studies mentioned in this review are qualitative in nature, but very rarely do they make use of quantitative methods. The suggested research could be done qualitatively and quantitatively; however, a quantitative study might be more effective for observing the trends of the effects of revitalization in these various contexts. This could lead to a higher level of precision when determining how to improve revitalization efforts for Alaska Native communities.

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