

Summary Report

Atlantic Indigenous Mentorship Network Kausattumi Grants Program, 2021-2023

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Nestuín Wiaqi - Elmi'knik Kekina 'muemkewey: A community-engaged research approach for accessing linguistic resurgence, revitalization, and reclamation efforts

Description of Research

Objectives: The intention was to study and construct linguistic teaching tools in the community through community-engaged research approaches. In my role as a mother and granddaughter, I am learning by experience and doing, receiving mentoring and guidance from Elders to recover, reclaim, and maintain my mother tongue, the Mi'kmaq language through storywork (Archibald, 2008). Much work needs to be done to explore shifting metaphors of 'linguistic genocide' to 'culture and language resurgence, revitalization, and reclamation', including answering, 'Why do I not have access to Mi'kmaq language in my own territory of Mi'kma'ki?'

I've spent time examining the impacts of language loss in community to connect to language resurgence and maintenance to the mental health and well-being of Indigenous families. While this objective was not fully achieved due to a pause in the program, through weekly participation in community parental support programs 'Baby and Me' hosted by the Indian Brook Health Nurse, I was able to partially meet the following:

- Understanding connection between language restoration and healthy communities withing families; and
- Connecting the need for Mi'kmaq language acquisition in supporting mental health by working directly with the community health center. This objective was achieved through meetings with community partnerships

My support at 'Baby and Me' included integrating Mi'kmaq language activities. We translated the nursery *head, shoulders, knees, and toes* and sang songs in Mi'kmaq including *itsy bitsy spider*.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology: Absolon (2011) uses the terminology 're-search' in lieu of 'research' to capture the process of re-writing, re-storying, and re-shaping of Indigenous methodology guided by Indigenous epistemology and worldviews. The objective of this re-search will draw on Mi'kmaw epistemologies (ways of being, knowing, doing) Etuaptmumk, the philosophy of Netukulimk (Bartlett et al, 2013; Marshall and Bartlett, 2018; Wright et al., 2019), storywork (Archibald, 2008), second language acquisition (McIvor, 2020; Ratima and May, 2011), linguistic genocide (Perley, 2011; Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar, 2010), language resurgence, revitalization and reclamation (Alfred, 2005; Baldwin, 2003; Corntassel, 2012;

Henne-Ochoa et al., 2020; Hermes et al., 2012; Hinton, 2011; Julian and Denny, 2016; Little Bear, 2000; McCarty, 2020; Simpson, 2011), decolonization (Battiste, 2013; Kovach, 2009; Simpson, 2014; Smith, 2012), and Elders' knowledge. My conceptual framework reflects experiences of kinship, reflexivity, and indigenizing parental techniques in support of cultural and language efforts.

The core question that drives this re-search is: *What current programs exist that attempt resurgence, revitalization, and reclamation for Mi'kmaq culture and language for parents, infants, and pre-primary toddlers?*

The secondary questions guiding this re-search are:

1. What existing actions are parents contributing towards linguistic survival?
2. What does success look like for a Mi'kmaq toddler second language acquisition language and how might it be sustained in a way that honours reconciliation, relationships, and reciprocity?
3. What are the barriers to language learning and interaction for parents?

Research Setting, Context. Relationship to Research and Timeline: Within the literature of second language acquisition, my proposed community-engaged re-search project aligned with the ethical pillars of Indigenous research which are: accountability, relationality, respect, reciprocity, dissemination, and responsibility (Kovach, 2009; Perley, 2011; Wilson, 2008). While honoring these pillars, I recruited participants from a family support group called 'Baby and Me and Tiny Tots' through Indigenous recruitment strategies such as working through Mi'kmaw Community Health. Recruitment took place in person and by word of mouth through personal and community networks. This re-search included parents of infants, pre-primary toddlers, Elders', and language speakers through a critical community-engaged research project. This re-search included linguistic elements such as storytelling and oral traditions in exchange for documented history. My relationship as a community member and participant of community intellectual property rights required partnership with the Mi'kmaw community health center and health center employees.

The timeline of this re-search began in 2021 and extended into 2023. After working with 17 families to construct linguistic teaching tools, we (myself and my community partner) begun setting up follow deliverables: weekly online language and learning sessions and gathering oral stories from participants in small focus groups for data collection (talking circles, testimonies

and jamboard). This timeline included the completion of my portfolio defense and ethics submission. However, my community partner was unavailable to assist in these deliverables for six months for unforeseen health reasons that are still ongoing.

Research Outcomes

The anticipated outcomes and deliverables included:

- Setting up weekly Mi'kmaq language sessions with the 17 families, each family receiving a Mi'kmaw lexicon for their participation,
- To have a bi-weekly zoom session or in person to play games in Mi'kmaq (COVID related),
- Hosting a talking circle at the end of 10 weeks to reflect on sessions, games, and what each family learnt,
- I had hoped to set up a survey with my community partners to assess family's wellness and mental health around Mi'kmaq language speaking and learning; this would include answering what are barriers to language learning and what existing actions are families doing for language survival,
- To end this research project, the intent was to collaborate a community framework for Mi'kmaq revitalization, reclamation, and resurgence for families with babies and toddlers.

Knowledge Sharing

- Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey networking meeting in Eskasoni for Language Educators. June 11, 2022. This meeting included sharing Mi'kmaq resources and materials.

Completed Project Deliverables

- Julian-Rikihana, A. 2022. *Understanding together, healing together: Mi'kmaq language revitalization as a tool for community mental health and well-being*. Presentation presented at the National Gathering of Graduate Students (NGGS), Dakota Dunes, SK.
- Julian-Rikihana, A. 2023. Nestiun Wiapi – Understanding together: a community-engaged research approach for accessing linguistic and cultural resurgence, revitalization, and reclamation efforts for early childhood education. Canadian Association of the Study in Indigenous Education (CASIE): York University, Toronto, ON.
- Julian-Rikihana, A. 2023. *Traditional healing practices through Mi'kmaq language learning with elders for future generations*. National Gathering of Graduate Studies (NGGS), Membertou, Cape Breton, NS.

Forthcoming Project Deliverables

- Canadian Association of the Study in Indigenous Education (CASIE), McGill University, Montreal, QC. June 2024.

Activities Outside of Your Research

- Atlantic Indigenous Mentorship Network Book Club 2023: Aimée Craft (Ed), Paulette Regan (Author), (2020) *Pathways of Reconciliation: Indigenous and Settler Approaches to Implementing the TRC's Calls to Action*
- Atlantic Indigenous Mentorship Network Book Club 2022: Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) *Braiding Sweetgrass, Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*
- Atlantic Indigenous Mentorship Graduate Meetings 2021-2023 - Ongoing

Future Plans

During this project, my anticipated outcome was to foster more families/parents/guardians to speak Mi'kmaw confidently with their children and within their language nests (Hinton, 2013). This continues to be my plan for community-based engagement ongoing participating using the Mi'kmaw language within the community health program 'Baby and Me'.

As a mother, the biggest challenge I've experienced in this re-search is coping with my own intergenerational language learning trauma. The influence of English is a huge part of this trauma along with the expectation I can easily become proficient in Mi'kmaw. My future plans are continuing to find ways to address this trauma and documenting it academically. This will include addressing the years and decades of same for not being fluent or fully being able to communicate with my grandparents before they pass away. Therefore, this re-search shows that I am facing my own obstacles of mental health and well-being in this journey to speak Mi'kmaw with my family and documenting this process within my doctoral dissertation. My future long-term outcome is a community-engaged re-search teaching tool for reclaiming, recovering, and maintaining Mi'kmaq language practices for parents, infants, and pre-primary toddlers. My grandmother says, if we don't use our culture, we lose half our language, all the words that we use are connected to the land, our cultural practices, and traditions (Julian, 2016). The plan is to continue ongoing language work with my grandmother while we still have her and to begin speaking Mi'kmaw with my children.

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