



ILI Study logo by Mike Marin (Diné/Laguna Pueblo/Washoe)

What can a study of Indigenous-language schooling teach us to improve educational practices for Native American learners?

Study Purpose

Native American students face enduring academic disparities, which research links to colonial schooling and the absence of culturally responsive pedagogies. Indigenous-language immersion (ILI) is a holistic approach designed to promote language and culture revitalization, academic success, and the health and wellbeing of Native children, families, and communities. No comprehensive database exists on the distinctive features, learning opportunities, or effects of these programs. This study asked how, when, and why ILI is beneficial and how ILI compares with non-ILI approaches. Answering these questions will significantly advance our understanding of the factors that contribute to improved educational practices and outcomes for underserved Native American students.

Key Findings

- Hundreds of Indigenous-language education programs exist across the U.S., serving infants to adults in and outside of schools. There is great variation, reflecting diverse community needs, resources, and goals.
- ILI students show steady growth in their Indigenous-language oral proficiency, grammar, vocabulary, and listening comprehension.
- At the same time, ILI students perform on par with or better than peers in English-medium programs on assessments of math, English, and Indigenous-language development.
- Case studies of 8 ILI Partner Schools highlight a common innovative practice: a relational pedagogy that fosters positive connections between learners, academic content, their community, and the natural world. This promotes holistic academic wellbeing.



Kindergartner practicing writing the Hakalama, the Hawaiian syllabary (photograph by Dr. Kauanoë Kamanā, courtesy of Ke Kula Nāwahioikalani'ōpu'u Laboratory School, Kea'au, HI)



“My hope for my children – our children – is learning the Native language, but also the culture, and for them to know who they are. ... The families, the parents, are very hands-on. ... My children are thriving here, and also our family.”

– Parent interview, 5/19

Research Team

Principal Investigators: Drs. Teresa L. McCarty (UCLA), Tiffany S. Lee (Diné/Lakota, University of New Mexico), Sheilah E. Nicholas (Hopi, University of Arizona), and Michael Seltzer (UCLA).

Email contacts: Teresa.McCarty@ucla.edu; tslee@unm.edu; sheilahn@arizona.edu; mseltzer@ucla.edu

Co-researchers: Dr. Kyle Halle-Erby, Dr. Thomas Jacobson, Dr. James McKenzie (Diné), and Leandro Holanda

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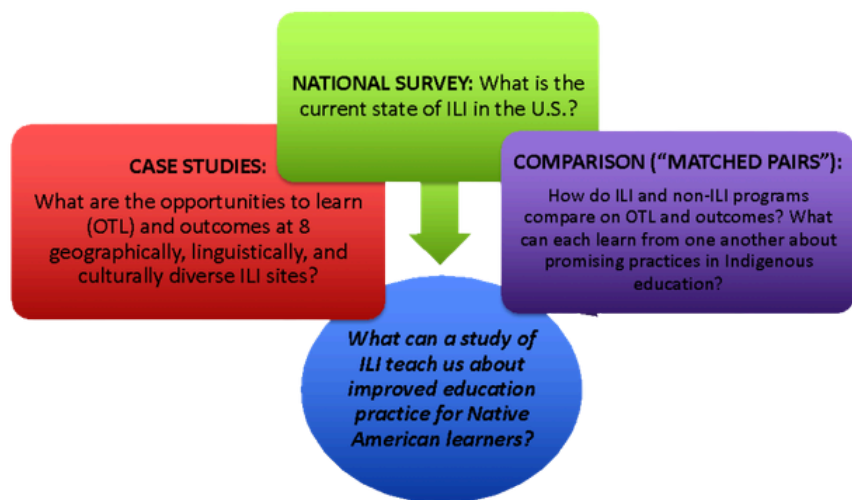


Photograph by Dr. Kauanoë Kamanā, courtesy of Ke Kula Nāwahioikalani'ōpu'u Iki Laboratory Public Charter School, Kea'au, HI

Study Design

The study used a rigorous multi-method design. Three research questions (RQs) guided the study:

- **RQ1.** What is the current state of ILI schooling in the U.S.?
- **RQ2.** How is ILI implemented in diverse regional, linguistic, and cultural contexts?
- **RQ3.** How do opportunities to learn (OTL) and outcomes in ILI compare with those for comparable students in carefully matched nonimmersion schools?



To answer these questions, the study undertook a US-wide survey of Indigenous language programs (RQ1); in-depth case studies of 8 diverse ILI schools (RQ2); and a matched-pair analysis of students' performance on locally administered assessments of English language arts (ELA), mathematics, and IL development (RQ3).



ILI nature walks teach science, social studies, math, language, culture, and earth care. (ILI Study photograph).

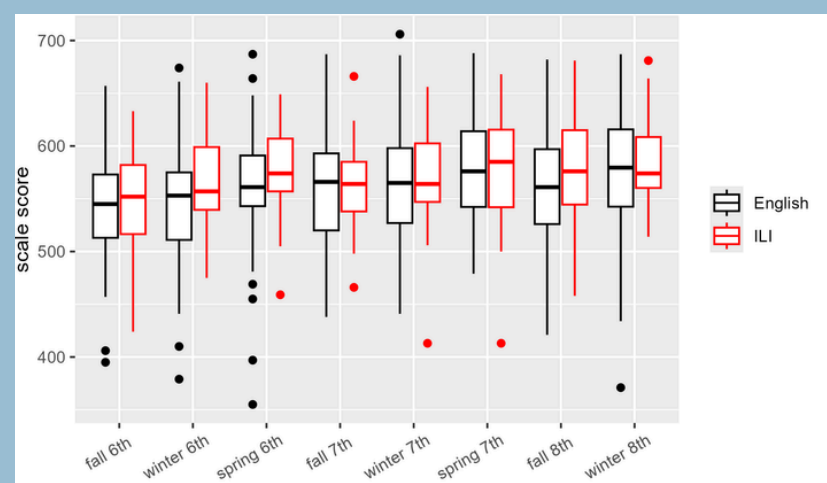
Recommendations

ILI programs enhance academic attainment and language revitalization, fostering bilingual, biliterate, culturally empowered students. Key recommendations from the eight-year study include:

- **Indigenous Stakeholders:** Embrace educating children in your language and values; partner with ILI schools and organizations for support.
- **Education Practitioners:** Learn from ILI schooling – its relational pedagogy for fostering children's bi/multilingualism, cultural knowledge, and wellbeing can benefit *all* learners.
- **Policymakers:** Eliminate barriers to Indigenous-language program development, ensure priority funding for Indigenous parents' choice of ILI, and uphold Indigenous language, culture, and educational self-determination.

Does ILI promote students' English language arts/literacy development?

In addition to significant learning in their Indigenous languages, students in ILI Partner Schools demonstrate high attendance, graduation, and college enrollment rates, scoring as well as or better on English standardized tests compared to Indigenous peers in English-medium programs. On 6th, 7th, and 8th grade ELA assessments, ILI students consistently achieve median scores equal to or higher than those of English-medium students for both girls and boys. We observe similar patterns on ELA and math standardized tests at other ILI Partner Schools serving different grade levels.



6th, 7th, and 8th Grade English Language Arts Assessment Scores Among ILI and English-Medium Students of Indigenous Heritage

Does ILI promote students' IL development and revitalization?

ILI students make remarkable strides in their Indigenous language (IL) development. Over time, we see steady growth in their IL oral proficiency, grammar, vocabulary, and listening comprehension. In some cases ILI students' proficiency approaches that of a first-language speaker capable of speaking in paragraph-length discourse on academic subjects, expressing their point of view, and engaging in humorous wordplay.

Additional Information About This Project

Lee, T.S., McCarty, T.L., Halle-Erby, K., Jacobson, T., Seltzer, M., McKenzie, J., & Nicholas, S.E. (2023). Indigenous language immersion schools: The link to sustainable and healthy Indigenous community Futures. *Wicazo Sa Review*, 38(1 & 2), 59-72.

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