

Language, Culture, and the Education of Indigenous Children: An Interview with Mary Eunice Romero-Little

Drawing on decades of research expertise, community knowledge, and professional experiences as an educator, Dr. Mary Eunice Romero-Little provides insights into pivotal language issues that impact the literacy development and education of young Indigenous children.

This issue of *Language Arts* features a conversation with Dr. Mary Eunice Romero-Little about Native American children, linguistic diversity, and education. Dr. Romero-Little is an associate professor of Indigenous language education and applied linguistics within American Indian Studies at



Arizona State University. She actively works with local and global communities for the revitalization of Native languages; for example, over the last two decades, she has collaborated with Pueblo communities in New Mexico on topics related to native language planning and revitalization. Her work has been published in venues such as *Best Practices in ELL Education* (Li & Edwards, 2010), the *Journal of American Indian Education*, and *TESOL Quarterly*. These publications link research, practice, and community engagement with Indigenous children and their communities, and deepen our understanding of identity and child development from an Indigenous perspective. In recognition of her research, Dr. Romero-Little received the 2010 Bobby Wright Award for Early Career Contributions to Indigenous Education from the American Educational Research Association. In addition, the

National Maori Language Institute in New Zealand awarded Dr. Romero-Little the International Centre for Language Revitalization Fellowship. As a result of her extensive commitments to research, service, and teaching, Dr. Romero-Little is an internationally recognized expert about Native American/Indigenous Lan-

guage Education, Language Policy and Planning, Child Language Socialization, and Early Education.

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Maneka Deanna Brooks (MDB): Dr. Romero-Little, thank you for taking time to talk with me today. I want to begin this interview by marking the importance of naming practices. We know that names are important; the way we talk about people is a sign of respect. What terminology should educators use when they want to talk about educational issues as they relate to the Indigenous people in the United States?

Mary Eunice Romero-Little (MERL): The general terms that we use to talk about Indigenous peoples here in the United States are *Indigenous* or *Native American*. But, if you want

to get more specific, you can refer to them with their own tribal-specific names. For instance, the local Indigenous peoples living in this area prefer to be called *Tohono O'odham* and *Akimel O'odham*—meaning desert and river people, respectively. Now, it may take some concentrated time and effort to learn how to say their Native names, but it's important to try. You can also ask Native people what Native Nation they are from. We want to show respect. For example, I really like the practice in Canada; before a public event, presentation, or speech, non-Native and Native visitors will acknowledge the First Nation whose territory or land they are on. That's so respectful.

MDB: Now that we have respectful language to talk about these topics, I want to learn a little bit more about your work with Indigenous communities. How did you begin this journey into your work with languages, Indigenous children, and education?

MERL: I came into this area because of my interest in children; children amaze me. I've always been interested in the language socialization of children, especially Native American children. What, how, and why do we teach our children? What and how do we determine what counts as successful and unsuccessful learning in the context of school and outside the school, such as in our homes and cultural communities?

Very early on in my education career, I was a public school teacher. I was fortunate; I taught at Cochiti Elementary and Middle Schools, which are located 5 miles from our community, Cochiti Pueblo in New Mexico. I also taught at the Santa Fe Indian School, a boarding school located in Santa Fe that today serves 700 seventh through twelfth graders, who are primarily from the Pueblos. I have also been a certified education diagnostician. I evaluated Native American children and youth to determine if they qualified for various special education categories, including giftedness.

From these teaching and diagnostic experiences, I noticed a misjudgment about the abilities of our Native American children that resulted in their misrepresentation and misplacement in special education. As I learned more about the identification/diagnostic process, it became clear to me that there was an ingrained bias that

avored English speakers and mainstream knowledge or English literacy. Our Native children were at a disadvantage because they didn't come from English-speaking homes and mainstream backgrounds; instead, they had more culturally and linguistically unique or rich early learning experiences. That made me want to understand why there is an overrepresentation of our Native American children in special education categories such as learning disabled, speech disordered, and so on, while there are very few Native children in gifted programs. From there, I became involved in the Keres Study (Romero-Little, 1994). This study looked at the idea or the construct of giftedness from an Indigenous Pueblo understanding. The results revealed an understanding quite different from the definition of giftedness promulgated in schools at that time.

This research experience then led to my realization of how sophisticated our Pueblo or Indigenous societies are and how intimately they are connected to our Native languages, beliefs, values, and epistemology. It is critical that our children learn our Native languages—and learn them well; it is so connected with why we socialize them through and with our Native languages, and how we interact with our children. Over time, I became further intrigued with child language socialization.

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MDB: What was it about how Indigenous children learned language within their communities and families that captured your interest?

MERL: I quickly came to the realization that due to many years of external societal pressures, including the assimilative educational policies that prioritize learning English, the language socialization process in many Native American homes has shifted to the point where many children are being socialized in English rather than their Native language. My home community

of Cochiti experienced a major language shift from Cochiti-Keres to English that brought all this to light. At that time in Cochiti [the 1990s], my parents' generation—the 55- to 60-year-olds and above—were the speakers of Cochiti-Keres. After that, we get my generation, with gaps here and there; some are speakers, some are not. Interestingly, in this generation you have some members who were born and grew up in Cochiti, but they grew up learning in English and hearing Cochiti-Keres spoken around them rather than *to* them. They are strong receptive learners but struggle with speaking Cochiti-Keres.

I wondered why and how that happened. So that was the focus of my dissertation; I took a critical and decisive look at why we shifted languages. Well, the reasons are connected to external and internal social dynamics and are more complicated than I can explain right now with time limits. Ultimately, however, the breakdown of intergenerational language transmission began with Cochiti's first generation of Keres-English bilingual parents. I call it the "bridge generation"; it is the generation that learned English as a second language well enough to be able to select—unconsciously or in some cases consciously—what language to speak to their children. The bridge was built to allow English into our homes and community. So what's the outcome? Like many other Native communities at that time, you had some children growing up bilingual because the Native language remained the core of their home interactions while they learned English in schools; others lived in homes where language dynamics favored English, thus becoming primarily English speakers with a strong receptive understanding of and a deep desire to become speakers of Cochiti-Keres.

MDB: You mentioned the language use of "the bridge generation" at home and the implications for language shift in the following generation. For example, in your community, you noted the shift between Cochiti-Keres to English within a generation. In your research, what have you learned about the reasoning behind parents (or other caregivers) choosing to use English and/or a Native language within the home?

MERL: Similar to parents worldwide, Cochiti parents wanted the best for their children. And, at that time, the message to them from

educators, policymakers, and the larger society was that English was the important language; it was the key to success in school and life. For Native Americans, successfully learning English meant you gave up the Native language—if not voluntarily, then forcibly. And many Native children did remember the punitive admonishments or punishments for speaking one's mother tongue while in school, including Indian boarding schools. Today, we know these teaching and/or disciplinary strategies were unethical, and they would never be allowed in schools. We also know that the English-only pathway to success was just a myth: you don't have to give up your mother tongue.

This thinking comes from another myth that says that only one language can fit into a mind—that is, languages are best learned one at a time. We know from first- and second-language research and cases-in-point that actually teaching in one's mother language is more effective for both content learning and the acquisition of the dominant language (English, in the case of the United States). Also, we know that a child can learn to speak, read, and write more than one language at a time, successfully and often effortlessly. There are many countries around the world that promote multilingualism so that education is not a subtractive but an additive process: you add on to one's first language.

MDB: It is so important that more people are aware of this research. The fact that people continue to believe these myths is troubling. What other factors played a role in this language shift?

MERL: Another difference may be in Native parents' ideologies about language, in terms of which language is more important to ensure their children are successful at school and in life, because life now extends beyond the Cochiti world. You see, at that time [1950–60s], our Pueblo communities were changing economically, socially, and so forth as a result of increased exposure to external factors. Cochiti, for example, got paved roads, and the first communal telephone was placed at the Rael's Store located in the heart of the community; some might call this "community improvement." Another factor was our men—our grandfathers, fathers, and brothers—going off to fight in the World Wars; those who returned came back with

different experiences and views. This generation anticipated “the coming of the English world,” in a sense, and came to the conclusion that we better learn English. And where do children learn English? They learn English in schools. On one hand, this was true; English was inevitable. But on the other hand, it need not come at the expense of our sacred community language, Cochiti-Keres, and culture. So, these parental choices—unconscious and conscious—were made thinking it was the best for their children and not really understanding the long-term consequences of such linguistic decisions.

In retrospect, we know today that we need to be vigilant in safeguarding our mother tongue and our cultural life ways. This requires a more conscientious effort from us to speak or continue speaking our languages to our infants throughout early childhood, so that they learn it well as their first language. Learning the Native language as one’s first language is rare today. It is more the case that our children are learning their Native language as a second language in schools, and it is much harder to learn and sustain it that way. We need help and support from others—advocates, like early childhood educators.

MDB: In light of your last point, I want to move from the role of the family to the role of the teacher. This question might be self-evident to some people, but it is still important to ask: Why should educators care about language shift? Why should they care if communities are moving away from the Native language toward English? A lot of people might say, “Well, what’s the big deal? That just happens.”

MERL: My answer reaches into the realm of Cochiti philosophy and ontology. Our spirits gave us our language, just as they gave the Anglo Americans the English language—they gave us Cochiti-Keres, Towa, Lakota, Kiowa, Tohono O’odham, and I am naming only a few of the hundreds of Native languages. If you want to embrace a child, you must also embrace their family and their people; this includes their language. And it’s so critical that it’s done in an unbiased way, like the unconditional love for a child. Language is the connection with which a child develops and establishes their intimate relationships with people. Language is not just the way we express our intellect or academic

views; it’s how we express ourselves emotionally and how we connect and bond with others. When I talk about nurturing a happy, confident Native child, I am talking about the same process as happens with a child whose language is English. As Native Americans, we want happy, smart children who speak our language as well because that’s who we are as a people.

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MDB: In your research (e.g., Romero-Little, 2010), you highlight the downfalls of a lack of cultural awareness in early childhood education models that take place even prior to preschool. You talk about the loss that occurs when a child is socialized outside of their community. That really stood out to me because these types of early education programs are usually positioned as something positive. Can you talk a little bit more about the dangers of certain approaches to early education?

MERL: I may have been referring to the fact that up until a few years ago, hardly any attention was being given to preschool or the years prior to preschool. It was not until Native American communities began developing native language revitalization initiatives—many of which focused on the youngest members—that more attention has been devoted to what’s happening there. Even then there was little understanding or recognition of what children bring from their homes to the preschool in terms of abilities, talents, and learning experiences. It was mistakenly believed that our cultural communities had little to offer to a child’s early education. Now we know it’s quite the opposite: what Native American children bring from home is the foundation for all future learning, but it just manifests in a different way than what early education expects.

I’ll give you an example. Several years ago, I was doing an observation in Jemez Pueblo, where 80% of the people of all ages speak Towa as a first language. The majority of kids enter Head Start for the first time speaking Towa.

It's like music to one's ears to hear these little people speaking Towa, not a word of English. Anyway, it was free time, and all the kids went and chose their free-time activity. Some chose books, some chose computers, while others chose games and puzzles. And there's little Jimmy in the corner by himself, and he's walking back and forth while gracefully moving his head from left to right. Native people immediately recognize that he's imitating a Pueblo buffalo dance. He was going back and forth doing both the hand and head gestures and the steps for the entire 10 minutes. I wondered, What is happening in his mind? What is he thinking? Well, he was most likely focused on the auditory, recalling the rhythmic songs of the buffalo dance—the drum beats and the singers. He was also using visual memory in remembering the context, the plaza filled with onlookers in his own community. He's remembering the buffalo dancers' movements, so he's remembering a lot, and he's showing that he is learning with all these different modalities that Head Start also expects children to demonstrate. But he's doing it his way, in the Jemez way.

MDB: If a teacher is not connected to the Jemez Pueblo, it would be difficult for the educator to recognize the skills, abilities, and knowledge that little Jimmy is demonstrating, right?

MERL: Right. If there's no recognition of the significance of his "free-time" activity, he may be told to sit down or choose something better to do. But he's teaching you about the cultural community and the dance that they had this past weekend. That's what he's doing; he's recalling it. And he is not only recalling it through visual and auditory memory, he's actually recalling the linguistic aspect as well—the songs, the messages he was taught, or language itself and the affective piece. So that's very, very crucial in children's early beginnings and in their early development.

MDB: Your example illustrates so clearly the importance of having educational programs that maintain community connections, because they facilitate education that supports linguistic and

cultural maintenance. It also shows the importance of educators who are a part of the community. Let me wrap up by asking if you have any upcoming projects or research with teachers that you plan to conduct in the future or anything you want to share with *Language Arts* readers?

MERL: I would really like to examine more closely the multimodal avenues that young children use to learn in a communal context, because for many Indigenous peoples, learning doesn't just happen at home and school; it happens in a larger context with additional socializers, often through communal activities with song and dance. Historical and spiritual aspects are in there, too. How do children learn through communal music and performance? It's all connected: child, family, community come first and then school. In the mainstream, children and parents are the focus, whereas in the Native American context, it includes grandparents. I have met so many people, and I can often tell who was raised by or with grandparents because these young adults or grown children now shine with a special sense of respect, compassion, and kindness. It makes me think that grandparents have something special to contribute to young children. How does that happen? We have a lot more than ABCs to learn. What and how do young children learn from and with grandparents and elders? That learning occurs only if we listen carefully to these elders and include them in our lives.

MDB: Very true. Well, thank you so much, Dr. Romero-Little. I appreciate that you took the time to talk to me.

References

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