



SITTING BULL COLLEGE
Wičhákini Owáyawa Immersion Program
PUBLIC INFORMATION BRIEF. DECEMBER 2016

This information brief presents selected findings from the RMC Research Evaluation Report, based on data collected during the 2015-2016 school year.

Begun in 2012 with a grant from the Administration for Native Americans (ANA), the Sitting Bull College Immersion Nest featured a classroom of eleven 3-year-old students. Called Lakhól'iyapi Wahóŋpi (Lakota language nest) in Lakota, the preschool immersion program was viewed as a central element of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's language revitalization efforts. Under a second ANA grant received by Sitting Bull College in 2015, immersion classrooms were extended into Kindergarten and first grade, with plans to add classrooms in the next two years at the second and third grade levels. The elementary immersion program, called Wičhákini Owáyawa, or revitalization school, is currently housed at Sitting Bull College in a room across from the preschool class.

The Wičhákini Owáyawa program has several main objectives. These include:

1. Provision of **culturally-rich language immersion classes** for students in pre-primary, primary, and elementary grades;
2. Alignment of immersion class content with **North Dakota Common Core State Standards**;
3. **Regular assessment** of student progress;
4. **In-depth and ongoing professional development** for language immersion teachers; and
5. **Extensive parent involvement**, including language classes designed to increase the use of the Lakota language in the home environment.

All classroom activities are conducted in Lakota with no use of English allowed inside of the classrooms. The teachers and curriculum director developed a monthly curriculum plan that incorporates seasonal and culturally appropriate themes.

On most Fridays, teachers take part in professional development activities to explore best practices in early childhood education, develop lesson plans, and enhance implementation of effective immersion practices. In the summer, immersion teachers participate in the three-week Lakota Summer Institute, an annual professional development event focused on the teaching and learning of the Lakota language and co-sponsored by Sitting Bull College, the Lakota Language Consortium, and the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Language and Culture Institute.

Parent language classes, which are held approximately twice a month, began in the fall of 2015. It is a project expectation that parents of students involved in the immersion program participate in the free classes to ensure that students can utilize the Lakota language in the home as well as the school environment. Several teachers lead classes to address the different levels of language proficiency present among the adult participants. In addition to the parent language classes, the program also sponsors a number of family events that allow children, parents, and other family and community members to come together and enjoy social and cultural activities. In November of 2015 and April and November of 2016, parent-teacher conferences were held to inform parents about the social, emotional, academic, and linguistic progress of their children.

RMC Research Corporation carried out the evaluation of the Wičhákini Owáyawa Immersion Program through a mixed methods formative and summative evaluation designed to assess program impacts on students, Lakota language teachers, families, and community members. All evaluation instruments were developed by RMC Research and revised and approved by program staff and administrators in the fall of 2015. A site visit was conducted in May of 2016 and included interviews or focus groups with project administrators, Lakota language teachers, and parents of students in the program. Observations were conducted in immersion classrooms and the results of pre/post Lakota language assessments were shared by project staff with the evaluators.

SELECTED FINDINGS

- **Students in the immersion classes were observed using hands-on materials to learn the Lakota language and other academic content and speaking Lakota with the teachers and other students.** There was substantial evidence that students in both classrooms were acquiring and practicing Lakota vocabulary during the lessons.
- **Students showed respectful behavior toward teachers and classmates, and teachers consistently modeled respectful interactions.** Students displaying any inappropriate behavior were redirected by one of the teachers so that their attention quickly returned to individual or group projects. Students were generally on task with activities and assignments.
- **On a pre/post language assessment conducted with Kindergarteners and first graders, students had statistically significant gains from pretest to posttest at Level 1.** Differences approaching statistical significance were found on the Level 2 assessment.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Measure	Range of Scores	Presurvey			Postsurvey		Difference		
		<i>N</i> ¹	Mean ²	<i>SD</i> ³	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Score	<i>z</i> ⁴	<i>p</i> ⁵
Level 1	0 – 20	9	16.00	1.80	17.44	1.51	1.44	1.980	.048*
Level 2	0 – 29	8	12.88	4.79	18.00	5.71	5.12	1.895	.058
Level 3	0 – 20	6	7.50	1.05	9.50	5.71	2.00	1.265	.206
Level 4	0 – 20	6	4.67	1.37	4.50	1.87	-0.17	-.276	.783

Note: **p* < .05

¹ *N* is the total number in a sample. *n* is the number in a subsample.

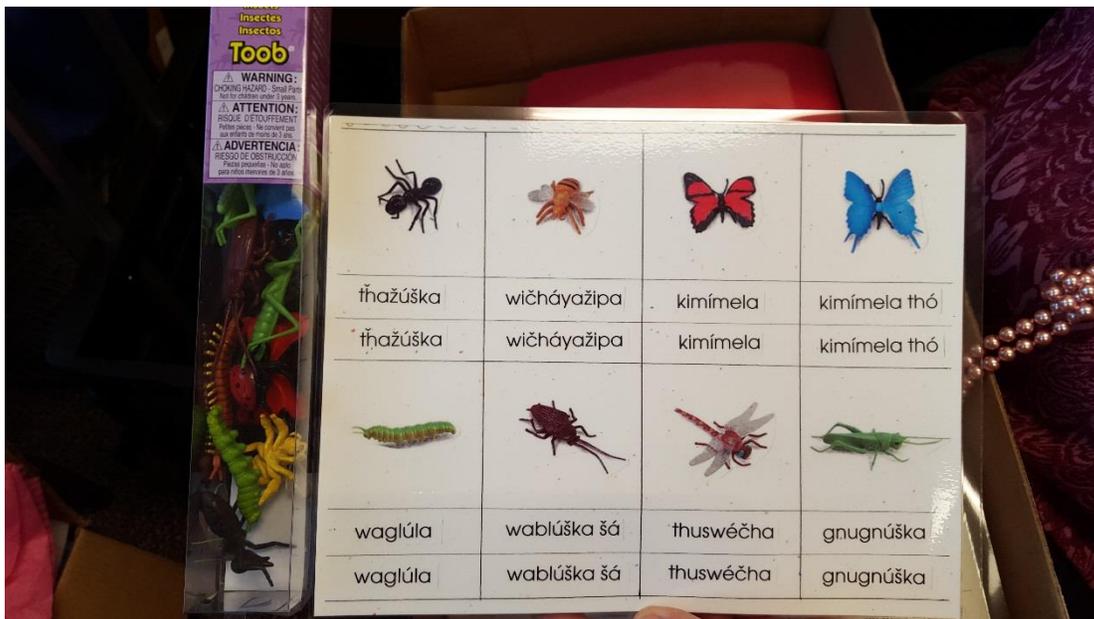
² The mean or average value is a measure of central tendency computed by adding a set of values and dividing the sum by the total number of values.

³ The standard deviation (*SD*) is a measure of how spread out a set of values is. Higher standard deviations indicate greater variability in data across respondents.

⁴ *z* scores refer to Wilcoxon signed-rank test results with significance level based on a 2-tailed test. Two-tailed test is a statistical test of whether a value of the statistic is either sufficiently small or sufficiently large enough to lead to rejection of the hypothesis tested.

⁵ The *p*-value is an indicator that represents the likelihood that observed results occurred by chance. In education research, values of *p* < .05 (i.e., values indicating that observed results had a less than 5% chance of occurring by chance) are typically used to identify results that are statistically significant. Lower *p*-values indicate a smaller likelihood that observed results occurred by chance and are therefore associated with statistically significant findings.

- **The consensus among parents, administrators, and teachers was that parents who participated on a regular basis derived substantial benefit from the classes.** Perceived impacts from participation included a greater ability and increased confidence in speaking the language as well as a more regular use of the language with children in the home.
- **Administrators and teachers agreed that professional development for the instructional staff was generally of very high quality.** Administrators and teachers described how training on instructional techniques was held most Fridays during the academic year. Many of the trainings were conducted through distance technology by a linguist from the Lakota Language Consortium (LLC), who demonstrated games and other hands-on learning strategies and guided teachers in the use of immersion techniques.
- **Parents rated the quality of instruction for their classes as good or excellent and agreed they were speaking the language more frequently at home with their children.** Parents also said they were using the language more often outside of the home with friends and family members.



Poster in the preschool classroom showing pictures of different insects along with their Lakota names.

- **The extent of parent engagement was perceived by all respondents as one of the program's greatest assets.** Parent-teacher conferences were held several times a year to inform parents about student progress, and four family involvement activities were held as part of the effort to maintain good communication between the school and parents.
- **Administrators believed that the existence of the program and the visibility of young Lakota speakers in the community were causing a shift in public perception from the language being something that belonged to the past to the language being an important part of the tribe's present and future.** Students were being invited to conduct opening prayers and songs at cultural gatherings and received warm and often emotional responses from community members when they heard children speaking the language.

- **Teachers and administrators reported an alignment between the immersion curriculum and North Dakota state standards for Kindergarten and first grade.** Training was conducted for teachers in examining and applying the mathematics/science standards, and administrators stated that all lesson plans were based on the standards. In the case of science, they said the immersion school exceeded the standards because science was being taught on a daily basis. Lessons also consistently incorporated cultural themes.
- **Administrators agreed that several large steps were being taken toward program sustainability.** The most notable development was the intent expressed by staff and parents of a local public school to incorporate immersion classes into the school curriculum and possibly house the existing Wičhákini Owáyawa K-1 immersion class at the school. The school may eventually take over the immersion classes entirely after the grant has ended. Administrators also said that the Tribal Department of Education was committed to the idea of language development and was discussing the possibility of funding language immersion programs.

NEXT STEPS

In the 2016-2017 academic year, Wičhákini Owáyawa immersion classes have expanded into the second grade level and several new teachers have been hired. In 2017-2018, a third grade classroom will be added. Elements of a new program, supported by the American Indian College Fund and called the Lakota Restorative Teachings Initiative, have been incorporated into the immersion curriculum. Representing a collaboration between Sitting Bull College, Wičhákini Owáyawa, and the Kampus Kids Learning Center, the program is designed to promote the health, well-being, and security of Native families at Sitting Bull College and in the larger Standing Rock community. As a result of this program, immersion classes now utilize hands-on activities to teach children about methods of sustainability, food sovereignty, and wellness, and have integrated traditional food use and preparation techniques into classroom activities.

Program administrators have continued to develop the project website at <http://wotakuye.weebly.com/>. The website now provides an overview of the immersion classes and contains a variety of Lakota language resources for teachers, parents, and students including children's books translated from English into Lakota, several Lakota audio books, Lakota language videos, downloadable materials, and flashcards. The site also provides a yearly calendar of activities and postings of weekly instructional themes.

There have been ongoing discussions about the possibility of integrating the program within the local public school system in Fort Yates and housing classes in an old elementary school building that now contains several offices. The building, however, has costly maintenance issues that would need to be addressed before it could become a suitable educational site. There are also some preliminary discussions about the creation of a new, environmentally sustainable building in Fort Yates that could accommodate both the Lakǰól'iyapi Wahóǰpi preschool and the Wičhákini Owáyawa immersion classes as well as classes sponsored by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Language and Culture Institute, a large language revitalization initiative funded by the Bush Foundation.

A site visit for the evaluation will take place in the spring of 2017 and the second year annual report will be issued in July of 2017.