

# The Critical Role of Early Educators in Sustaining Endangered Languages and Cultures

## Perspectives from Around the World

by Barb Carlson, Carolyn Codopony, Karma Gayleg, and Tere Gilbert

Imagine entering an early childhood preschool classroom. The children are actively conversing in their Indigenous language. Some are dancing to a tribal drumbeat while others are examining native plants, used for centuries by their Elders. In the infant room, babies are rocked to sleep with traditional lullabies or hymns. Children are learning skills through the incorporation of Indigenous ways of knowing.

Revitalization of Indigenous language and culture is an ongoing effort in many native early childhood programs. The diversity of our world's languages and cultures has been rapidly diminishing due to colonial efforts to discourage or even outlaw Indigenous languages and practices, followed by modern media and commerce, instant communications, and the educational and economic need for fluency in dominant languages such as English. Many Indigenous languages are just one or two generations from extinction. Early care and education programs play a vital role in strengthening their communities' language and traditional practices. A foundation of this preservation effort is teacher training and education.

Our contributors share their experiences, successes, and challenges, each at a different stage in program development and using unique approaches to fit their own communities.

### Lhotokuchu, Bhutan: Early Childhood Programs as Partners in Sustaining Language and Culture

by Karma Gayleg

The Lhop community of Lhotokuchu, Bhutan, is an Indigenous group with only 121 households and 501 residents. The community's very unique culture and language bear no similarity to any of the neighbouring communities. The Lhops strictly marry within the community, and follow time-honoured customs in their daily



Photographs by the authors

The authors are leaders of the Indigenous People's Action Group of the World Forum Foundation  
[worldforumfoundation.org/indigenous](http://worldforumfoundation.org/indigenous)



Barb Carlson, Manitoba, Canada, has worked in the field of Early Childhood Education (ECE) with First Nation, Inuit and Metis families for over 40 years. She teaches the Early Childhood Education diploma program at University College of the North, relying on Knowledge Keepers, hands-on and land-based experiences, and distance education tools. She is a leader of the World Forum Foundation Indigenous People's Action Group, and a lifelong advocate for land-based, placed-based learning.



Carolyn Codopony, Comanche Nation, United States, Child Care Development Fund Program Director, began her career in tribal care as the Comanche Nation's Early Childhood Development Center Director in March 2003. She was in the first class of fellows for the Peer Learning and Leadership Network, and currently is a Mentor for the second class of fellows, an Office of Child Care initiative. She recently finished her duties as a Global Leader, a World Forum initiative. Carolyn was able to present on her Global Leader project, Certification Methodology for ECE Comanche Language Teachers, this past September at the regional meeting of the Americas in Salvador, Brazil.



Karma Gayleg works with the Ministry of Education in Bhutan. As a pioneer for ECCD in Bhutan, he has contributed to taking up the ECCD program in 2007 and rapidly expanding it in the country. He spearheaded drafting of policies, development of standards, guidelines and curricula. He has extensive experience in working with communities on innovative community-based programmes enhancing access to ECCD services and training ECCD professionals. He has been associated with the World Forum for Early Childhood since 2011 as a Global Leader for young children representing the Asia Pacific Region. He has also been the National Representative of Bhutan since then.



Tere Gilbert, Aotearoa (New Zealand), is a descendant of the Ngāti Kahungunu, Te Āti Awa, and Ngāti Raukawa tribes in Aotearoa (New Zealand). As an adult, she has been fortunate to learn the Māori language through immersion with children and other adults in *Kōhanga Reo*. She also became an early childhood teacher along the way. Tere says, "He taonga tuku iho ō tātou reo rangatira, kōrerohia, manaakitia kia ora ai mō a tātou mokopuna — our chiefly languages are our prized cultural heritage that have been handed down to us, speak our language and care for it so it will survive for our future generations."



lives. There are visible signs of change in recent times. Gayleg and Jamtsho (2015) observe that many households own utility trucks and grow cash crops such as cardamom.

With rapid economic development and change, there are also impending signs of a vanishing culture. Gayleg and Jamtsho note that many people prefer wearing pants and shirts to their traditional attire. Stacks of empty beer bottles appear in many backyards. As many Lhops now speak Lhotshamkha, the language of the surrounding communities, and Dzongkha, the national language, the Lhopku language is at risk of dying, and is often diluted with Lhotshamkha words. As languages of instruction, English and Dzongkha are critical for success in school, creating a dilemma of either not doing well in school or risking the loss of the Indigenous language, and the unique Lhop culture with it.

In the face of such challenges, the Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Centres in the village, especially the parent education programs, are pivotal to helping families teach their children important language and school readiness skills, while preserving a

valuable but endangered culture. Parents participate in their children's learning by telling stories or teaching Indigenous songs, games, and crafts — both at home

and in the ECCD centres. Parent participation in the program engages parents in playing more active roles to practice and pass on the Lhop culture, while at the same time reinforcing literacy, math, and learning skills that will help their children succeed in school.

Pitam, mother of three, volunteered for the ECCD program when her daughter was at the center. No one from the community is yet qualified to be an ECCD Facilitator, so Pitam has served as an interpreter between the teacher and the children, in addition to helping the centre with daily chores. Pitam's experience demonstrates the positive impact of this ECCD program: "I now know how important stories and songs are in teaching my children about our language and culture, which may be lost if our children didn't practice."

### Comanche Nation, United States:

#### Building a Team

by Carolyn Codopony

I grew up a couple of miles from the place I now call home. I was away from my community for 20 years. I returned to raise my daughter, Hazel, named

after my grandmother, and I found myself in a position to direct the first-ever child care center for the Comanche Nation. Looking back, it was a wonderful place to grow up. I was blessed with two sets of grandpar-

ents right next door who doted on all of their grandchildren. We spent countless quality hours with them. This is where I first heard *Numunu tekwaptu*, the language of my Comanche people, as my grandparents spoke with one another, with relatives who came to visit, and with Comanche people they met in the community.

We had many Speakers when I was young, and the passion I have for language and cultural preservation derived from experiences with them, but I was not taught to speak *Numunu*. My father can understand the language, but he does not speak it. With English spoken everywhere and without expectations or instruction for learning *Numunu*, we did not absorb the language. Now I wish to change that for upcoming generations.

The Comanche Nation tribal membership, leadership, families, and parents now recognize the importance of teaching the *Numunu* language and culture to our youngest children. Thus, integrating



*Numunu tekwaptu* and culture into daily learning activities has been a priority since our ECDC program began.

While the commitment has always been present, steady growth — and growing pains — have been evident with each passing year. There are numerous reasons, but primarily, the quality of Comanche language instruction in the community has not been at a level to produce Speakers. Tribal members in our community want to learn, but get discouraged when language classes do not go beyond vocabulary and pronunciation. Facing a language with remarkably few Speakers, and limited success with the current language instruction program, has meant exploring a range of strategies to produce new Speakers within the early childhood program. Focusing on language instruction for early childhood staff, we have assembled a team with diverse skills: Elders who are Speakers, second language Speakers, a clerical person savvy with designing and developing resources for computer language instruction, and a philosopher/linguist — a certain young tribal member with a knack for working with a Speaker to teach *Numunu*

*tekwaptu* to staff and parents. With only a handful of Speakers in our community willing and able to help, time is working against us. Our program staff is continually evaluating what is bringing success and what is not. Meanwhile, work in the trenches continues... perseverance continues... hope continues. We are developing a new path, teaching the early childhood educators, youth program teachers, and committed parents to speak *Numunu*. The past year has given us incentive as we are starting to truly speak the language of our people.

### **First Nations and Metis, Canada: Connecting to Culture and Language through Land-based and Place-based Learning**

by Barb Carlson

Many Indigenous children in Canada have lost their first language, traditions, customs, and beliefs, as well as their connection to the earth and their sense of place because of the residential school system and other colonial practices. As an early childhood education instructor, I have had the opportunity to develop and implement an ECE training

program that integrates Indigenous and western approaches to learning and knowledge. Indigenous people have historically educated their children by connecting them to Mother Earth. Through land-based learning, children develop a sense of place that roots them in their culture, including social and environmental relationships. They learn how their language works to describe and connect them to the land, and how their material culture comes from their environment.

Teachers in training must first gain an understanding of land-based learning themselves by experiencing activities on the land. Consequently, we take them out to experience ice fishing, cooking on an open fire, and the calming effect of being outside in nature. Teachers in training learn to teach children traditional languages by showing them the names of the plants, animals, birds, fish, and insects that live in the forests, lakes, and streams. When children have these experiences with the natural environment, they develop not only a connection to place, but also an understanding of their culture and traditions. A true sense of place, language, and tradition must always include Indigenous Elders who connect children to Indigenous history, practices, knowledge, and community. They are a key part of community building and reconciliation. In our language and literacy course, teachers in training learn drum making from a Knowledge Keeper, and they learn how to use the drum as a teaching tool to pass on traditional language and knowledge to children of the next generation through rhythm and song, integrating these activities into the programming of the child care centre.

Land-based teaching that connects children to community, history, and culture is key to revitalizing and sustaining Indigenous language and tradition.



## *Te Kōhao Kōhungahunga,* *Aotearoa (New Zealand):* **Building from One Generation to the Next**

by Tere Gilbert

In 1978 a research report released by Richard Benton alerted that the use of *te reo Māori* (the Māori language) in *Aotearoa* (New Zealand) was declining rapidly and in danger of disappearing altogether. Initiatives such as *Kōhanga Reo* (preschool Language nests) in the 1980s and Māori immersion early learning centres were established to address this language decline and to revitalise it for successive generations.

### **Te Kōhao Kōhungahunga**

*Te Kōhao* Health Limited (TKH) is a *Whānau Ora* (healthy families) provider in Hamilton whose services encompass medical, social, justice, education, and welfare services. TKH's Early Childhood strategy came out of the *Whānau Ora* ideology and the belief that the key driver out of poverty is education. TKH's early childhood program *Te Kōhao Kōhungahunga* is located in one of the lowest socio-economic areas of Hamilton.

Kiingi Tuheitia, the Māori king, opened the building on 12 February 2015 and gave it the name *Ngā Rau Atawhai* (the

Nurturing Leaves) signifying that through our nurturing, leaves grow to be strong, healthy, vibrant trees and forests. Like the leaves, our *tamariki* (children) will grow and develop through our nurturing. Our philosophy is:

*Whakatinanatia ko te ihi, ko te wehi,  
ko te wana me te hauoranga o te whānau*

Strong, healthy, vibrant, and prosperous *whānau Whānau ora* (healthy families), *te reo Māori* (the Maori language), and *tikanga* (cultural practices and values) guide our curriculum throughout the day.

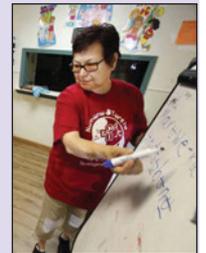
Our *whānau* are all Māori and range from those who have not had any *te reo Māori* for generations to those whose first language is *te reo Māori*. Many of our children are bilingual. The ones whose first language is *te reo Māori* easily switch languages depending on whom they are talking with. If they know the teacher speaks Māori, they will communicate in Māori; if their little friends are speaking in English, they will switch to English. To nurture Māori language, our teachers must encourage children to use the language by only speaking Māori.

By immersing the children in *te reo Māori*, we believe we are planting seeds



### **This Cannot Be an Add-on**

by Barb Carlson



Sharing and preserving endangered languages and cultures cannot be an add-on or a unit of teaching. It must be an integral part of the program. We must not take a tourist approach to incorporating language and culture within a child care centre. We must ensure that language and culture have a strong presence in every aspect of the program. We must be able to feel, hear, see, touch, and taste the culture of the place we call home. When language and culture are place-based, we connect the children to the land of their ancestors. Children must live and learn their culture to feel proud of who they are, to become strong confident people who can walk in two worlds. Our Elders say, "Our children must know where they have come from in order to know where they are going."



of knowledge. We hope that these seeds of knowledge develop a further love for their heritage, language and culture, and our children can grow up confident in their identity, knowing who they are and where they come from.

## Conclusion

Indigenous languages and cultures are endangered in many places. Many have lost these gifts, and in other communities languages and traditions are quickly vanishing and will disappear if nothing is done. One of the most powerful ways of preserving Indigenous cultures is for parents and institutions to teach children, so that they grow up to be proud and confident of who they are and have a clear path toward their future. Children need to understand their past in order to flourish in the present and share their language and cultural traditions with future generations.



Teachers are catalysts in the preservation of Indigenous languages and cultures as they can help communities understand the importance of their culture and teach them how it can be promoted and perpetuated. Teacher training is critical in preparing new educators to be sensitive to Indigenous languages and cultures and make efforts to promote them. Ultimately, we can all play a role in our daily lives by respecting Indigenous cultures and integrating them both in policy and practice.

## References

Dorji, K., & Wild, M. (2013). "Bhutan's Cultural Diversity: Life and culture in four remote communities of Bhutan." HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation.

Gayleg, K., & Jamtsho, S. (2015). "Positive influences of a community-based ECCD in Lhotokuchu, a closed and remote Indigenous community." Asia Pacific Regional Network for

Early Childhood Noteworthy Practice Documentation.

## Video Extras

Barb Carlson's video:

[youtu.be/LC2ZxHQXGXQ](https://youtu.be/LC2ZxHQXGXQ)

Knowledge Keeper Ron Cook of the Cree Nation teaches and reflects on drumming and language with young children.

Karma Gayleg's video:

[youtu.be/Lo-gy4mXqHg](https://youtu.be/Lo-gy4mXqHg)

Learn more about the ECCD program in the Lhops community in southwestern Bhutan in this video from ARNEC.

Carolyn Codopony's Global Leaders video:

[vimeo.com/155061849](https://vimeo.com/155061849)

Carolyn Codopony discusses her World Forum Global Leaders project to develop a Comanche language certification and methodology for ECE.

