Indigenous adult language learning can enhance health and wellbeing

**WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW**
Due to past and current forms of colonization, many members of Indigenous communities were not given the opportunity to learn their language as children and are now studying the language as adults. Personal Indigenous language learning can support Indigenous peoples’ resilience and sense of belonging. Together with a UVic-based research team, two Indigenous adult language learning programs in British Columbia gained understanding into how the process of learning and teaching Indigenous languages impacted participants’ wellbeing.

**WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?**
All culture is rooted in language, and languages are vital to health, belonging, and resilience in Indigenous communities. Researchers have identified a connection between the impacts of colonization and poor health outcomes. One of the effects is language loss, which can be seen in a missing generation of adult (and now children/youth) language speakers. In many communities, the few remaining speakers are elderly. Adult Indigenous language learners play a critical role in the revitalization of the language as the link between the aging language speakers and the younger generations of Indigenous children and youth.

This research project entitled NEʔOLṈEW “one mind, one people” focused on two adult Indigenous language programs in British Columbia. Run by the W̱SÁNEĆ School Board SENĆOŦEN language department and the First Peoples’ Cultural Council (FPCC), these programs paired adult language learners with fluent language speakers (mentors) where they spoke the language while doing daily activities together.

“I feel more confident. I feel like I am, I’m getting to know who I am.”
– Hla Algyax, Gitxsan (Apprentice)

**WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?**
The researchers interviewed 60 participants in the W̱SÁNEĆ and FPCC language learning programs. The participants represented 16 different Indigenous languages found in BC: Secwepemctsin; Ditidaht; SENĆOŦEN; Gitsenimx; She shashishalhem; Hul̓qumí‘num; St’aíl’imcets; Ktunaxa; Tsilhqot’in; Kwak’wala; Witsuwit’en; Nsyilxcən; ’Uiškala; Nuu-chah-nulth; Xaad kil; and Nuxalk. They included current and past apprentices, current and past mentors, and program administrators.
“As long as they keep remembering [the language], that’s our future”

—Ruth A. Paul (Mentor)

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?
The researchers identified six themes related to the effects of language learning on health and wellbeing.

1 Cultural and spiritual health and healing
   • Learning the language strengthened participants’ identity and provided a source for feeling more grounded.
   • Participants experienced healing through reconnection to their language and culture.

2 Improvements to health
   • Participating in the language program motivated participants to commit to their own health and wellbeing and making changes.

3 Understanding the impacts of language loss on the wellbeing of Indigenous people
   • Learning the language allowed participants to reflect on and process feelings of shame or grief related to the traumatic impact of colonization.

4 Relationship between commitment to the program and participants’ wellbeing
   • Mentors and apprentices sometimes felt stretched by the time commitment (approximately 10 hours per week with their mentor, plus 20+ hours per month of additional learning).

5 Apprentices’ increased their community involvement and leadership
   • Participants took on more active roles in their communities. They contributed to their communities’ wellbeing and inspired others.

6 Elders’ experienced healing through their experience as language mentors
   • Mentoring gave Elders a sense of hope and apprentices a greater feeling of continuity.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?
Support Indigenous language revitalization for its importance to the health and wellbeing of Indigenous communities. Understand that learning the language for Indigenous people, and appreciating the contributions of Indigenous people and communities is part of the reconciliation process. Language can be a way to connect with your own heritage as well as learn about the history and contributions of other cultures.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS
Barbara Jenni and Adar Anisman were research assistants on this study and graduate students at the University of Victoria.
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Dr. Peter Jacobs is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Linguistics at Simon Fraser University and co-led the study.

KEYWORDS
Indigenous language revitalization, Indigenous health, adult language learning, mentor-apprentice learning

CITATION

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