

# Visibility, Healing and Resistance: Voices from the 2005 Dena'ina Language Institute

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This paper explores the complexities of institutional involvement in Native language programming by looking at a program in Kenai, Alaska. The work contrasts learner goals with stated grant goals in order to investigate the tensions between institutional (university, funding agency) and individual learner goals in a language revitalization effort. Analysis of 19 semi-structured in-depth interviews with adult Dena'ina learners revealed that goals of attendees clustered into four categories: fluency, literacy, cultural knowledge, and community building. These four stated goals connected to overarching themes of visibility, healing and resistance. The subsequent discussion highlights the importance of examining the challenges and compromises that come with the inclusion of institutional funding structures in Indigenous language movements. To conclude we raise questions around the larger political-economic conditions in which revitalization movements are situated and possible constraints imposed by the dominant discourses that legitimize them.

## Introduction

**T**he Dena'ina Language Institute (DLI) derived from a five-year, grant funded (U.S. Department of Education #T195E010045) partnership between the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (ANLC), the Kenaitze Indian Tribe I.R.A. (KIT), the Alaska Native Heritage Center (ANHC), and the Kenai Peninsula College (KPC). The program was intended to improve the quality of Dena'ina language programming in schools by providing targeted coursework and access to degree programs for would-be language teachers.

After three years of the five year program, the funding agency determined that the published grant goals were not being met. The project was labeled a "failure" and funding was withdrawn a year later. Despite these setbacks, however, program partners and participants considered the program a success and requested that carry-over funds be made available to support the DLI through the

fifth and final year of the project. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition granted this request and sufficient funding was made available to support the DLI through summer 2006.

This paper presents partial results from a qualitative study conducted in 2005 comparing and contrasting participant goals with those of the university and funding agency in an effort to better understand why a program considered successful by program participants could be labeled a failure by the funding agency. An analysis of the data collected (including official project documents, field notes, and 19 semi-structured, in-depth interviews) reveals that DLI participants viewed the Institute and language learning as a mechanism for increasing individual and community visibility, healing and resistance to the dominant majority culture. While these goals were not inconsistent with the institutional goals of the project as provided in the grant narrative (attainment of individual language proficiency and degree completion), neither were they dependent upon them.

### The Land and Language of the Dena'ina

Dena'ina<sup>1</sup> traditional lands are in South Central Alaska (see Figure 1), and include remote wilderness areas as well as the highly urbanized "Anchorage Bowl" and portions of the Kenai Peninsula. The Dena'ina practice a variety of lifestyles ranging from subsistence hunting and fishing in remote villages to running multi-million dollar businesses in urban centers, such as Anchorage and Kenai. While it is estimated that there are around 900 Dena'ina living in Alaska, fewer than 75 are Dena'ina speakers<sup>2</sup> (Krauss, 1997). As of 2005, the remaining fluent speakers were over 50 and/or past child bearing age.

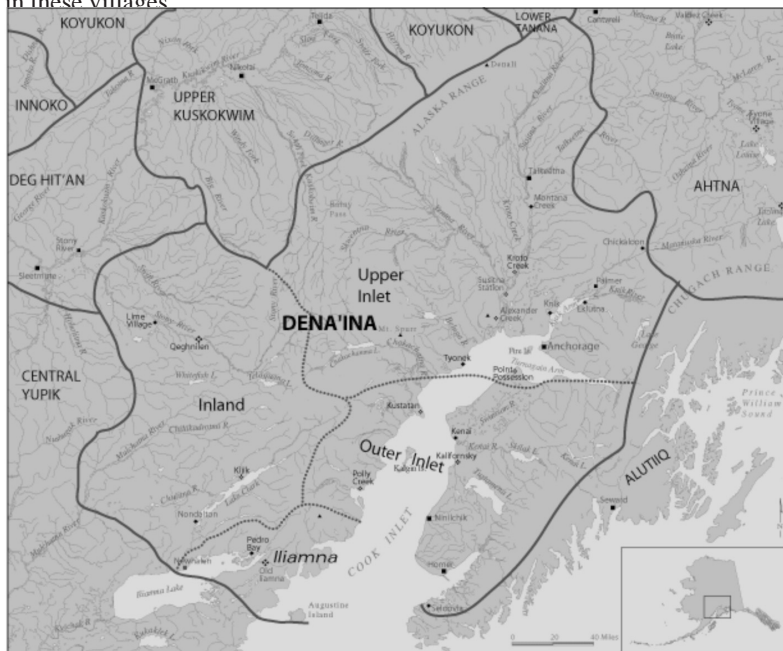


Figure 1. Map of Native Peoples and Languages of Alaska (Krauss, 1982).<sup>3</sup>

According to Krauss (1997) Dena'ina has four mutually intelligible, regional dialects: Upper Inlet, Outer Inlet, Iliamna and Inland (see Figure 2).

Boraas (personal communication, March 22, 2006) identifies a fifth dialect, Seldovia. The five dialects have experienced language shift<sup>4</sup> at varying speeds. The Seldovia dialect is no longer spoken. The Outer Inlet and Upper Inlet dialects encompass urbanized communities such as Anchorage and Kenai where Dena'ina has been in direct competition with English for over a century. The Outer Inlet dialect has one identified speaker, while the Upper Inlet dialect may have as many as six fluent speakers, all over the age of 70. There may be another six remaining fluent speakers of the Iliamna dialect, the language of the modern villages of Pedro Bay and Iliamna (Kari, personal communication, March 27, 2006).

The strongest of the four dialects, Inland, is currently spoken by up to 50 people, many of whom are in the villages of Nondalton and Lime Village and most of whom are over the age of 50 (Kari, personal communication, March 27, 2006). The geographical isolation of these two villages has most likely helped to sustain this dialect. However, English is now the first language of all children in these villages.



**Figure 2.** Dialect Map for the Dena'ina Language (by J. Kari as on [www.qenaga.org](http://www.qenaga.org))<sup>3</sup>.

### The Dena'ina Language Institute

The Dena'ina Language Institute derived from a larger grant funded effort known as the Athabascan Language Development Institute (ALDI). Funded by grant

funds (U.S. Department of Education T195E980090 and T195E010045), ALDI sought to improve the quality of instruction for Alaskan Athabascan languages in K-12 contexts (Marlow, 2006).

In 2003, at the request of participants and in an effort to facilitate greater community autonomy, the Dena'ina Language Institute (DLI) was founded as an off shoot of ALDI (Bell, 2005). Kenai was chosen as the site for the DLI as it had facilities to accommodate a large influx of visitors. Kenai is accessible by road and is home to the Kenai Peninsula Campus of the University of Alaska Anchorage. The campus is walking distance to a private college (Alaska Christian College) that offers comfortable accommodation at a reasonable cost. The new site for the Institute brought about a partnership between the Alaska Native Language Center (ANLC) at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, the Kenaitze Indian Tribe I.R.A. (KIT), and Kenai Peninsula College (KPC). The support of these partners helped raise DLI attendance from 3 learners in 2002 to over 26 learners and 11 elders in 2005. All partners believe the co-operation of these agencies was directly responsible for this increase in participation.

The Dena'ina of the Kenai community were eager to take on the DLI. The facilities available made the city of Kenai an attractive choice. However, one key element was missing: Dena'ina speakers. As noted above, the Outer Inlet dialect of Dena'ina, the ancestral language of the Kenai area, has undergone almost total language shift. With the age and health of the only identified speaker of Outer Inlet dialect precluding him from participation, the DLI was dependant on elders (speakers) from outlying communities to facilitate language learning.

The grant supporting the DLI was written around three concrete and measurable goals relating to degree completion, professional advancement and Dena'ina fluency development:

Goal 1: Native Language Education, Athabascan Option

As a result of this partnership, bilingual teacher's aides in member districts will complete either a 30-hour certificate or 60-hour A.A.S. degree. Selected high school students and pre-service teachers will complete the training jointly with the bilingual teacher's aides, and Alaska Native teachers will earn a post-certification Endorsement in Native Language Education.

Goal 2: Career Ladder

In anticipation of this partnership, member districts have already begun to develop career ladders that place graduates of the 30-hour certificate and 60-hour A.A.S. Degree Native Language Education program, Athabascan Option, in positions commensurate with their education (transfer to these new positions is guaranteed). Salary rate ranges will be adjusted to reflect the advanced level of training. In addition, certified Native teachers will be recognized for completion of the Endorsement in Native Language Education (19 credits) and for completion of the M. Ed. with this endorsement.

### Goal 3: Building Language Skills

As a result of this partnership, IATC will match fluent Native speakers with Alaska Native certified teachers and high school students who are not fluent. Mentors and apprentices will be paired within the respective language groups: Tanacross, Upper Tanana, and Dena'ina. (Marlow, 2005)

With a primary focus on language learning and degree completion, the DLI was organized around discreet classes. The 2005 course schedule (see Table 1) included courses focusing on oral proficiency, literacy, teaching methods, materials development, and technology (Bell, 2005).

Table 1  
**Class Schedule for Dena'ina Language Institute 2005**

Time	Courses
9:00-12:00	ANL 121- Beginning Conversational Dena'ina
	ANL 122- Beginning Conversational Dena'ina II
1:00-4:00	ANL 287- Teaching Methods for Alaska Native Languages
	ANL 288- Curriculum and Materials Development for Alaska Native Languages
7:00- 9:00	ANL 295- Technology for Alaska Native Languages (Tues. & Thurs.)
	ANL 108- Beginning Athabascan Literacy (Wed.)

Although formal coursework was the focus for the grant, it was only one element of the DLI. Formal and informal cultural events occurred throughout the three weeks. The DLI co-occurred with the Dena'ina Festival sponsored by the Kenaitze Indian Tribe I.R.A. (KIT). Institute participants joined KIT members in a weekend of activities including a traditional feast, the presentation of Dena'ina songs and dances, and the annual setting of the traditional salmon fishing net.<sup>6</sup> Other formal outings included a guided visit to Kalifornsky Village, an abandoned Dena'ina village inhabited between the years ca 1820-1920 and occupied during the prehistoric era as well.

Informal teachings seemed to be the most memorable experiences for DLI participants. The housing facilities had a large fire pit encircled with simple wooden benches. This became the site for evening gatherings where elders shared their skills and led interested students in traditional basket making using either birch or spruce bark. The fire was also the site for the sharing of traditional stories, some told in Dena'ina others in English.

### **Methodology**

When the Dena'ina joined the project, no direct assessment was done of the needs and unique characteristics of Dena'ina learners. This prompted the design and implementation of a qualitative study looking at the language goals and ideologies of adult Dena'ina learners at the 2005 summer Dena'ina Language Institute. A primary goal of that study was to gather sufficient information about participants in order to make changes for 2006 that reflected community and learner goals (Bell, 2005).

DLI participants came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Participants who are themselves Dena'ina (referred to as Dena'ina Participants, or DP) made up the largest sub-group (DP = 46%, 12/26), followed by two equally represented groups: Non-Natives (referred to as Non-Natives, or NN = 27%, 7/26) and Alaska Natives who are not themselves Dena'ina (including Yup'ik, Aleut, and Ahtna Athabascan individuals, referred to collectively as Alaska Native non-Dena'ina, or AKND = 27% 7/26).

DLI participants ranged in age from 16-50; the average attendee was 31. Six participants were male, and 20 were female. All interviewed participants had a minimum of a high school diploma and at least a few courses towards a post-secondary degree. On average, participants were Bachelor level degree holders and two participants had completed their Master's degrees.

A mixed-methods approach was used to collect data for this study. Observational data was recorded as coauthor Bell was a participant observer. She undertook morning language classes with participants and engaged in most DLI activities. She made ethnographic descriptions of the site, participants, interactions and daily events. To add depth, 19 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted between 30 and 90 minutes.<sup>7</sup>

The data was analyzed using an inductive process of coding. Codes were not predetermined, but rather they emerged from the data. Data was then analyzed for themes, patterns, paradoxes and contradictions. The interview data was cross-analyzed (and re-analyzed) with historical (Boraas, 2002; Bright, Fall & Kari, 2003; Kalifornski, 1991; Leggett, 2005; Osgoode, 1937; Peter & Boraas, 1986), and observational data to generate new ideas and a situated interpretation of participant experiences.

### **Stated Participant Goals**

The study revealed incongruencies between the grant's stated goals (see Table 1) and participant goals. The grant assumed a program audience of educators and future educators. In reality, only 35% of Institute participants can be formally categorized as educators or future educators. None of these professionals work in public schools. They are either Head Start staff or are in an educational role within KIT. Two participants categorized as future educators are working towards degrees in Early Childhood Education.

The acquisition of degrees, certifications and endorsements leading to employment mobility was also central to the grant. While more than half of DLI participants (62% 16/26) had degrees in progress (ranging from Associates to Master's level work),<sup>8</sup> few (4/26 or 15%) required additional degrees or certification to gain employment or to maintain existing employment. Further, few expressed degree completion as a primary or even a secondary goal behind their participation in the program.

If DLI participants weren't primarily interested in degree completion, what then were their core goals in attending the Institute? Responses to this question

were unique to each participant; however goals primarily clustered into four categories: fluency, literacy, cultural knowledge, and community building.

### Fluency

Achieving *Fluency* was a goal stated most frequently by DP group members (DP= 8/10, NN=2/7, AKND =0/4<sup>9</sup>) however, it was generally discussed with hesitancy:

**LB:** do you hope to become fluent in Dena'ina?

**DD:** yes, it depends on what I end up doing. (07/05/05)

**CC:** [In the]beginning I wasn't so passionate about it, I guess, and now I feel like I really want to attain fluency. (07/04/05)

**LB:** [W]ould [you] like to become a fluent speaker, and would you like your children to be speakers as well?

**CC:** Yes, and they want to be too, and my husband does too XXX.<sup>10</sup> It does seem impossible in a lot ways. (07/06/05)

The goal of 'future fluency' was discussed more securely by many respondents. 'Future fluency' refers to participants expressing the goal that their children, grandchildren or other Dena'ina children will be able to speak the language:

**GG:** My personal goal, I would like to see my son become fluent. (06/07/05)

**LB:** And when you say bring it back alive, what do you mean? ...

**LL:** Well, hopefully it becomes all that in the future...for me right now I have two grandchildren that are in Head Start. One's three and one's five and the last time we made a road trip the five-year-old was in the back of the seat and she's singing a song and half of it was in Dena'ina and half of it was in English, so that's what I mean about—you know, the future and—and maybe eventually it'll all go into all that, into the classrooms and home lives and to the movies and the grocery store. (06/06/05)

The literature on language revitalization often depends on *language use* as an identity marker and a mechanism for boundary maintenance (see Paulston, 1994). What we find here, however, is that *language learning* can serve the same functions of identity marking and boundary maintenance. If the goal is to project a Dena'ina identity (i.e., to increase one's **visibility** as a Dena'ina person), then the *process* of language learning may be just as effective (and perhaps more immediate) as speaking the language. Learning, and making space for future generations to learn, Dena'ina is a form of **resistance** in that it operates against traditional colonizing views of Native languages as worthless, unnecessary objects to be "blotted out" (Alton, 1998). As descendants of those persecuted by schools for the use Native languages, DLI participants (of the DP group) are reclaiming their rights (personal, familial, communal) to learn their language.

Many participants felt that if they could achieve 'some' of the language, future generations may be able to acquire the 'whole' language. In this way the adults become the cultural brokers vis-à-vis the language. Further, by passing on the expectation of fluency to future generations, they extend the timeline available for full restoration of the language. More notably, the hesitancy to express a desire

for fluency and the emphasis laid on future fluency supports our claim that the process of “getting back” the language outweighs the actual desire for full acquisition of the language. Here we are able to connect the goal of fluency to the broader theme of **healing** (as represented in Figure 3). Language learning, like healing, is a journey or a process while fluency is an end product. Many of the learners extended the healing benefits of language learning to other generations. Some participants felt that having a forum for elders to gather and share their language was a means to communicate the value of the language. Many participants felt as though the elders’ knowledge of language has not been sufficiently valued in the past. The DLI is a formal way of recognizing their knowledge.

### Literacy

Literacy, like moving towards fluency, seeks to facilitate **visibility**. It does so in three ways. First, literacy facilitates the visibility of the lesser used dialects. As previously mentioned, three of the four remaining dialects have fewer than six remaining speakers. Literacy allows these dialects to persist. Many DLI attendees, particularly Dena’ina participants, said being able to read and write Dena’ina was a primary goal. Developing literacy was most important for those Dena’ina participants from Kenai and Anchorage. Both of these communities are highly urbanized with little or no access to fluent speakers of the regional dialect. Through reading and writing Dena’ina, students feel they gain access to the language and its complex cognitive structures, even when elders/speakers are no longer available. Further, literacy is a means for these students to access otherwise inaccessible dialects:

**TT:** You know, if I can read it and write it in 20 years from now, I’d be happy with it and that’s still something that’s in the back of my mind. I still—that’s a goal of mine, is to be able to read and write our language... (05/30/05)

**GG:** [Last year I was] frustrated because I could not learn enough and...there are not Kenai dialect speaking elders... to me its very painful when somebody says there isn’t a difference [between the dialects], because there is a difference... Peter [Kalifornski] wouldn’t have worked very hard on writing the Kenai dialect and getting as much stuff down if it didn’t matter... (06/07/05)

Second, literacy (text production), increases group visibility. The presence of written Dena’ina is a sign to the larger community that the Dena’ina have a physical presence in the area:

**LB:** ... language revitalization...What would that look like?

**TT:** I guess to me what it would be is, there would be a constant flow of new publications in Dena’ina... (06/25/05)

**TT:** ...it’s more than just the language. It’s that it’s in—that it has a presence,...[here] in Anchorage, that if I had a tourist from—who’d never been to Alaska—and if there is a place where I can show them where our language exists, it’s a physical manifestation of it, whether it be a sign,



whether it be some sort of accurate portrayal—just let it be known, I guess, that there is a presence of Dena’ina people in Anchorage and that there is some sort of visual representation of our people here. (25/06/05)

Third, literacy allows the development of curriculum and materials that have a place in Western institutions like local schools and universities. These materials increase visibility and viability of the language while attempting to increase the number of language learners, which in turn is seen as essential to the development of proud Dena’ina youth.

Materials production was a source of great pride for those involved in language programming. At a follow up language workshop in November 2005, DLI participants shared with the group various resources they had been working on after the institute ended. The time spent on sharing curricular materials (books, websites, interactive maps) outweighed the time spent on language learning. Materials creation is also a form of **resistance** as it canonizes the language in forms that are valued by the dominant culture. It pushes dominant genres/artifacts (websites, curriculum, children’s books) to include Native languages as legitimate and as capable of expressing contemporary thoughts.

The process of reducing languages to script has come under scrutiny by post-colonial scholars (Bauman & Briggs, 2003; Errington, 2008). Regardless of the roots of literate practices, print materials and literacy skills have acquired a level of symbolic capital among members of the Dena’ina community that needs to be considered.

### Cultural Knowledge

Reclaiming cultural knowledge is fundamental to deconstructing ideas of the superiority of Western knowledge. This process of deconstruction is an essential element of **resistance** movements among colonized peoples (Weenie, 2000). Access to cultural knowledge was the most frequently expressed goal among all cross sections of the interviewed participants:

**TT:** I want to know the language to understand it and to understand the culture and I guess I’m not learning the language just so I can know another language... (05/30/05)

**YY:** ...in learning our language, we learn about where we are. (06/06/05)

**ZZ:** [Dena’ina teaches us about] different attitudes to the world around you. One of them that’s really easy to see is—you know, attitudes towards animals and nature. You know, the English language isn’t going to convey that in the way that Dena’ina can. (06/05/05)

**VV:** [T]here’s more to be passed on here, especially culturally. There’s something about this language...things can’t always be translated into English in the same way that they are in Dena’ina. A lot of it has to do with the outdoors...this whole area is so rich and beautiful with the outdoors and... nature and all the different ways that they used to do things. I think that’s part of why the language was, and still is, so important for me to learn and to understand better how they viewed the world and how we, too, can hopefully learn to view the world that way and protect what’s here. (06/06/05)

**TT:** [T]here's a place out—out towards Earthquake Park—and the reason they call it Earthquake Park is, the whole area kind of—it was just completely screwed up after the earthquake... I don't know the Dena'ina name right at the moment, but what it translates out to is 'no good land', so... they knew exactly that this isn't a place you want to be building your home. They knew that this wasn't good ground...(06/25/05)

Cultural knowledge is seen as embodying an understanding of the local natural world and providing an insight into the Dena'ina worldview. Participants described how cultural knowledge can be learned both through speaking the language and through understanding its linguistic features. It is evident from these comments that the loss of the language in the Kenai area has led participants to acknowledge a cultural shift has taken place. Participation in the DLI for many learners is equated with working to reverse both language and cultural shift. The interest and enthusiasm for cultural activities throughout the institute was overwhelming. Participants' most memorable moments surrounded cultural activities that often did not involve the Dena'ina language. What this may point to is the limits of an overly simplified one to one relationship between language and culture. What became clear over the course of the institute is that linguistic structures alone were not the means of achieving community goals stated herein, rather it was social interactions (achieved through languages) that proved to be of central importance. This points to one of the built-in limitations of the ideologies of language that “discourses of language endangerment” (Duchêne & Heller, 2007) rely on—namely that language is a bounded object that can be abstracted from its social context. This will be an argument we revisit below.

### Community Building

**Resistance** is as much a collective process as it is an individual process. Participants from all sub groups felt it was beneficial to develop a support network of Dena'ina learners. Many felt that the building of a close knit group of Dena'ina learners was the best outcome of the DLI. At the follow up language workshop in November 2005, many returning participants noted they were happy to be among “family” again. The choice of the term “family” to refer to this new, emerging support network seems significant. All DP members have monolingual English speaking parents, and many expressed that their parents do not overtly support their language efforts.

**TT:** [T]here's not a lot of external—really encouragement from—you know, my mom... she never came out and said—“you know, [TT], I think that you need to learn our language” or that “this is something that's important.” (05/30/05)

**OO:** [My mom] was proud of what I always accomplished... She just didn't know the language, so it—it didn't—it didn't really matter to her, I don't think. (06/04/05)

Parental indifference to Native language learning may result from negative past experiences associated with suppression of the language (Dauenhauer &

Dauenhauer, 1998), including formal education (Alton, 1998). By building a family of choice, a family of learners and elder speakers, this new support network assists in **healing** from parental disinterest in language achievements while facilitating continued language learning for DP group members.

### Connections

Participant goals were not “stand alone” but related to the broader goals of **visibility, healing and resistance**. Figure 3 (below) illustrates that these central themes are interconnected forms of, and tools for, **empowerment**. Visibility, healing and resistance form a singular organic whole, each reinforcing the other and acting together to build the central theme of empowerment at the center of the circle. The arrows within the circle represent the relationship between these concepts, each relying on the other to materialize and expand. Thus, increased group and individual visibility is a sign of resistance, is central to a healing process, and leads to greater group and individual empowerment. In turn, increased resistance allows for greater Dena’ina visibility and even greater empowerment. This process is recursive.

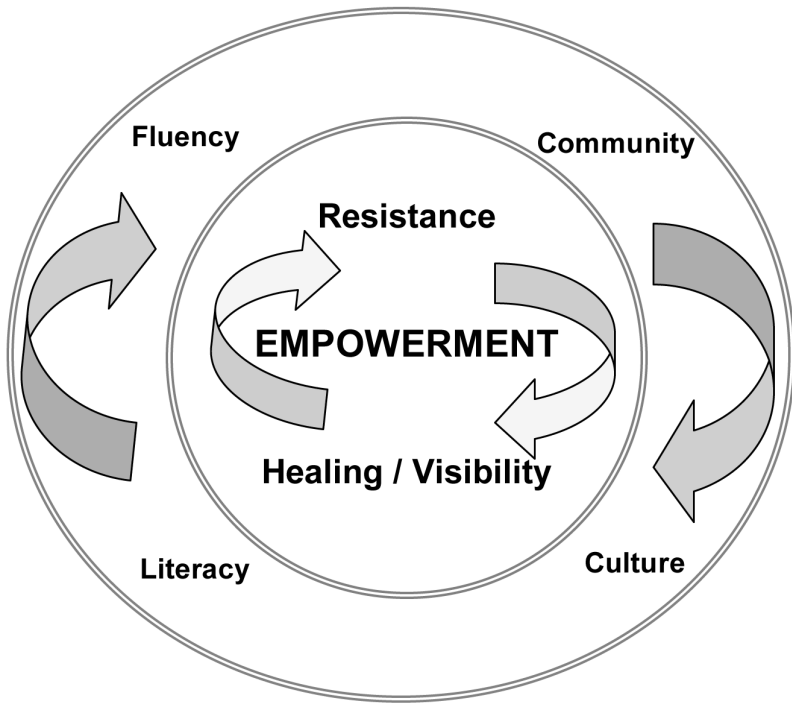


Figure 3. Interconnections of DLI Participant Goals.

The outer circle represents the group and individual goals identified in the study. Although identified and dealt with in this study as discrete goals, **fluency**, **community**, **literacy** and **culture** are represented here as an interrelated whole represented by the outer circle. The arrows indicate movement within the outer circle. This movement indicates both interaction between ostensibly discreet goals, and a reinforcement of the movement within the inner circle. Thus, the goals of fluency, community, literacy and culture are seen here to reinforce the process of empowerment represented by the inner circle. This process is also recursive.

**Resistance**, according to Weenie (2000), involves “unlearning what we [Aboriginal peoples] have been taught about ourselves and learning to value ourselves” (p. 75). Resistance ultimately assists in **healing**: the restoration to spiritual wholeness. **Visibility** is the act of “choosing”<sup>11</sup> to accentuate a Dena’ina identity both individually and collectively. Renegotiating an ethnic identity so that it is more visible is a sign of power relations being renegotiated in a social space. Language is a powerful means of expressing, cultivating and maintaining ethnic identities for Indigenous peoples (Iseke-Barnes, 2004; McCarty & Zepeda, 1999). Learning the Dena’ina language is a symbolic acceptance of a Dena’ina identity that serves to renegotiate power relationships with the dominant culture and enables participants to heal from experiences related to ‘hiding’ their Dena’ina-ness. Learning Dena’ina helps to reverse the sense of imposed invisibility on DP group members by the dominant culture.

The term **EMPOWERMENT** appears in the center of the diagram in Figure 3. Empowerment here draws upon the Foucaultian concept of power (Foucault, 1980). “Power is not a thing or quantity we possess or lose, but a relation of struggle” (Belsey on Foucault, 2002, p. 55). The search for “knowledge” is also an expression of a will to exercise power over other people. “For Foucault, knowledge is always a form of power” (Macey, 2001, p. 134, further see Foucault, 1980). In acquiring Dena’ina language “knowledge” (either spoken, written, or linguistic) participants acquire an audible or visible sign that demonstrates that a) the dominant forces failed and b) the speaker/reader/“knower” knows something the dominant culture-bearer does not. This ‘knowledge’ becomes privileged thereby empowering the “knowers.”

The themes visibility, healing and resistance imply that individuals and the collective group on many levels feel invisible, repressed or oppressed. Many DP participants grew up believing that being Dena’ina was not something to be proud of. As such, they rendered their ‘Dena’ina-ness’ invisible either consciously or sub consciously.

Two members of the DP group grew up unaware of their Dena’ina heritage:

**TT**<sup>12</sup>: It was around Thanksgiving time and we were at pre-school and we had made—like, a little baby jar of cranberry sauce or something and took it to my grandma’s house and gave it to her and said, “Grandma, Grandma, here’s this—you know, cranberry sauce,” and I said, “and guess what, we dressed up as Indians.” Well, she looks at me and she says, “you are an

Indian,” and I kind of stopped and—you know, for some reason that sticks out in my mind. It was like, “oh, really?” I didn’t know. (05/30/05)

**FF:** [I wasn’t] even like ashamed that I was Native, it was like beyond that. I suppressed it, you know, it was like in the very back, back, back of my brain, you know, I would have to think about it if someone asked me if I was [Dena’ina] cause I just didn’t even want to know, I had no idea. (05/04/06)

Other participants were aware of their heritage, but were taught to hide their Dena’ianess in order to integrate socially. Ethnically exogamous marriages facilitated this invisibility (through fair skin, Scandinavian last names etc.):

**YY:** [My grandmother] rejoiced when her daughter was born with blond hair and blue eyes; and I was her first grandchild and she was happy to see the blond hair and blue eyes...that’s always been something that’s really bothered me, you know, that you couldn’t rejoice in the fact that your child looked Dena’ina...It’s more important—you know, it would be better and be more accepted if you didn’t look like you were Indian. (06/06/05)

**LB:** For the school years? To your peers, would they know you were Native?

**CC:** Umm... if I told them.

**LB:** Did you choose to tell many people at that age?

**CC:** No. (06/07/05)

Through these experiences some participants began to develop a sense of shame associated with being Alaska Native:

**CC:** There was this underlying, something, from my other [non-Native] grandparents about the Native side [of the family] and um although, they had lots of friends that were Native, it was always, sometimes inadvertently but, you know, “We’re Better” you know because we are not [Native]. (06/07/05)

We argue learning Dena’ina is a mode of resistance that seeks to heal some learners from previous experiences of forced invisibility:

**CC:** It has been um healing in ways, probably in the same way I could not express shame, in spending time with the elders and understanding, it helps to teach me who I am and why I am the way I am and the awareness of a different way of thinking... it is an identity that is very important. We need to know who we are so we are not ashamed of who we are...I don’t know if I am making very much sense. There is so much in the language that it has been a very healing thing for me learning the language and I feel like some part of me...sorry (crying)(06/07/05)

## Implications

The DLI is just one of many examples of tribes and Native organizations turning to universities for help in reversing the nearly universal trend toward minority language loss (Blair, Rice, Wood & Janvier, 2002; Dementi-Leonard & Gilmore, 1999; Hinton & Hale, 2001; Krauss, 1992; McCarty & Zepeda, 2006; Morgan, 2005; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). University faculty, with their relevant expertise (e.g., linguistics, language teaching, indigenous education), and greater access

to grant funding and technological resources, appear to be natural allies in these efforts.

While these community-university partnerships can be invaluable to minority communities, they are not without their own challenges and compromises. As an externally funded project, what counts as “success” is largely defined by the funding agency through the call for proposals. Therefore, the “fit” between partner goals and those established in the call for proposals must be carefully considered. In many community-university partnerships (as in the DLI), it is common for a university faculty member to write the proposal and acquire the funding on behalf of the partnership. In such cases, it is important that the “fit” between the university’s goals, those of community partners, and those of would-be participants be considered independently of the call for proposals. As our discussion of the DLI suggests, such outside entities may be driven by easily demonstrated outcomes, e.g., the number of credit hours generated, degrees earned, or the level of language proficiency obtained. In contrast, the goals of communities and individual program participants are much harder to quantify, yet no less real, e.g., visibility within a broader social context, resistance to hegemonic domination by an encompassing majority. Just as failure to carefully consider and incorporate the goals of the funding agency will lead to an unsuccessful proposal, failure to consider and incorporate the goals of all partners may lead to an unsuccessful project.

As we have seen, the stated DLI grant goals were focused on providing course work for bilingual teachers, yet those who attended were not interested in degree completion. Students declared a desire for fluency, yet were resistant to “communicative” methodologies which initially downplay the role of literacy in favour of oral fluency. Participants declared a one-to-one relationship to language and culture, yet experienced connection with elders and the environment through activities led in English.

Many language revitalization efforts (including the DLI) are grounded in ideological assumptions that treat language as a bounded object organically linked to culture in a defined territory.<sup>13</sup> We in no way deny the intimate connection between language and culture. However, some versions of this ideology overlook the very social (and heterogeneous) nature of language and the ways in which linguistic and cultural practices are mediated by political-economic conditions. For instance, in the case of the DLI, participation required a three-week commitment, which for those who practice subsistence is impossible, as salmon wait for no one. Participation, by in large, requires a certain socio-economic status that is not available (or desirable) to all Dena’ina. As the DLI illustrates, many of the incentives related to indigenous language revitalization fail to ground ‘language’ in political economy and therefore are unable to respond to the diverse conditions Indigenous people find themselves in.

Preparing language teachers is an important part of many revitalization programs (Hinton & Hale, 2001; Wilson & Kamanā, 2001). Nevertheless, it is worthwhile raising questions about why and how the school became the primary

site for language issues to be addressed, and what constraints this may place on the types of action Indigenous communities can take in accessing their ‘rights’. In what ways might these state-sanctioned programs decouple language issues from other struggles (namely over land use rights and sovereignty)? The grant the DLI was run through was made available on the grounds that language teaching would lead to employment mobility. What does this say about the changing role of language in the new economy (Cameron, 2000; Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996; Heller, 2003)? How might Indigenous efforts collide with state strategies for economic development? As our work shows, state intentions aren’t all encompassing, and community members who attended the DLI were able to subvert the program goals in order to meet their personal goals. However, funding for the program has been discontinued pointing again to the complicated position of the university in these movements.

To conclude, we find promise in bridging the theoretical and empirical gap between the literature on language revitalization and the literature on language and political economy. We think it is significant to ask questions about the impact of neo-liberal reforms in federal and state policy that might be determining the ways in which language revitalization can be pursued (Bell, 2007). We feel the university, while well suited to teaching language pedagogy, may also be a critical site for investigating links between macro historical-economic processes and the micro practices that shape social interactions and seek to reproduce the conditions under which certain linguistic practices (and their speakers) are deemed more valuable over others.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The modern spelling ‘Dena’ina’ is preferred over the older academic form ‘Tanaina’.

<sup>2</sup>The counting of speakers, and equally the defining of dialects can be seen as practices that emerged concomitantly with the emergence of nation-states. As Heller (2008) and Errington (2008) have shown, these means of describing languages are bound up with defining and policing political boundaries for the purposes of managing (and eventually controlling) populations that counted as citizens. While these ways of describing languages figured prominently into colonial regimes (Stroud, 2007, Makoni & Pennycook, 2005)

the authors hesitantly make use of them here as they continue to be meaningful ways for talking about the decline of the uses of particular linguistic resources.

<sup>3</sup>Note that the map uses the former spelling 'Tanaina' to designate 'Dena'ina.' See note 1 above.

<sup>4</sup>Language shift is marked by a decrease in intergenerational transmission (see Krauss, 1997). Reversing language shift (for both Krauss, 1997 and Fishman, 1991) entails restoring in-home transmission of language.

<sup>5</sup>The Dena'ina names for these places are as follows: Idlughet (Eklutna), Niteh (Knik), Tsat'ukegh (Susitna Station), Tubughnenq' (Tyonek), Kahtnu (Kenai), Ch'ak'dalitnu (Iliamna), Nunvendaltin (Nondalton), Hek'dichen Hdakaq' (Lime Village).

<sup>6</sup>Catching and sharing early run salmon is directly connected to the "First Salmon Ceremony" (Osgoode, 1937, pp. 148-9) a world renewal ceremony of the Dena'ina people.

<sup>7</sup>The interview questions were developed using a three-phase phenomenological model as described by Seidman (1991) based on Dolbeare and Schuman (in Schuman, 1982). The first phase is characterized as a focused life history. Questions centered on their language history: their experiences learning, hearing and interacting with any languages over the course of their lives. The second phase focused on the details of their experience in learning Dena'ina. The third and final phase asked participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences and on the role of language in their lives, and in their community. What was essential in this design was using participant answers to build more personal questions to carryout comfortable dialogue. Coauthor Bell kept a detailed audit trail (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985) that summarized initial reactions to interviews and documented the ways in which she adjusted the interview protocol with each respondent. For data management purposes, all data, interview transcripts, field notes, audit trail and historical documents were entered into *Atlas Ti*.

<sup>8</sup>The original grant proposal measured outcomes by the number of education and Dena'ina-related degrees or certificates awarded to participants. Only a third (31% 5/16) of participants were enrolled in such programs.

<sup>9</sup>While no AKND made reference to achieving fluency in Dena'ina, two of the four interviewed expressed a desire to become proficient in their own Native languages.

<sup>10</sup>The code XXX represents portions of the tape that were inaudible.

<sup>11</sup>Choices are constrained by the social setting and are maintained through unequal power relations. Therefore individuals in a society may only be "choosing" from a limited set of possibilities dictated by their standing in the social order. The works Gramsci (1971), Foucault (1972) and Foucault (1980) highlight this notion in detail.

<sup>12</sup>To maintain anonymity, names are substituted with double letter combinations that make no reference to the participants name (e.g. AA). The code LB represents the interviewer. Elipse marks some portion of speech omitted, most often a hesitation or repetition. Square brackets indicate clarifications by the authors. The dates following the passages indicate the date of interview. Extended pauses are indicated by a hard return.

<sup>13</sup>For a summary of the origins of this assumption, see Heller (2008).

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