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Tribal immersion schools rescue language and culture

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Tim Thompson/The Missoulian



HOW DO YOU SAY JUNE?

Blackfeet children learn the months of the year in Piegan, the tribe's native language, at a school in Browning, Montana.

Twenty years ago, Darrell Kipp moved back to the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in northwestern Montana. He'd been away from his birthplace long enough to serve a tour of duty in Vietnam, earn two master's degrees, and establish a career as a technical writer.

He and a small group of Blackfeet friends longed to go home again, to reconnect with their culture and relearn the language they'd spoken as children. They were dismayed to find out that while they'd been away, the number of fluent speakers of Piegan, the Blackfeet language, had plummeted, and the remaining speakers were all more than 60 years old.

So Mr. Kipp and his friends founded the Piegan Institute, a nonprofit organization dedicated to restoring and preserving native American languages. In 1995, the institute opened the privately funded Nizipuhwahsin (or Real Speak)Center, which immerses students in the Blackfeet language from kindergarten through eighth grade.

The school's graduates are the first young fluent speakers of the Blackfeet language in a generation. Nizipuhwahsin teacher Shirlee Crow Shoe says the school is not only resuscitating the language, but also helping to preserve Blackfeet culture.

"If you go into Indian country and ask a child 'Who's Indian?' most of the time they'll say 'Oh, it's those people who dance,' " she says.

Her students, by contrast, "will put their hands out and introduce themselves to you in Blackfeet. Learning the language has clarified their identity."

Overcoming shame

Today, the Nizipuhwahsin Center has 36 students and more applicants than it can accept. But when Kipp first returned to the reservation, he says, he encountered a hostile environment. "We met people who could not only not speak the language, but also had a negative view of the language."

Many tribe members grew up ashamed of their native tongue. From the late 19th century until the 1970s, the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs forced thousands of students to attend schools far from reservations. Students were punished for speaking their languages, and many returned home with only vague memories of once-familiar words.

Tribes started to regain control of their children's schooling in the late 1960s, and a few established language classes at high schools. But these fledgling efforts didn't produce fluent speakers, the lifeline of any language.

Immersion models

In the early 1980s, Maoris in New Zealand and native Hawaiian Islanders tried a different approach. They founded early childhood immersion centers known as "language nests," systems that have since been extended through the 12th grade.

Students are exposed to Maori or Hawaiian all day, every day, and study English only as a second language.

The immersion-school model reached the mainland United States in 1985, when the Akwesasne Freedom School in upstate New York started creating fluent speakers of the Mohawk language.

Impressed by the success of these schools, Kipp and the rest of the staff at the Piegan Institute thought immersion could bring back the Blackfeet language. To overcome resistance on the reservation, they showed a video of tribal elders speaking about their experiences with the language.

"People realized we did not quit using the language out of choice," Kipp says. "Our parents and grandparents were forced to. They didn't pass the language down because they loved us, and they didn't want us to suffer the same abuse."

Such campaigns are slowly restoring pride in tribal languages and the unique cultures they describe, says Mark Trahan, a journalist and a member of the Shoshone-Bannock tribe. "Now, there's a recognition that people are better off being multilingual. These languages contain a way of looking at the world that has a 10,000 year-old history.... Those of us who don't speak our language are viewed as less prepared for the world."

Immersion schools are not for every tribe, says Inee Yang Slaughter of the Indigenous Language Institute in Santa Fe, N.M. "Immersion is the ideal situation for any language, but you have to look at the community." Fundraising responsibilities, complex tribal politics, and a shortage of qualified language teachers can easily turn an immersion school into an overwhelming project.

Yet the idea is increasingly popular. Tribes have recently opened immersion schools in Nevada and Wisconsin.

In one week in late April, the Nizipuhwahsin Center hosted visitors from the Kootenai tribe of Montana, the White Earth Band of the Ojibwe tribe of Minnesota, and the Tlingit tribe of Alaska.

The Lannan Foundation, which has underwritten language-preservation projects throughout the US, estimates there are 50 tribes interested in starting immersion schools.

The power of language

Mary Hermes, an education professor and the administrator of a publicly funded Ojibwe-language immersion school in northern Wisconsin, says many tribes are running out of time to protect their languages. On her reservation, there were 15 fluent Ojibwe speakers at the beginning of the year. Now there are 13.

Dr. Hermes says there's another motivating force at work: the power of hearing a language, and a culture, come back to life.

When her 6-year-old daughter said a prayer in Ojibwe at a recent powwow, she says, "there must have been 500 people in the audience, and they were blown away when they heard that.... They just yelled and yelled when she finished. On an emotional and spiritual level, what we're all doing is healing."